

**Acceptance and Belonging in New Zealand:  
Understanding Inclusion for Children with Special Education Needs**

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To cite this article:

Alesech, J., & Nayar, S. (2020). Acceptance and belonging: Understanding inclusion for children with special education needs in New Zealand. *International Journal of Whole Schooling*, 16(1), 84-116.

**Abstract**

Significant movement in educational practice within New Zealand schools, particularly evident in special education, has seen schools actively encouraged to mainstream students. Central to the success of this transition, is the facilitation of a child's acceptance and belonging within the school setting. Yet, there is a dearth of literature in New Zealand and internationally that directly addresses this topic. This study sought to answer the question: "How do New Zealand school settings help or hinder a sense of acceptance and belonging in children identified as having special education needs?" A total of six case studies were gathered from around the Auckland region to represent a typical sample of New Zealand students, classrooms and schools. A thematic analysis of interview data collected from the child, parent/guardian, teacher, and other professionals working within the child's school, classroom observations and document review, resulted in the emergence of a model: 5 Pillars of Acceptance and Belonging in School. The 5 pillars are: attitude, an individualised approach, teacher characteristics, effective teaching and learning techniques and law. Together these pillars form the foundation for enhancing acceptance and belonging, and ultimately inclusion, for children with special needs in the New Zealand education environment.

**Keywords:** Acceptance; Belonging; Case-study; Inclusion

### **Introduction**

The call for more inclusive education in New Zealand began emerging around the time of the 1989 Education Act. However, in the past two decades significant movement in educational practice has been seen within New Zealand schools, including the nature and quality of relationships between schools, communities, and government. Change has been particularly evident in special education where schools have been actively encouraged to move from a segregated educational system to an inclusive mainstream model (Fraser, Moltzen, & Ryba, 1995; Ministry of Education, 2002; Ministry of Health, 2001a; Stainback & Stainback, 1996; Villa & Thousand, 1998). Education providers have been asked to remove barriers so that people with disabilities can fully and actively participate (Allen, 2004; Ministry of Health, 2001a). This paradigm shift has been an international trend, embraced by many countries (Fasting, 2013; Lyons, Thompson, & Timmons, 2016). In New Zealand, the Ministry of Education (2011b) has prioritised inclusive education for all students.

However, since the transition from special education models of segregation to inclusive education has occurred, there has been very little research that has explored the perspectives of children with special education needs and what has helped or hindered them with feeling a sense of acceptance and belonging in a mainstream educational setting. Hence, the current study asked, “How do New Zealand school settings help or hinder a sense of acceptance and belonging in children identified as having special education needs?” This article begins by reviewing the literature on inclusive education in New Zealand and the requirements of children with special education needs. Next the methods for the current study are provided, followed by the findings and discussion which detail the ‘5 Pillars for Acceptance and Belonging in School’, a model derived from the findings of the study, for inclusive education in New Zealand.

**Inclusive Education in New Zealand**

Ballard (1997), a New Zealand scholar, considered inclusive education as “non-discriminatory in terms of disability, culture, gender or other aspects of students or staff that are assigned significance by a society” (p. 244). For the purposes of this paper, inclusive education is defined as “students with special education needs having full membership in age appropriate classes in their neighbourhood schools, with appropriate supplementary aids and support services” (Mitchell, 2010, p. 121). Internationally, Western educational practice has been encouraged to move toward an inclusive model (Allan, 1999; Allen, 2004; Fraser et al., 1995; Jenkinson, 1997; Kunc, 1992; McMaster, 2012; Ministry of Education, 2002, 2005; Ministry of Health, 2001a, 2001b; Stainback & Stainback, 1996; Villa & Thousand, 1998).

In 1996, the New Zealand government’s objective was to implement, within 10 years, “a world-class system of inclusive education that provides learning opportunities of equal quality to all students” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 5). To achieve this objective, New Zealand introduced a new policy, Special Education 2000 (SE 2000), during 1995-1996 (Fraser et al., 1995). SE 2000 demanded a shift in values and provided changes in the provision and thinking about special needs (Fraser et al., 1995; Moore 1999). The aim of the initiative was to develop processes and actions that worked for children and young people with special education needs (Ministry of Education, 2000). However, a special education review found that for some students with special education needs their time at school prepared them for life in the community; while for others, school was disempowering (Ministry of Education, 2010). Acceptance, the choice to be included and providing opportunities for all children to succeed, was at the heart of the review vision (Ministry of Education, 2010).

**The New Zealand Disability Strategy**

The New Zealand Disability Strategy vision statement is based on a human rights perspective that promotes empowerment and participation. It provides a clear vision for a society

in which people with impairments can fully participate and lead highly valued lives (Ministry of Health, 2000). To achieve this vision, the strategy outlined 15 objectives and 113 detailed actions that cover a range of subjects including: “educating society, rights, receiving education, lifestyles, information, participation of Māori, Pacific peoples, children, youth and women, and valuing families, whānau and others who provide support” (Ministry of Health, 2000, p. 10). The launch of the New Zealand Disability Strategy was the catalyst for increased disability awareness and offered a pathway forward for shifting New Zealand society from one of disablement to one of inclusiveness (Ministry of Health, 2000, p. 1). Nevertheless, despite continuous work undertaken on many fronts, it appears there is still a long way to go.

From an international perspective, people with disabilities have been given access to ordinary environments such as schools and residential neighbourhoods. Nevertheless, Nind and Strnadová (2020) cautioned that both integrating and segregating influences can be present within each environment. What has also become evident is that people with disabilities have expressed the need to spend time with others like themselves, people who have the same kind of issues without these people being regarded as failures (Johnson & Traustadottir, 2005). The New Zealand Disability Strategy supports this view. A key concern of the Strategy is to foster a society where people experiencing disability are integrated into community life on their own terms (Ministry of Health, 2000; 2017).

### **Social Inclusion**

Social inclusion pervades education, underpins law and provides society with expectations. In short, social inclusion and participation encapsulates a “vision of fairness, opportunity and security for all New Zealanders” (Bromell & Hyland, 2007, p. 5). A New Zealand study used a critical theory philosophical stance to expose barriers to inclusive education (Kearney, 2009). Kearney (2009) looked at inclusion in a broader sense, identifying barriers that excluded children while in New Zealand schools and classrooms. Research findings established

that mainstream schools may practise inclusion; yet, some children can experience exclusion (Kearney, 2009, 2011). McLeskey, Waldon and Redd (2012) used a case study methodology with a critical case sampling to ascertain what an elementary school (catering for ages 6-11) does to support students and teachers in a setting that is inclusive and highly effective within the US. Evidence revealed that the school focus was on meeting the needs of all students, providing high quality instruction in general education classrooms, and using resources effectively but flexibly to meet student needs. Further, the school placed emphasis on providing teachers with high quality professional development and using data systems to monitor student progress (McLeskey et al., 2012).

As inclusive education literature expanded during the 1990s (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018), the notions of class membership and belonging for students with disabilities emerged as a defining characteristic (Juvonen, Lessard, Rastogi, Schacter, & Smith, 2019). Membership occurred when all students felt safe and connected (Côté-Lussier & Fitzpatrick, 2016; Schnorr, 1997); in other words, included without judgement. Students believed that active participation in classroom activities, regardless of whether or not one had a disability, underpinned what it meant to belong (Pratton & Hales, 2015; Williams & Downing, 1998). Participation in activities outside of the classroom such as drama classes and sports days was seen as an opportunity to increase the understanding of disability among all school participants; students and teachers (Jamieson, Hutchinson, Taylor, Westlake, Berg, & Boyce, 2009). Having forums in which students can share interests and develop relationships in which they are empowered to advocate for their needs can also promote inclusion.

Recently Rose and Shevlin (2017) listened to student voices as a means of learning how children view acceptance and belonging in mainstream schools. Their comprehensive study involved 120 semi structured interviews with children and findings indicated that having the support of teachers and other staff were important to the childrens' sense of acceptance within the school environment. These findings echo that of an earlier study wherein students recognised the

importance of teachers in helping them feel like members of the class and “associated [certain] class activities” (Williams & Downing, 1998, p. 103) with classroom membership. For example, they felt part of the class when class work was fun, active, interesting and meaningful.

Williams and Downing (1998) suggested a further area for study was how the actual classroom structure and climate impact that sense of membership. In response, Crouch, Keys and McMahon (2014) suggested that positive interaction with peers supported feelings of acceptance, while Simmons (2001) found that reducing the school size had a positive effect on students’ academic achievement. However, Anderman (2002) recommended that further research is needed in relation to school size as this has proved to be the most consistent predictor of the relationship between school belonging and other psychological outcomes. Overall, it appears there is a need for more comprehensive understanding from a range of stakeholders regarding how acceptance and belonging for students with special education needs can best be facilitated (Evans & Lunt, 2010; Farrell, 2012).

### **Acceptance and Belonging**

There is much agreement about, and similarities between, the terms *acceptance* and *belonging*. Acceptance can be defined as a favourable reception and belonging as secure relationship and/or affinity (Gordon, 2006). In this paper, ‘acceptance and belonging’ have been combined to mean the ‘act’ of being accepted or acceptable within a secure relationship, influencing their and other people’s ‘state’ or sense of belonging, which results in a favourable reception that creates affinity (Gordon, 2006). The notion of ‘influencing their and other people’s state or sense of belonging’ comes from the human desire to be loved, underlying a deeper need; the desire to belong. To feel a sense of acceptance and belonging is a basic human need that is essential for human growth and development (Maslow, 2011). Children with disability are at risk of not experiencing a sense of acceptance and belonging, which is detrimental to their social, academic, health and psychological outcomes (Anderman, 2002; Baumeister & Leary; 1995;

Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Osterman, 2000). It is posited that that acceptance and belonging is the cornerstone of community and education, which is the basis of true inclusion. On a societal level, individual difference is becoming more acceptable and accepted (Barton, 2001; Clear, 2000; Education Review Office, 2015). Yet, inclusion literature has tended to overlook the concepts of acceptance and belonging, and children's voices are rarely heard. Indeed, Rose and Shevlin (2017) contended "the voices of children have seldom been brought to the forefront of data" (p. 67).

### **Methodology**

A descriptive case study methodology (Yin, 2003) utilising thematic analysis was the chosen design. Case study has potential to offer a complex account of a particular phenomenon; in this study, acceptance and belonging within schools. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Auckland University of Technology.

### **Participants**

To participate in the study, children needed to be identified by the school as having special education needs and be enrolled in a state educational setting within the Central Auckland region that practiced inclusion. Ability to speak and read in English was mandated for all participants.

**Recruitment.** The first author met with Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour (RTLBs) from Central Auckland to discuss the research. RTLBs may be employed as a specialist teacher or psychologist, and are funded to work in schools supporting teachers to better meet the needs of students in Years 1-10 with learning and/or behaviour difficulties. Each region has a RTLB cluster which receives referrals from schools in the area that identify particular students who need additional support in learning and/or behaviour. In this study, RTLBs were requested to contact the parents/guardians of possible participants to explain the study and obtain permission



for the author to contact them. Next, the author contacted the parent/guardian and a face-to-face meeting was arranged. In total 8 parents were contacted, of which 6 chose to participate.

**Six case studies.** Each case study comprised multiple participants including a parent/guardian, the student's teacher, teacher aide and other professionals working with the student (see Table 1). The children all identified as New Zealand European ethnicity.

Table 1

*Summary of the Six Case Studies*

Case	Age	Diagnosis	Interviewees
1: Jonathon	10 years	Mild intellectual disability	Child Parent Classroom teacher Teacher aide Other professional (RTLb)
2: Brett	8.5 years	Mild cognitive impairment, Autistic traits Learning difficulties	Child Parent Classroom teacher Teacher aide Other professional (RTLb)
3: Kevin	13 years	Global developmental delay	Child Parent Classroom teacher Other professional (Supplementary Learning Support teacher)
4: Mary	13 years	Autosomal recessive genetic disorder Central auditory processing disorder Visual perception difficulties Dyslexia	Child Parent Classroom teacher
5: Amanda	15.4 years	History of learning difficulties	Child Parent Teacher/SENCO Teacher aide
6: Cathy	13 years	Dyslexia Attention Deficit Disorder	Child Parent Form teacher

### **Data Collection**

Data were obtained through interviews, observations and written sources. All adult participants over the age of 16 signed a written consent form for participation; and parents/guardians provided written consent on behalf of their children. In addition, each child was asked to sign an assent form. A pseudonym was chosen by participants and has been used in the presentation of quotes to ensure their confidentiality and anonymity.

Interviews are a primary source of case study information (Yin, 2003). The interviews lasted between 1-2 hours and were conducted either at home or in a quiet room at the school. Interview questions informed by previous acceptance and belonging research (Crouch et al., 2014; Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Williams & Downing, 1998) framed the discussion. Examples of questions for parents and teaching staff included: ‘what do you think helps (child’s name) feel like he/she belongs in school?’ and ‘tell me about the activities that (child’s name) is included in at school?’ Children were asked questions such as ‘tell me about the sort of things you do with other people in your class?’ ‘what happens when things don’t go well at school?’ and ‘when people start a new class or school how do they connect with their classmates?’ Interviews with the children were supplemented by drawing activities to encourage the children to relax and talk freely about their experiences. Consent was obtained to digitally audio record all interviews which were then transcribed verbatim before being returned to participants for verification. One participant responded with grammatical amendments; no further feedback was received.

Classroom observations were conducted to see how environmental factors (e.g., peer and teacher interactions; classroom resources; classroom structure; and teacher expectations) may affect the child. The child was not identified during the observation. Although the teacher knew the identity of the child being observed, the researcher ensured that she maintained a distance and interacted with all children where necessary; thereby ensuring that children within the class did not know which child, specifically, was being observed. Each observation lasted up to one hour, following which the first author completed a written record of what had taken place.

Additionally, a case study log was used throughout the study to document reflections, feelings and concerns.

**Analysis**

A thematic analysis was undertaken starting with an initial reading of the interview transcripts and observation records to compare data across cases for similarities and differences. In particular, observation records were used to corroborate what participants had said during their interview. As common patterns emerged these were grouped on large data display sheets using a colour coding system. Each sheet represented a particular theme. As part of triangulation, the different data sources – observations and written sources – were then reviewed and merged with the interview data. From this analysis, 10 themes emerged.

Further analysis revealed some repetition across themes. Therefore, a further round of analysis occurred. For example, information relating to three themes: enjoying school, level of enjoyment, and activities and classroom were combined to form ‘Classroom subjects, activities and programmes the children enjoy’. In this manner, the 10 themes were further reduced to form the five themes of: attitude, an individualised approach, teacher characteristics, effective teaching and learning techniques and law. Next these themes were cross mapped against the 6 case studies (see Table 2), confirming the model of Five Pillars of Acceptance and Belonging at School (see Figure 1).

Table 2

*Summary of 6 Case Studies as Encompassed by the Five Pillar Model*

	Pillar 1: Attitude	Pillar 2: An individualised approach	Pillar 3: Teacher characteristics	Pillar 4: Effective teaching and learning techniques	Pillar 5: Law
Jonathon (Case 1)	√	√	√	√	
Brett (Case 2)	√	√	√	√	√

Kevin (Case 3)	√	√	√	√	
Mary (Case 4)	√	√	√	√	
Amanda (Case 5)	√	√	√	√	√
Cathy (Case 6)	√	√	√	√	

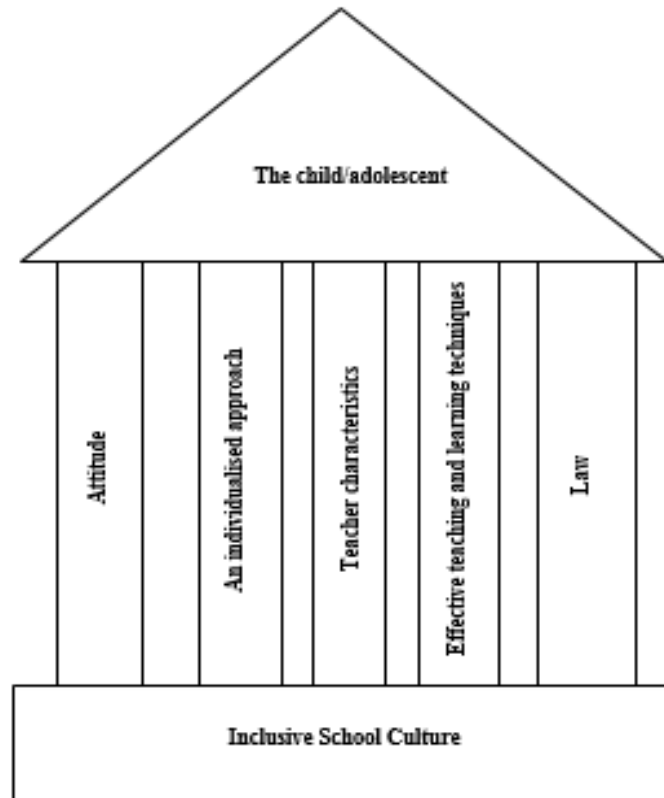


Figure 1. The five pillars of acceptance and belonging in school

## Results

The 'Five pillars of acceptance and belonging at school' model takes the form of a structure that supports a child, symbolised by the roof. Supporting the roof, the pillars are integrated through a solid foundation that is inclusive school culture. If the pillars are not sound and tied together cohesively, and/or the foundation is weak or built on unstable ground, the roof collapses representing a breakdown in acceptance and belonging and learning. An integrated and

well-maintained structure is necessary to ensure the child develops and continues to enjoy a sense of acceptance and belonging at school. The five pillars represent: 1) positive attitudes; 2) an individualised approach; 3) identified teacher characteristics; 4) effective teaching and learning techniques; and 5) law.

### **Pillar 1: Attitude**

Attitude identifies the significance of creating a positive, accepting culture when planning and catering for a child who has special needs. Four children (Jonathon, Kevin, Mary, Cathy) perceived the people in their school as having positive, friendly and inclusive attitudes.

They've never ever been mean, they're always nice to me. (Jonathon)

When you go past somebody they usually say hi and they make you feel really welcomed. (Mary)

However, Amanda had mixed experiences at school. Some peers and teachers were friendly and had inclusive attitudes but Amanda's comment "I want people at school to be nice" indicated this was not always the case. In Brett's situation, school personnel were not viewed as having friendly, positive or inclusive attitudes even though teachers considered themselves to be supportive. His mother commented:

There's just a total lack of compassion and I mean there's nowhere else to send your child but to school, but the schools don't see them as part of the community... you know we can't be sexist and we can't be racist but there's still a lot of overt prejudice about special needs children, a lot of hostility even from educational professionals.

Negative attitudes included: teachers feeling threatened by parental suggestions and/or input; staff members displaying a judgemental attitude and offering offensive comments to the child and their parents; and other parents complaining to the classroom teacher/principal about the child.

## **Pillar 2: An Individualised Approach**

While similarities exist, each child is unique in her or his own right. Thus, there is a need to design curricular and delivery based on the child's development level, personal preferences and social interests. In relation to adapting the curriculum, findings indicated that all six cases required a modified/differentiated programme that targeted their individual learning needs so that the children experienced success and/or independence in the classroom. Four cases (Jonathon, Brett, Kevin, Amanda) required significant adaptation of the curriculum. Offering alternative subjects and/or programmes, particularly at high-school level, was identified as helpful for supporting learning needs, as described by Amanda's special education needs coordinator (SENCO):

She has her own correspondence. She's doing Life Skills. And we're trying to keep the maths going so that she is getting the maths reinforcement at her own level... And hopefully that is going to boost her through some of the simpler unit standards that they're going to be doing.

As a result of these changes, Amanda had demonstrated significant improvement in ability, attitude and academic outcomes.

An individualised approach takes account of the child's needs when transitioning to new teachers, classrooms or school settings. Four case studies (Kevin, Mary, Amanda, Cathy) provided evidence regarding the positive and negative aspects of transitioning to a new school setting. Collaborative team work was an essential component in effectively catering for Jonathon's needs at school which include transitioning to new teachers or classrooms. At this particular school, collaborative meetings were organised, prior to which team members gathered current data on Jonathon's academic level, friendships and social interests so that appropriate goals were formulated. Regular reviews were undertaken so that information relating to Jonathon remained current and effective.

In contrast, three cases (Mary, Amanda, Cathy) identified factors that hindered them when transitioning to a new school due to a lack of individual provision. As an example, appropriate planning was not carried out prior to Amanda starting school, which meant that her academic and socialisation needs were not catered for from the first day of high school. Mary discussed the difficulty of having to learn new skills for which she was not prepared for within a new school setting, for instance, reading the class timetable.

In the beginning of the year I had to get my older brother because he was Year 9 at that stage to go through the timetable with me. And then I kind of got use to it.

Everybody else was just telling you different things and you didn't know. (Mary)

Having problems reading a timetable would have serious implications for the child during the course of a day, which would impede her sense of acceptance and belonging at school.

An individualised approach also includes the use of supports and/or additional assistance. Jonathon, Brett and Amanda were the most reliant on teacher aide support. The six cases had different preferences concerning how teacher aide support was used within a school setting. Amanda, for example, preferred one-on-one time with the classroom teacher and/or the teacher aide. Mary and Cathy, on the other hand, preferred teacher aide support to be used as a classroom resource so they were not targeted or treated differently to their peers. Mary's mother made the following observation:

I think it's good to have like a floating teacher aide who can help kids when they need to, but sometimes it's also really important for teacher aides to be aware of, when they need to give the kids a chance to do it themselves, and to be independent. Mary particularly is very independent and she just wants a chance to try. And not be treated like she's stupid and can't do it.

Five cases (Jonathon, Brett, Mary, Cathy, Amanda) demonstrated that the effectiveness of a teacher aide was dependent on who was employed for the position as this could have either positive or negative consequences for the child concerned based on the participants' experiences.

### **Pillar 3: Teacher Characteristics**

Teachers are most effective when they can manage the class and students' behaviour; employ a constructive approach to identifying and resolving problems; engage with parents; and effectively plan and cater for students' needs (Alesech & Nayar, 2019). Teachers need to be knowledgeable about how to teach children who have learning, social and/or behavioural difficulties and gain an in-depth, factual knowledge (social, emotional, academic, medical, family dimensions) of a child's disability within his/her class. Three cases (Brett, Amanda, Cathy) demonstrated the negative implications when teachers do not have in-depth, factual knowledge of disability. The following account from Cathy's mother demonstrated the impact of the teacher that highlights the need for careful placement:

It's totally dependent on the teacher. Probably the best examples would be in Year 5 when she had a teacher who was a lovely person but everything was geared at a very high level and she just wasn't able to access things and she found it all very frustrating. She would just cry and refuse to get out of bed in the morning and wouldn't go to school. In Year 6 she absolutely adored school because she had two teachers, it was a job share and they were both able to modify and made sure that she was included in everything and she never felt that she was different to anybody. In Year 7 it was an absolute disaster because she had a teacher who basically did whole class teaching and did things like took the girls for maths and then took the boys for maths it wasn't done on ability grouping and none of the children were happy.



Another positive teacher characteristic is creating an affirming culture. In order for children to achieve a sense of acceptance and belonging at school, the teacher is critical in ensuring students are fully engaged in learning, motivated and experiencing success. For example, Brett's outcomes improved once he was included in classroom activities alongside his peers and his sense of acceptance and belonging at school increased.

Teachers also need to be reflective practitioners who effectively plan and cater for students' needs. Three cases (Jonathon, Kevin, Brett) provided examples of reflective practice in education. These teachers reflected on what worked well for the children as individuals and what did not and made changes accordingly. As Brett's RTLB commented:

She [teacher] is extremely reflective on tasks she's asking him to do and looks very carefully if he is resistant, what might be causing that resistance and adapting that. I think she's doing that really well.

The six cases provided the following words to describe their best teachers' attitude: friendly, caring, approachable, fun and accepting of difference.

#### **Pillar 4: Effective Teaching and Learning Techniques**

All six cases in this study contributed their experiences concerning effective teaching and learning techniques at school. Two examples of techniques discussed below are: 1) enabling success; and 2) engaging children through fun activities. The first technique is enabling success for children which occurred through purposefully designed tasks for joining in with others. Brett and Amanda's cases demonstrated the positive impact of being included and experiencing success in learning. For Brett targeting his interest meant learning and sharing his knowledge about nature. A buddy system was also a successful technique in enabling success as Kevin stated, "But Tina [learning support teacher] thought of a good idea, we can have a chart and then I can have a friend a day that I go up to and say can I have some help". Incentives and encouragement were further tools that enabled success and motivated them to learn (Jonathon,

Kevin, Mary, Amanda, Cathy). Incentives could be a physical reward such as extra PE time or simply be reflected in a smile of encouragement and praise. When this approach was consistently and genuinely applied, the children felt valued, respected and a contributing member of the class; thus, building a sense of acceptance and belonging.

The second technique, engaging children through fun activities increased participation and enjoyment which lead to improved learning outcomes and a greater sense of acceptance and belonging. These activities tend to be practical and hands on including art, music, drama, and dance. The children also enjoyed participating in physical activities such as swimming, soccer, netball and physical education as demonstrated in the following quotes.

I love to play soccer. And act. And sing songs sometimes. (Kevin)

I like sports like netball and I think I'll be a pretty good actor... Like clay. I went to my friends and I made pottery. Yeah and I'm pretty good at it! (Mary)

I enjoy doing food technology. (Amanda)

### **Pillar 5: Law**

The law pillar is central and fundamental to a child's sense of acceptance and belonging at school. This pillar is conceptually of a different order than the other four pillars which, in themselves, contain a specific focus on the implementation of educational practices. However, an adherence to education law is a vital factor in the inclusion of children who have special needs in New Zealand school settings (Human Rights Commission 2014a, 2014b) and a fundamental human right. Human rights in education include: 1) Everyone has the right to education; and 2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms (Human Rights Commission, 2014b).

Being excluded from school activities affects the child and his/her family and is a violation of human rights. Brett's parents have been asked to keep him at home during some

school activities, for example, cross country and the Christmas concert. Exclusion from these activities has resulted in Brett and his mother feeling rejected, isolated and not accepted by the school. Brett's mother commented:

He's been excluded from a lot of events. Like last year on the day of the school cross country I was told to keep home even though he had run the cross country in the practice runs in case he caused an incident... You just reach the point where you just don't, don't have the energy to kind of, fight it, you're just fighting on so many fronts and that you just can't. You have to pick your battles... Another instance of exclusion last year was the Christmas concert.

Section 8[1] of the Education Act (1989) describes the obligations of the state with regard to special education:

People who have special educational needs (whether because of disability or otherwise) have the same rights to enrol and receive education at State schools as people who do not.

Amanda's academic level is not the same as her peers. In her third year at high school, after much struggle from her parents and her SENCO, Amanda was finally offered alternative subject matter that has made a positive difference in her school life.

She has her own Correspondence. She's doing Life Skills. And we're trying to keep the maths going so that she is getting the maths reinforcement at her own level. (SENCO)

The learning derived from Brett and Amanda's cases highlighted the need for educators and/or other professionals to be familiar with international conventions and New Zealand legislation in regards to the children's rights and the rights of their parents (Amnesty International New Zealand, Development Resource Centre, Human Rights Commission, Office of the Children's Commissioner, & Peace Foundation; Community Law, 2020; Human Rights Commission 2014a, 2014b).

**Discussion**

The objective of asking the question: “How do New Zealand school settings help or hinder a sense of acceptance and belonging in children identified as having special education needs?” was to provide practical techniques, tools and suggestions for practitioners and management that will impact children in order to improve learning outcomes and through creating a greater sense of acceptance and belonging at school. In fulfilling this objective, the ‘Five pillars of acceptance and belonging at school’ model emerged. The concepts that the pillars represent have considerable overlap but, for clarity, they are separated into five distinct themes: 1) positive attitudes; 2) an individualised approach; 3) identified teacher characteristics; 4) effective teaching and learning techniques; and 5) law.

A positive attitude is the first key to helping foster a sense of acceptance and belonging. However, the school’s collective and individual attitude that may reflect outdated belief systems. In contrast, a more recent and beneficial attitude is expressed through the Index for Inclusion which focuses on an inclusive values framework that encourages “children and adults to feel good about themselves” (Booth & Ainscow, 2011, p. 14), and for children to be valued equally. Accordingly, irrespective of the intent and structure such as policy documents, it is the attitude and competence of leadership that drives how culture is interpreted and implemented. Schools need active, supportive (and consistent) leadership (Ainscow & Miles, 2009; Agbenyega & Sharma, 2014) from the senior management team to promote positive and inclusive attitudes across the school community.

It is noteworthy that attitudes have a powerful effect on behaviour and help develop acceptance and belonging; however, attitudes are changeable (Cherry, 2014). Being aware of this changeability is important as creating an inclusive school culture may demand a real shift in individuals’ attitudes and behaviours. Attitudes can be changed through on-going professional development relating to human rights and disability (Office for Disability Issues, 2014; World Health Organization, 2014). Professional development can be integrated into whole school staff

meetings or department meetings with relevant personnel. Senior management need to drive these meetings through leading, demonstrating and providing expectations for desired attitudes.

Creating a successful atmosphere of acceptance and belonging for children identified as having special education needs requires schools developing flexible systems and utilising a strengths-based approach (Ministry of Education, 2006; 2019). The Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2011) suggests that special education policies need to support inclusion through minimising the withdrawal of children from mainstream lessons, which may involve adapting the curriculum and/or modifying the classroom environment to suit the child's needs (Hick, 2005; Finnan, 2009; Ministry of Education, 2011a, 2011b).

From a Deweyan (1944) perspective, all aspects of education must centre on the child; meaning the child's personal and social interests, habits, developmental level, personality and character ought to take precedence over the subject matter (Hickman & Alexander, 1998). The central argument is that the curricular design and delivery needs to match and accommodate the child's needs (Null, 2011 Vetoniemi & Kärnä, 2019). Therefore, it is recommended to seek to include the voices of children who have special education needs in decision-making processes so that their needs are effectively catered for (Hick, 2005; Shevlin & Rose, 2008).

The ideal model for facilitating an experience of acceptance and belonging includes a school SENCO (Special Education Needs Coordinator) who is employed by the Ministry of Education specifically to help senior management identify children who are at risk and provide the necessary support and assistance. All schools should have a SENCO whose job is to ensure schools are fully documenting evidence of student progress, interventions and making referrals to appropriate services and/or agencies. The SENCO could also play a pivotal role in developing policy and pathways for transitioning children who have special needs to a new school and/or teacher. A new Learning Support Coordinator role has been implemented in the New Zealand education system during 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2019, 2020). Learning Support

Coordinators have been employed nationwide to support a cluster of schools and work with existing SENCOs to improve learning support services for young people.

With the introduction of inclusion, New Zealand educational institutions are recognising the importance of catering for students' learning styles and needs. However, in relation to acceptance and belonging literature there is an identified gap concerning effective learning strategies (Frydenberg, Care, Freeman, & Chan, 2009) for children who have special needs. This study has revealed a number of strategies that were effective in facilitating the children's sense of acceptance and belonging and therefore their learning. However, it must be remembered that not all strategies will work for every child.

Central to implementing effective teaching and learning techniques is, necessarily, the classroom teacher (Hymel & Katz, 2019). Yet building an inclusive school culture requires buy-in from a range of people within the school setting which includes the Board of Trustees, principal, classroom teachers and teacher aides to name a few. The Index for Inclusion refers to schools and staff in a collective sense rather than using the term *teacher* (Booth & Ainscow., 2011). Terminology has the power to shape how people respond; thus a collective approach ensures that facilitating acceptance and belonging is beyond the responsibility of one individual alone.

New Zealand legislation that informs education includes: Human Rights Act (1993), Education Act (1989), the Education Standards Act (2001) which is an amendment to the Education Act (1989) and the Privacy Act (1993). The main objective of this legislation is to protect human rights, provide equal opportunities and create a fairer society (Bell & Brookbanks, 2005). Education policy and administrative practice further supplement the realisation of these rights (Human Rights Commission, 2014b). As a consequence of New Zealand legislation, schools have a legal obligation to provide equality of access and protection to students who have special education needs (Human Rights Commission, 2014b). Accordingly, all staff should be offered professional development with the objective of highlighting ways in which schools may

help or inadvertently hinder a sense of acceptance and belonging in children identified as having special education (Crispel & Kasperski, 2019; Inclusion International, 2013; Juvonen et al., 2019).

The right to education for persons with disabilities requires that they receive an education within the most inclusive (and least restrictive) setting. Educators internationally often cite government philosophical beliefs as major challenges to successful and meaningful inclusion (Owen & Griffiths, 2009). For instance, inadequate financial investment, limited professional development, lack of educational resources and support are identified barriers to inclusion (Allan, 1999; Wills, 2006). Human rights education, for people with or without disabilities, and robust application of the law is essential to promote acceptance and belonging.

### **Conclusion**

The research question in this study centred on the factors that help or hinder a child's sense of acceptance and belonging at school. However, a gap has been identified between the theory of law and practice in schools which suggests that further research is needed to understand the risk, impact and implications of legislation to all stakeholders. Schools can do a great deal to improve a child's sense of acceptance and belonging. However, the emphasis needs to centre on the child; the legal rights of the child; and how schools can effectively cater for the whole child and support diversity. The theoretical model, 'Five pillars of acceptance and belonging at school', has been developed from the research findings distilled from hearing the children's and parents' and teachers' (RTLB, and SENCO) experiences of acceptance and belonging within the school environment. The five pillars are guiding principles that merge to provide cohesive and collective support. Depending on the individual student's characteristics and needs, one or more pillars may be foregrounded. Thus, the structure requires constant review and maintenance to ensure it adapts to meet the needs of the child/adolescent. Furthermore, as the Five Pillar model has been

developed from a descriptive analysis of 6 case studies, it is suggested a study be conducted to test the applicability and validity of the model in schools nationwide.

The five pillars model offers a representation of a desired future wherein children enjoy acceptance and belonging at school. The difference between the two situations, current and future state, is the identified gap that needs to be addressed. Once the gaps are identified, an implementation plan can be designed to ensure the pillars are filled in a positive sense and that all children, with and without disability, are effectively catered for within every school setting in New Zealand.



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