

Publication Summary

Analysis and Critique of the Advocacy Paper *Towards Inclusive Education: A Necessary Process of Transformation*

Australasian Journal of Special and Inclusive Education 2021

A number of individuals and disability advocacy groups in Australia argue for full educational inclusion for all students with a disability. Their arguments are often based on human rights positions such as the UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. As well as social justice arguments, proponents often claim that research supports full inclusion for all.

There are recognised difficulties in interpreting the research literature on inclusion. Researchers approach from different theoretical perspectives and definitions of inclusion. There are also differences in outcome measures, participants and educational contexts. Research comparing different settings is also problematic in that it is difficult to ensure that student populations are comparable. It should also be acknowledged that some research is of poor quality.

One advocacy paper that has been influential in Australia is that produced by Children and Young People with Disability (CYDA) (Cologon, 2019). This paper, which advocates strongly for full inclusion for all children with a disability and claims research support for this position, was the focus of our analysis. We looked specifically at the sources that were used in this paper and the extent to which those sources provided conclusive evidence for the claims made about full inclusion.

Method

We examined the sources used in the document as a whole, and then more specifically, those relating to the discussion of the outcomes of inclusion in the second chapter of the document. We took a random sample of 20% of the footnotes in Chapter 2 and looked in detail at the papers that were cited. We also examined the sources that were cited most often.

For all papers, we classified the level of evidence they could provide for the claims made. Briefly, we regarded only experimental or survey studies and reviews and meta-analyses as sources of definitive evidence. Secondary sources were those papers that made claims in the literature review or discussion, not based on the results of research reported in the paper. Discussion papers or non-refereed sources were those where the claim was the author's opinion or the sources were not refereed. Unsupported claims were those that were not supported by the cited source and included qualitative studies as these are not designed to provide cause/effect relationships. For the more detailed analysis of Chapter 2 sources, we extracted a range of data from the papers, including participants and settings. Acceptable levels of reliability were established by independent coding and data extraction.

We took a random sample of sources that were judged not to support the claims made and provided our reasons for why the claim was not supported.

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Results

For the paper overall just over half (51.5%) were research papers. For Chapter 2 specifically, 65.3% were research papers. For the 11 most frequently cited sources (five or more citations), six were research papers. The most frequently cited source was an unrefereed report that set out to summarise research that showed the benefits of inclusion and did not consider other research.

In terms of the level of evidence provided by the random sample of sources from Chapter 2, we found that only seven provided definitive evidence and 27 did not support the claims made. Of the 27 papers that reported research studies, 12 included participants with a disability and just four papers actually compared outcomes for students in inclusive and specialised settings. Most research was carried out in the US in primary/elementary/middle schools. Of the 18 quantitative studies cited in the sample, 10 provided no definition or information about what inclusion entailed.

For the random sample of studies judged not to support the claims made, reasons for our judgements included that claims were made for inclusion being superior when there was no comparison made between settings in the study and claims were made about student outcomes when these were not measured. We also provided a few other examples of what we regarded as misleading claims, mainly focusing on studies that reported more positive results for students in specialised settings compared to inclusive settings.

Discussion

Overall, we found the heavy reliance on opinion/discussion articles and unrefereed sources of concern. We were also concerned that many sources did not appear to support the claims made. It is also of concern that overarching claims are made on the basis of one or a few papers from particular countries or contexts or on the basis of papers concerning students with less severe disabilities.

Our analysis suggests that readers of such position papers, particularly policy-makers, should take a critical stance. This might involve ascertaining if the review is systematic and includes a range of findings on inclusion. Although there is research that supports inclusion for some students in some contexts, not all the research is positive. Readers should note how many sources provide empirical evidence and how many reflect the opinion of the authors. Given that most comparative research is of poor quality, readers may want to review those studies for themselves. Finally, readers should be cautious of extrapolating findings from a particular context to all contexts.

Our position is that all students have a right to an education that meets their needs, and this may mean that all or part of their education is in a specialised setting, whether a special school or intensive small-group instruction in a mainstream school. Ultimately, we need to be guided by high-quality research that demonstrates the best outcomes for students with a disability.

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To read the full article please click [here](#)

Reference

Cologon, K (2019). *Towards inclusive education: A necessary process of transformation*. Children and Young People with Disability. Children and Young People with Disability Australia.