

The Full Inclusion of Students with Special Needs in all Aspects of ‘The Regular Classroom’

A Discussion of the Full Inclusion Debate with Special
Reference to Queensland

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Education policy makers throughout Australia are currently riding a wave of inclusive education theory. When Elkins (2002, p.106) described ‘some issues about full inclusion’ he revealed divergent opinion as to whether full inclusion must really mean all, or whether some students should be excluded from the regular classroom environment. As we shall see, in Australia, this question is now redundant in Australia, as both Federal and State approaches to inclusive education allow for non-inclusion of students with special needs on a number of practical and philosophical bases.

Hence the issue has been relegated to mere academic debate for the time-being at least. And subject to more in class support being made available, greater teacher awareness and willingness to include ALL, and an underlying framework that allows flexibility to provide valid education experiences, this situation is unlikely to change.

That is not to say that the debate is not relevant. One just needs to look at the numbers of students upon whom this impacts, either directly (special needs students) or indirectly (the remaining student population and society as a whole), to realise the significance of the issue. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW 2003, p.41-2), in Australia 137,500 students aged 5 – 19 with a ‘specific restriction’ attend ordinary classes. A further 59,000 attend special classes and 18,600 attend special schools. For ordinary classes, 77.2% of students with a mild ‘restriction’ attend. This falls to 73% of moderate, 71% of severe and 49.1% of profoundly restricted students, who are able to attend ordinary classes. It is evident from the rates of participation and the actual numbers involved, that this is an issue of great significance. Potentially half of all profoundly restricted students and 77,600 students not currently attending ordinary classes may be missing out on an opportunity to be included in that environment.

This paper will investigate the issue of full inclusion through an analysis of existing policy and methodologies for inclusion of students with special needs, within Australia and further a field. First a very brief historical analysis is conducted to place the current debate in Australia within it’s appropriate historical context.

1.1 Historical Development of Inclusionary Practices

The current debate must be placed within the context of the historical development of inclusive education practices within Australia. This will highlight both the extent to which ‘new thinking’ and policy are really a step forward, and will reveal the underlying theory behind existing inclusive education strategies.

Tracey (2002) in her doctoral thesis conducted a thorough analysis of the historical treatment of students with disabilities. She identified a “steady trend” whereby philosophies and policies are “moving away from rigid exclusion to progressive inclusion” (p.10). Hand in hand with this movement, there “has been a change in emphasis from a welfare perspective to one of social justice” (P.11). Prior to the 1960’s the educational experiences of people with disabilities were ones of “institutionalised segregation” and “palliative care and supervision” (p.11).

During 1960s and 70s limited progress towards inclusion in school was made, which merely involved the establishment of special schools, or specialist units within ‘regular’ schools, although it was based on a growing recognition of principles of social justice (Tracey 2002, p.11). Throughout the 1970s and 80s, theories of ‘normalisation’ and ‘social valorisation’ were applied to the school setting (p.14). Schools and governing bodies attempted to provide students with disabilities with a normal school experience, where they were “seen as valued members of the school community” (p.14). It was during this period that the concept of ‘Least Restrictive Environment’ was developed (see subsequent discussion).

2.0 INCLUSIVE THEORY

This section will build on the previous (brief) historical exposé to reveal recent thinking on ‘inclusion’ and ‘full inclusion’, and the ancillary theories and tools by which the inclusive education theories can be applied.

There appears to be a continuum of inclusion with at one end the ‘less inclusive’ theories of mainstreaming and integration, while at the other end resides ‘full inclusion’. Theories of mainstreaming and integration are not truly inclusive approaches. The students are generally placed within a class for students with special needs, as their primary place of study (Tracey 2002, p.15; SPAN 2000). It is from that safe, supportive and familiar environment that the students are then included in some ‘normal lessons’, often without the support that was available in their primary place of study but with the expectations of performance that are placed on the normal student population (SPAN 2000). Tracey (2002, p.15) suggests that here is an “underlying assumption of inequality between the two [parallel systems].”

‘Inclusion’ requires the primary placement of the student to be in the regular classroom, while full inclusion requires “100% placement in regular education” (Tracey 2002, p.15). Full inclusion is “based on the premise that educating students in physically separate environments is inherently discriminatory and unequal” (Lipsky & Gartner 1987 in Tracey 2002, p.14-5). Students with special needs are educated “alongside their peers without disability” and “instruction for all students is adapted to fit the context of the regular classroom” (Tracey 2002, p.16). Differentiation occurs, but not in the form of segregation, rather in differentiated instruction, pedagogy and assessment. Inclusion is premised on the principles that students with disabilities “have the same rights and responsibilities as other students,” and the “students with disabilities are not an homogenous group” (TASED 2003). Local definitions of this principle will become evident in the subsequent analysis of State and Federal policy.

The concept of ‘Least Restrictive Environment’ fits somewhere between the principles of mainstreaming and full inclusion. To summarise, students are to be fully included as much as they can be, with segregated, ‘restrictive’ special education being the fall-back option. This is to occur only when “the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily” (Individuals With Disabilities Act 1990, USA). Special classes are seen as restrictive because they “may limit the student’s opportunity to access the experiences available in regular school or regular class” (Foreman 2000 in Tracey 2002, p.14). Importantly the belief that an individual assessment of each student

should be determinative as to where they placed was developed, and can be seen in current Australian approaches.

2.1 The Index for Inclusion

Identifying every aspect of school life that may impact on the equitable participation of a student with special needs, communicating inclusive policy, implementing inclusive curriculum and practices, mobilising resources to enable inclusion – these are all necessary components of the full inclusion process. Without a structured approach and delineated guidance, the actual implementation of a broad, holistic and multifaceted strategy may be compromised. Without the tools, the policy may count for little. Out of the Centre for Studies in Inclusive Education at the University of the West of England has come the Index for Inclusion. Booth and Ainscow (2000; also CSIE 2003) have developed “a set of materials to support schools in a process of inclusive school development (see also Vaughan 2002). It is “concerned with improving educational attainments through inclusive practice.” Working with the index:

[E]ncourages staff to share and build on their existing knowledge about what impedes learning and participation. It assists them in a detailed examination of the possibilities for increasing learning and participation in all aspects of their school for all their students. It is not seen as an additional initiative for schools but as a systematic way of engaging in school development planning, setting priorities for change, implementing developments and reviewing progress.

It is not appropriate here to trawl through the various sections of the index. However from a practical view, the “material guide[s] the exploration of the school along three interconnected dimensions: 'creating inclusive cultures', 'producing inclusive policies' and 'evolving inclusive practices'. They cover all aspects of school life, from collaboration and values, to induction and learning support policies, to classroom practices and resource planning” (Booth & Ainscow 2000). This tool is especially useful as it is non-prescriptive and allows for the individual assessment of student needs and for the inclusion of the student within the whole school community on the basis of the particular situation at hand.

3.0 QUEENSLAND POLICY

The current Queensland government and the state education department, Education Queensland have addressed the issue of the inclusion of students with special needs. This has occurred broadly through the application of policies on 'Inclusive Learning' and 'Principles of Inclusive Curriculum' (Policy CS-15). Recently the Queensland government have chosen to support 11 out of the 12 recommendations on the 'Inclusive Education of Students with Disabilities' from the Ministerial Taskforce established to look at the issue. Below is a brief analysis of these attempts to include students with special needs.

3.1 Inclusive Learning and Principles of Inclusive Curriculum

In recognition of their commitment to ALL students achieving to their full potential, Education Queensland have established an Inclusive Learning Unit. It is founded on the principles of valuing student diversity, creating a strong sense of belonging and respect, and improving levels of achievement, participation and completion (EQ 2002). Likewise they state "Education Queensland is committed to providing an inclusive curriculum (EQ 2003). They define a curriculum as inclusive when participants in the learning process:

- (a) identify and address barriers that limit students' opportunities, participation and benefits from schooling;
- (b) include, value, and use as a basis for learning, the perspectives, contributions and experiences of the full range of social and cultural groups, by acknowledging diversity both within and among these groups;
- (c) develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes and processes necessary to:
 - (i) question how disadvantage has developed and exists within social structures;
 - (ii) challenge rather than accept social injustice;
 - (iii) empower people to participate as equals.

This goes a long way towards full inclusion. It talks of opportunities AND outcomes. It is inclusive of all students, and not just those with special needs. But most importantly its scope goes beyond the school. Its aim is to challenge social injustice and to empower full participation. Essentially it is a blueprint for full inclusion into post school society in general. While these aims are admirable, the route to these goals is not as well defined.

3.2 The Ministerial Taskforce on Inclusive Education

The Governments response to the recommendations of Ministerial Taskforce on Inclusive Education can be seen as another step towards full inclusion. Of the following 12 recommendations, only Recommendation 3 was not supported (immediate action was chosen over further consultation):

1. That the Queensland Government publicly support the vision and benefits of an inclusive society.
2. That the Minister adopt and promote a vision of inclusive education for diverse learners and lead the implementation of comprehensive system changes to achieve that vision.
3. That the Minister prepare and promulgate a Green Paper on Inclusive Education.
4. That the Minister take steps to ensure that the importance of communities, and particularly families, in contributing to the creation of inclusive educational environments for diverse learners, is translated into effective policy and practice.
5. That schools implement policies to embed collaborative relationships with parents/caregivers to enhance their participation, and where possible that of their child, in making decisions about the child's education.
6. That schools provide accessible information about their dispute resolution processes and that an independent complaints mechanism be developed and implemented so that in unresolved cases parents/caregivers have access to a system of due process.
7. That the Queensland Studies Authority develop by December 2006 syllabuses and other documents that support the development of an inclusive curriculum that emphasises achievement of educational outcomes within key learning areas for all students.
8. That the Minister establish a rigorous research program in all schooling sectors of Queensland along the lines of the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study, which examines the link between pedagogic practices in classrooms for students with disabilities and the outcomes achieved by these students.
9. That Ascertainment, as a process for the allocation of resources, be phased out by 2005 and that a new resource allocation methodology be developed.
10. That professional development programs focusing on strategic implementation of the vision be developed and implemented within a planned timeframe to meet the identified needs of the workforce.
11. That by January 2006, all Queensland pre-service teacher education programs be required to ensure that inclusive education is a pervasive theme in their courses of study, and to demonstrate the effectiveness of the courses.
12. That the Teacher Application process include, among its criteria, reference to inclusive education theory and practice.

Like the previous inclusive policy, the terminology again appears to support the concept of full inclusion. Students are to be supported to their “full potential.” Educational “outcomes” are to be improved and the “best educational opportunities for ALL students” will be provided (Queensland Government 2004a, p.1). In recognition of the broad issue of full inclusion, an holistic, all of school (even beyond school into the community) approach is to be taken. They aim to improve participation and outcomes, and will be supporting these aims through enabling the school and its teachers (through training) to better provide fully inclusive education for the students. One criticism could be directed towards the inclusion of the concept of ‘potential’. Outcomes will not be measured in real terms, rather a determination of the best case scenario for each student will be used. Hence, only limited inclusion in post school society for a severely disabled student could be considered a success. When in objective measures, no great inclusion has been achieved.

4.0 FEDERAL POLICY – DISABILITY STANDARDS FOR EDUCATION, 2004

Like the current Queensland inclusive strategies, the Disability Standards for Education 2004, can also be viewed as a step towards the full inclusion of students with special needs. The objects of the standards are (Section 1.2):

- to eliminate, as far as possible, discrimination against persons on the ground of disability in the area of education and training; and
- to ensure, as far as practicable, that persons with disabilities have the same rights to equality before the law in the area of education and training as the rest of the community; and
- to promote recognition and acceptance within the community of the principle that persons with disabilities have the same fundamental rights as the rest of the community.

However, the focus remains on inclusion and participation. In this instance, outcomes are given little attention. Students with special needs simply have the right to “enjoy the benefits of education” (Guidance Notes, p.2). As a piece of legislation, a minimum standard of compliance has been set, with the goal of legal equality. Education providers must simply comply with a 4 stage process:

- Consultation with the student
- Consideration of whether an adjustment is necessary
- If an adjustment is necessary, identification of a reasonable adjustment
- Making the reasonable adjustment

The most significant component of the policy is the concept of ‘the same basis’ (Section 2.2).

A person with a disability is able to participate in courses or programs provided by an educational institution, and use the facilities and services provided by it, ***on the same basis*** as a student without a disability if the person has opportunities and choices in the courses or programs and in the use of the facilities and services that are comparable with those offered to other students without disabilities.

This is achieved through ‘reasonable adjustments’ being made to accommodate the student, that “balances the interests of all parties affected” (Section 3.4). But again, the student with special needs is guaranteed access to, and equal participation in education, but there are no guarantees that they will exit school with the same opportunities ‘regular’ students given.

The concept of reasonable adjustment, together with the exceptions of ‘unjustifiable hardship’ (Section 10.2) and ‘special measures’ (Section 10.5) allow significant flexibility for the school to determine what is reasonable, and what opportunity will be provided for the individual student. For financial or reasons of practicality, no place may be found for a particular student within the school. And once enrolled, the special measures exception will allow for segregated teaching, when it is considered to be for the benefit of the student.

5.0 ANALYSIS / CONCLUSION

We have just seen that, although being an important step forward, the Disability Standards for Education 2004 will not guarantee full inclusion. In fact students could be wholly excluded from the school where it is not easily possible to include them, and if enrolled, they can legally be segregated from the normal student population under the special measures clause. Even when they are fully included, these standards do not guarantee a good quality of education, nor equal treatment upon completing school.

Likewise, the conventional wisdom, within the policy making sections of Queensland and Federal Australian governments, appears to be that wherever possible, *students should be included within the regular classroom environment, so long as the school or other students are not disadvantaged*. This is justified by the supposed mutually beneficial, and cyclically reinforcing benefits of the inclusion of students with special needs, to the whole school community. However, this only amounts to the inclusion of *those students that can be included*, and inclusion only *to the extent that they can be included*.

These governments have taken the 'Third Way', 'reasonable risk taker' approach to the problem, in providing opportunities to succeed, rather than ensuring truly equitable outcomes. The questions, therefore, must be: Can this scenario be equated with full inclusion? Is this as far as we (as a society) can go in the provision of equitable education experiences for students with special needs? Must we ensure that such students enter the post compulsory-education world equally equipped to succeed? And should corresponding changes be sought in the world outside of school, if the work within the school is to be of most (any) use?

The definitional issues above, reveal further problems with the concept of inclusive education. 'Full Inclusion' can become a "catch-all notion ... a politically correct and ultimately meaningless mask" (Stroebe 1996, p.129). Governments can "commit themselves to an imprecise, but nonetheless worthy-sounding, mission" (Marsh & Mullins 1998, p.751). 'Full inclusion' may be seen as "just another link in a chain of shifting terminology" (Kilmurray 1995). As Seamus O'Cinneide (in Kilmurray 1995) forcefully puts it "there is no point in using the term simply as a new piece of jargon, a pretentious flavour-of-the-month synonym". Simply adopting the terminology, without adopting an adequate approach to tackle problems of the exclusion of students with special needs, will ultimately result in failure.

The Queensland government have rejected further consultation in the implementation of an inclusive education strategy, on the basis of an existing "clear vision and direction for Inclusive Education"

(Queensland Government 2004a, p.3). However, they are to establish “a rigorous research program” to investigate “the link between the range of pedagogic practices ... and the relationship of these practices to student outcomes” (Queensland Government 2004a, p.5). This approach will be useful, especially if the concept of outcomes is extended beyond normal educational achievement to post school outcomes such as employment and further study.

Can full inclusion for students with special needs, therefore, truly overcome disadvantage for people with disabilities? Kabeer (2000, p.95) talks of two types of remedies. They are ‘affirmative’ remedies which aim at correcting the outcomes, and ‘transformative’ remedies that “aim to correct for inequity by restructuring the underlying framework.” In this instance, including students in the regular classroom environment with the goal of creating citizens equipped to deal with the realities of the real world, is an attempt to provide an affirmative remedy. Although it is questionable whether local policy is trying to do anything more than provide participation in that classroom environment rather than truly equitable outcomes. It must be questioned then whether true inclusion is even possible without the implementation of transformative remedies, that aim at correcting broader societal inequities.

Those who support inclusion argue that

providing education services to all students in the same placement is fair, just, equitable and a moral imperative. Opponents propose that inclusion should be viewed as one placement alternative within a continuum of services required to cater for the needs of all students” (Tracey 2002, p.19).

Federal policy appears to support the concept that “effective support can[not] be provided in the same educational placement for all students” (Kauffman & Hallahan 1995 in Tracey 2002, p.19).

Only time will tell whether the fear that “including all children with disabilities, regardless of the severity and nature of their difficulties, may be merely replacing one injustice with another” (Shanker 1995 in Tracey 2002, p.19)

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