

What Does it Mean to be Included?

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There have been many submissions and follow-up witness statements *to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability* supporting the inclusion of all children with a disability in regular education classrooms. I have accessed some of the hearings online and, as both an experienced researcher and practitioner, I have been concerned about some of the statements made in those hearings. It appears that both human rights and research is being used to support the case for the full inclusion of students with disabilities including those with severe intellectual disability and multiple disabilities.

The Human Rights Argument: What is meant by inclusion?

From a human rights perspective, it is hard to argue against full inclusion and those of us working in the field of special education would always support inclusion that works in the best interest of the individual with disability. In Australia, students with learning difficulties are generally educated in mainstream classrooms, as are students with hearing loss, vision impairment, and physical disability. Some children of school age who have an intellectual disability will be enrolled in mainstream classrooms and some will be enrolled in special schools and classes. Parents will often advocate for a placement that they believe to be best for their child.

When considering the pros and cons of inclusion, it is important to ask the question: What is meant by inclusion? Is it merely being present in a regular education classroom? Is it no longer inclusion if the student is withdrawn for one-on-one instruction for any period of time during the school day or week? And what about instructional inclusion? Should all children access the very same content and be taught in exactly the same way by the classroom teacher? Of course, there is differentiation – but what does that mean? different content? different instructional approach? different grouping? different instructor? I suspect that the meaning will depend on who is using the term.

As part of my research into the inclusion of children in regular education classrooms, following their participation in an inclusive preschool program at Macquarie University Special Education Centre, I collected observational data in classrooms in state, catholic and independent schools. While many of the children were accessing similar content with additional instructional support, some of them were probably just as segregated, if not more segregated, than they would be if they were enrolled in a special class or school; in other words, the child appeared to be segregated within the class. In one classroom, the student with a disability was sitting on his own at a desk that was facing the side wall, away from the other students. In others, a teacher assistant was working with a child with a disability in the classroom while the teacher was conducting a whole class lesson with the other children. Sometimes a teacher assistant would work with the child in a separate room or an isolated corner of the room. Although those data were collected at the end of last century, I have since visited classrooms as a consultant and seen similar examples of segregation within a mainstream class setting.

The Human Rights Argument: Placement versus education

Yes, students with disabilities have the right to be included in an educational setting with their same-age peers, but they are also entitled to a quality education that prepares them for life. If they spend all of their time in a regular classroom but receive a poor educational program, individuals with disabilities will be left without the skills needed to live their best life and long-term inclusion may well be compromised. So yes, let's support the human right to be educationally included but don't forget the human right to the best quality education. Why should there need to be a compromise here? The answer is that there should not, especially if classroom teachers receive the support of qualified instructional specialists in providing educational programs that meet the needs of all children in their classrooms. Unfortunately, several reviews in NSW and Victoria have identified a shortage of qualified special educators in Australia. Without the support of these instructional specialists, skills in evidence-based instructional approaches are unlikely to be implemented and inclusion will be compromised.

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The Research Argument

I have heard the statement from some professionals and parents that “research supports inclusion”. Research supports the inclusion of many students with a disability in many contexts. However, a lot depends on which research you are reading and one needs to take into account the quality of that research, the definitions of inclusion that are used, the populations included in the research, the measures of effect, and the quality of the interventions and support provided. Both sides of the inclusion debate, that is those who support full inclusion with no exceptions and those who argue that it is not just where a child is educated but how and by whom, will be able to find research to support their position on inclusion.

The Research Argument: Populations and levels of inclusion

The early research did not include students with severe levels of intellectual disability or multiple disabilities. The large meta-analysis completed by Carlberg and Kavale (1980) included 50 studies and 27,000 participants in integrated and segregated settings. Although the difference in measured outcomes between students with intellectual disability in integrated versus segregated settings was statistically significant in favour of the integrated settings, the opposite was found for students with learning disabilities and behavioural challenges. The difference between outcomes for students in integrated versus segregated settings was not clinically significant for either the participants with intellectual disability or learning disabilities. The more recent meta-analysis by Oh-Young and Filler (2015) found that students who were more integrated achieved better on the measures used than students who were less integrated. Again, very few studies included students with severe and multiple disabilities and the more integrated settings did not necessarily represent full-time inclusion in mainstream settings. It should be kept in mind that more capable students are more likely to be included. Unfortunately, there is a lack of comparative research for comparable students across settings. Further, in the United States, where most of the research is conducted, students in more inclusive settings will be receiving support from a qualified special education teacher.

The Research Argument: Selection of supporting research and interpretation of results

If a review of research on inclusion versus segregation were to be written by either an inclusion advocate or someone who favoured segregation, it would be easy to find research to support the position of the author. Reviews like this, sometimes commissioned by government departments, are likely to reflect the bias of the authors or, perhaps, even the bias of the officers selecting the reviewer or organisation managing the review. In addition to selection of studies for inclusion in a traditional review, there is also the interpretation of the findings initially by the researchers reporting the findings from individual studies and ultimately by those reporting the findings in a review of the research. It is easy for those advocating one point of view to report the findings supporting that view and omitting those that do not. I am not suggesting that this is fraudulent but just a reflection of human nature.

For a completely objective review, systematic procedures need to be applied. The findings are likely to be reported in the context of research quality, participant characteristics, definitions of inclusion, effects reported, and the measures used to assess those effects, interventions and supports provided, and whether the interventions/supports were delivered by researchers or practitioners. All relevant studies should be included, and all of the variables need to be considered when providing an objective overview of research findings in this area.

How do we Resolve the Inclusion Debate?

I suggest that we accept that inclusion in all aspects of life is the ideal but that there are competing considerations that also need to be addressed. We should aim for the most inclusive placement possible that serves the educational needs of the student while, at the same time, ensuring that educational programs meet the needs of all students in the class.

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References

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Oh-Young, C., & Filler, A. (2015). A meta-analysis of the effects of placement on academic and social skill outcome measures of students with disabilities. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 47, 80-92.