



***Inclusive  
Schooling:  
Is it a success?***

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29<sup>th</sup> March 2010*



# *Contents*

Abstract	3
Introduction	3
What is inclusive education?	4
Current Context	4
Is the current strategy for inclusion working?	5
Teachers' attitudes to inclusion	6
Conclusion	7
References	8

## INCLUSION POLICY

# Inclusive Schooling: Is it a success?



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### Abstract

*One of the aims of each Australian States and Territory Departments of Education and Training is to create a world-class inclusive strategy in schools across the nation. They each see the need to raise awareness, support and change societal expectations for students with Special Needs and Disabilities nationally. This paper aims to investigate the integration of Special Needs children into regular schooling and classrooms and whether the movement has been successful since its amalgamation in the 1970's.*

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### Introduction

Australia, like many other developed countries, has formalised Special Education integration into regular schooling. By the nature of its sheer size, geography and diversity, Australia has developed many and varied approaches and strategies to working with and including students with special needs and disabilities. Each state has their own jurisdiction and policies and interpretations of the perspective, nevertheless they all see a common ground of the importance of inclusion (Allan, 1999).

Internationally, educational authorities have also adapted a range of different philosophies of inclusion to address their obligation to educate all students' (Forbes, 2007). This paper does not aim to articulate the positives and negatives of inclusive schooling, but rather to investigate whether the movement of inclusion has been a successful one. Forbes (2007) suggests that the debate for inclusivity, has for far too long, focused on whether or not children with special needs or disabilities should be educated in special or mainstream schools, rather than focusing on the support and quality they will receive.

This article aims to define the term and notion of inclusion or inclusivity, the current context of Australian philosophy towards inclusion, whether such inclusive movements have been successful from the perception of undergone research, and teachers attitudes to inclusive schooling that either advance or hinder inclusion strategies and approaches.

### **What is inclusive education?**

Although there is no single or definitive definition and fixed notion of inclusion or inclusivity, many authors and researchers (Richards & Armstrong, 2008; Cheminais, 2003 and Flavell, 2001) can concur as described by the Department of Health and Ageing (2006) that inclusion:

*‘... in education refers to unconditional placement of students in regular education settings, regardless of type or degree of disability. Inclusion implies the existence of one comprehensive education system for all children.’*

Inclusive education is a continuous and changing process and intrinsically relates to the notions of context and community which raises questions for schools in how they respond to changes on both national and local levels (Armstrong in Richards & Armstrong, 2008). Moss (2006) extends on this by suggesting that by developing school systems that are responsive to social change dimensions and new knowledge, will increase the integration of inclusive schooling.

### **Current Context**

Currently, in Australia there is an emerging philosophy of full inclusion. This has been construed to mean that all students with special needs and disabilities are entitled to be educated in regular schools alongside students with non-special education needs, in order for inclusion to flourish (Forbes, 2007). Such tenets overlook the fact that sufficient and necessary specialised teaching skills, human and financial resources are required in order to achieve such inclusion (Carrington, 1999).

Forbes (2007) points out that although politically, inclusion may seem attractive as it is less resource intensive and parent advocates perceive inclusion avoids negative status, she sees such a view as Utopian in manner whereby no reference is made of the achievement of authentic educational outcomes for all children.

In order to ratify an inclusive stance, Moss (2006, p. 4) identifies necessary key factors that embody this. These are 'whole school action, values clarification, curriculum inquiry, pedagogical decision making, understanding the identities of staff and students, engaging critically with policy and a sustained team collaboration'. Without these embodies, inclusion may be deemed as unsuccessful, thus excluding special needs education within the mainstream settings.

### **Is the current strategy for inclusion working?**

It is acknowledged that for an effective provision of inclusive schools, a requirement of clear inclusion policies, administration leadership and on-going professional development is essential (Cheminais, 2003).

There has been much research on the inclusiveness and its success in schools world-wide. Marsh (2008) noted that the mainstreaming of exceptional students in regular classrooms is a positive step towards social and emotional wellbeing and is becoming more widely common in many countries. Nevertheless, he also states that such mainstreaming has also placed further responsibilities on teachers that feel that have little knowledge or the skilled expertise on dealing with special needs education and their students.

A research study undertaken in the UK by Lloyd (2007) also concentrated on the success of the integration of inclusive schooling. She wrote a critique that responded to the Green Paper- Excellence for all Children; Meeting Special Educational Needs (DfEE, 1997 as cited in Lloyd, 2007). She argued that there was a failure of the policy and legislation concerning inclusion and its underlying assumptions and misunderstandings. She states that although inclusiveness was been introduced and practiced in mainstream schooling, there was questioning about its benefits and effectiveness to Special Education Needs students or the range of needs being safeguarded and adequately identified, addressed and met.

Students with special needs are receiving fewer teaching and learning opportunities than those students without disabilities and are faced with barriers to participation and achievement, which have been revealed in Lloyd's (2007) presentation. This was due to lack of teachers abilities to cope with such limited resources and aide and the demands of meeting the unique need of all students.

These research findings are indeed perturbing and reflect the doubt that many continue to convey about the policy for inclusion of mainstream schooling for students with additional

needs according to the studies assumed by Dyson, 2001; Benjamin, 2002; Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2006 and Barton & Armstrong, 2007. One of the major factors that encumber and could prevent the overall school development and improvement in meeting the obligations of inclusion and anti-discriminatory legislation is the personal attitudes and knowledge teachers hold in the mainstreaming of special needs education into their regular classrooms such as those demonstrated by Forlin, Douglas & Hattie (1996) and warned by Ainscow (1994).

### Teachers' attitudes to inclusion

Regular education was not originally designed for students with special educational needs, consequently, the integration of such students and an inclusive schooling policy challenged regular schools and in particular their classroom teachers (Carrington, 1999). Forlin, et. al., (1996) argue that educators' attitudes towards the inclusion of special needs education is closely linked to their acceptance of children with disabilities. Although teachers agree that all children should be entitled to equal education, their acceptance of mainstreaming is generally negative, which in turn affects the outcome and achievement of inclusion.

This is not to say that inclusion has been completely unsuccessful since its movement in the 1970's. Teachers who work in thriving inclusive schools believe that an explicit value base provides a platform for inclusive practices (Salisbury, Palombaro & Hollywood, 1993) and that all students, regardless of ability, should be included in regular schooling and classrooms, thus a change in educator attitude and ownership would eliminate special schooling structure for children with disabilities (Christensen & Dorn, 1997). These authors argue that this is a phenomenon that requires values of school culture, the temperament of the learning environment and philosophy about learning and teaching. Cook and Slee (1993, p.12) present a similar notion:

*'disability is not to be overcome by changing attitudes toward "the disabled" and allowing them to "spend time with our children. Making schools places for girls required a reconstruction of curriculum, pedagogy and school organisation. So too for people with disabilities. Integrating people into deficient educational organisations will not suffice'.*

Australia is faced with a crisis of a shortage of qualified special educators, which is placing unrealistic demand on teachers with little or no knowledge of dealing with special needs education. Prochnow, Kearney & Carroll-Lind (n.d.) undertook a study in New Zealand on what teachers say they need to provide efficient and successful inclusion. Their studies overall

findings from teacher comments and descriptors gave insight to what was lacking and overlooked that affected the move towards a more inclusive education system. Teachers stated that they felt that there was a lack of funds, human resource and professional development and knowledge regarding inclusion which placed them in unrealistic positions and contributed to deteriorating inclusiveness in their classrooms.

As a result of teachers attitudes towards inclusivity, there are many factors that need to be addressed at a personal, local and national level in order for inclusive schooling to be a complete success. Prochnow, et. al., (n.d.) suggest that teachers need adequate training in disabilities and special needs education, they need support within their classrooms to cope with the demands of all children and sufficient funding for the provision of resources to met the students unique educational needs of all students.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper was to scrutinize the success of inclusive schooling since its movement into the education system in the 1970's. Indeed there has been an integration of inclusiveness throughout schools on a world-wide basis, but the notion of its quality and effectiveness has been questioned by the many researchers stated throughout the paper. Research has revealed that educators and advocates believe that children with special needs should have the right to equal education, teacher attitudes have sometimes been negative to mainstreaming as they believe inclusion places added responsibility on teachers who have little knowledge on special education or are not afforded with support or adequate funding, which has been a consequence of unsuccessful or poor inclusion policy and practice.

In sum, schools are required to ensure that all teachers have undertaken studies in disability and special needs, are provided with sufficient support and funding and develop a clear pedagogy and curriculum direction. As contended by Forbes (2007), such planned and supported programs that value difference will ensure that education systems progress towards an achievement of genuine inclusion.

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