

Inclusive education means all children are included in every way, not just in theory

August 13, 2015 6.35am AEST

<http://theconversation.com/inclusive-education-means-all-children-are-included-in-every-way-not-just-in-theory-45237>

Recent articles on [The Conversation](#) and in [The Guardian](#) question whether inclusive education can do more harm than good – but neither article presents examples of inclusion. Rather, they present tragic examples of exclusion that are claimed to be inclusion-not-working.

What does ‘inclusion’ really mean?

There seems to be a lot of confusion and misinformation about what inclusion actually means. Inclusive education involves the full inclusion of all children. No children are segregated.

Supports for inclusion are embedded within everyday practices. If aides are employed they circulate around the classroom, or spend time assisting the teacher and making adaptations to materials, rather than being off in a corner with one particular child.

There are no separate areas or curricula for children who experience disability. All children are supported to be involved in all aspects of learning.



No separate areas or curricula exist for children who experience disability. www.shutterstock.com

At one school I visited in my research, a young boy with Down syndrome was learning a modified version of sign language, which supplemented his spoken language, with the rest of his class.

His teachers completed a one-day keyword sign workshop at the start of the year. His teacher introduced a unit on Auslan (Australian sign language) where all of the students learn about Auslan and learn new signs together each week.

Learning sign language in this way did not single him out. However, it did create the opportunity for him to share his knowledge with his peers and support their learning, while also supporting him in his communication.

This example provides only one snapshot of inclusion within a classroom experience, but it illustrates some key elements of inclusion in action. The child in this example participates in the classroom experiences with the other children in the class, but with supports and adaptations as needed (for him and his peers).

That each child has individual differences is not ignored. It is embraced and valued as what makes each person unique. The goal is not to make any child “normal”, but rather to grow and learn together.

The child who experiences disability could be sitting in the same classroom, separate to his peers, with an aide who may or may not be using sign language. However, this would not be inclusion – this would be exclusion.

Common misunderstandings of inclusion

Common misunderstandings of inclusion relate to (incorrectly) considering integration and inclusion to be synonyms; viewing inclusion as simply the presence of a child who is labelled “disabled” or “different” in a mainstream setting; thinking that inclusion is only about some people (instead of about everyone); and viewing inclusion as a process of assimilation.



The concept of inclusion is commonly misunderstood and viewed as a process of assimilation. [from](#)

www.shutterstock.com

These misunderstandings of inclusion lead to macro or micro exclusion, which is sometimes mistaken for – or misappropriated as – inclusion. Macro exclusion is where a child is segregated into a separate classroom, unit, or school.

Micro exclusion is where, for example, a child is enrolled in a mainstream setting, but is segregated into a separate area of the classroom or school for all or part of the day; where a child is only permitted to attend for part of the day; present but not participating in the activities along with the other children in the setting; or present but viewed as a burden and not an equally valued member of the class or setting.

While the recent article on [The Conversation](#) claims to explore research on inclusive education, studies cited in that article explicitly represent examples of macro or micro exclusion. It is alarmingly common in research and practice for examples of exclusion (micro and macro) to be reported as being about inclusion.

The journey from full segregation to inclusion

Special education [commenced](#) (gradually in the 1900s) as a then-revolutionary idea that children who experience disability can and should receive some form of education.

In the main, this was an important first step towards social justice for children who experience disability, who were previously routinely denied any formal education at all (albeit with some exceptions).



The idea that children have equal value and that education should be inclusive has developed in the years since special education was introduced. [from shutterstock.com](#)

Following this commencement of formal education for children who experience disability, the 1960s and 1970s saw the development of ideas of “normalisation” and “integration”, as questions began to be raised about whether segregation was actually the best approach to education.

The 1992 Disability Discrimination Act made it unlawful for any setting to discriminate against a person on the basis of disability (though with some caveats). This paved the way for much greater integration and, eventually, for inclusion.

Since then, philosophical arguments and relevant research progressed from the initial recognition that children who experience disability can and should receive some form of education to the idea that children are of equal value; that the education of all children (including children labelled disabled) should be of high quality; and, therefore, that education should be inclusive.

Inclusive education vs special schools

Contrary to what could logically be expected (given the higher teacher-to-student ratios and the special education training for teachers in special schools), there is no evidence that special schools have any benefits over mainstream schools.

Inclusive education has been found to have equal or better outcomes for all children – not just for children who experience disability. This includes better academic and social outcomes.



[shutterstock.com](https://www.shutterstock.com)

No evidence exists that special schools have any benefit over mainstream schools. [from](#)

It is common for parents and teachers to worry that the inclusion of a child who experiences disability will lower the standard of education for children who do not experience disability. However, research clearly demonstrates that this is not the case.

By contrast, along with myriad other benefits of inclusion (including social and communication development and more positive understandings of the self), inclusive teachers engage with all children more frequently and at a higher cognitive level, with important benefits to all.

Frequent claiming of micro (and even macro) exclusion as inclusion creates significant barriers to, and confusion about, inclusion. Lack of understanding of what inclusion is, and subsequent unwarranted fear of inclusion, are also significant barriers.

Inclusive education involves supporting each child in belonging, participating, and accessing ongoing opportunities, being recognised and valued for the contribution that he or she makes, and flourishing.

Author: **Kathy Cologon**

Senior Lecturer, Institute of Early Childhood at Macquarie University

Disclosure statement

Kathy Cologon currently receives funding from the Financial Markets Foundation for Children, The Asia Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC) and consults to Children with Disability Australia (CDA). Kathy is a member of Early Childhood Australia, CDA, and ARNEC. Macquarie University is not a member of The Conversation and does not financially support the project.

Can inclusive education do more harm than good?

June 29, 2015 6.02am AEST

<http://theconversation.com/can-inclusive-education-do-more-harm-than-good-43183>

Recently, a teacher expressed his misgivings about the “inclusion at all costs” ideology of modern education. Despite being well supported by his school and hugely in favour of inclusive practice, he outlined his difficulties in managing a young fellow with Down Syndrome whose behaviour in the classroom was extremely difficult, and increasingly dangerous. This resulted in children and staff leaving the school, citing concerns about their safety and psychological health.

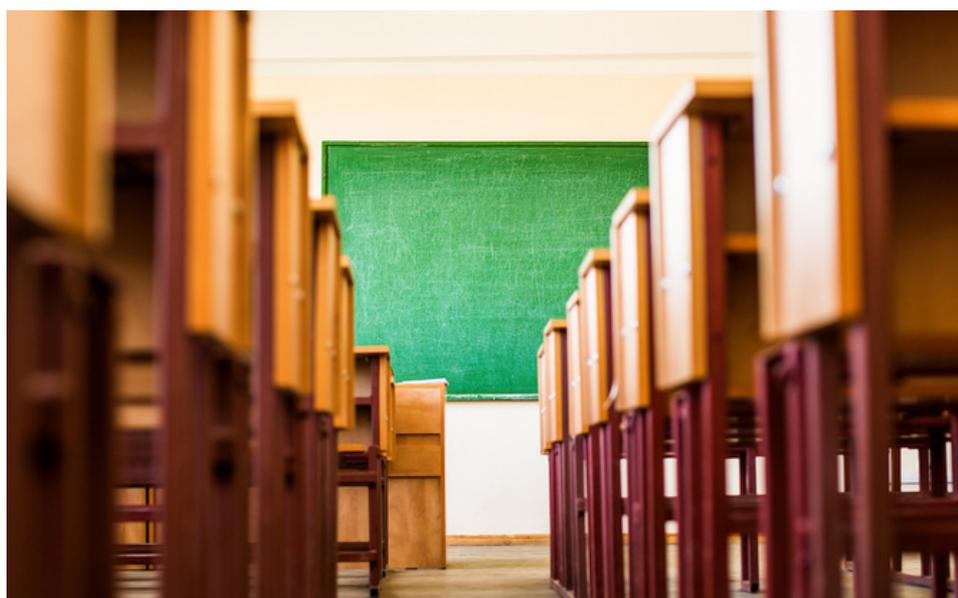
The article attracted derision from many, but also a sigh of relief from other teachers and a surprising number of parents of children with a disability.

I've witnessed instances in my own kid's classrooms, where both the teacher and teacher aide were needed to skilfully “manage” one child's behaviour, while the other 20+ children sat and waited patiently for the crisis to pass. So resigned was the rest of the class, I was curious as to how much of their time was routinely spent in this fashion, and whether this impacted their learning.

I also wondered whether repeated exposure to this behaviour promoted understanding and tolerance or, alternatively, led to stereotypes that people with disabilities are difficult and disruptive?

When I worked for a disability support organisation, there was much angst for parents in determining whether their child was better off in a mainstream versus a special school. This discussion was taken extremely seriously, involving their paediatrician and a range of allied health/education specialists.

The vast majority of the time we supported mainstream inclusion. On the few occasions we were concerned this was not in the child's best interests, a number of parents had a great deal of difficulty believing that their child could have a positive alternative education experience.



Sometimes children with special needs need more special care than a mainstream school can provide. [from www.shutterstock.com.au](http://www.shutterstock.com.au)

The outcome of parents insisting on mainstream inclusion was sometimes not helpful to their child. One young student had a severe level of cognitive impairment and social functioning. By high school she could barely read or write and had limited verbal expression. Her parents insisted

on the most mainstream education possible, even preventing her from going on end-of-semester fun excursions with her class, lest it disrupt her studies.

No amount of discussion from her medical/education therapists could convince her loving parents that she would really benefit from some experience in crowds, queues and learning to interact appropriately in public, rather than focusing on her academic work.

This student is now an adult and I still see her around and about, always with a family member, as she frequently needs redirecting when her social interactions become inappropriate. This makes me wonder who benefited from her mainstream inclusion.

What if she had gone to a special school? The focus there would have been on teaching her useful life skills, such as how to interact with people in public. She may have even made a friend or two who shared her interests.

While I am a believer in the benefits of inclusion, it doesn't automatically follow that inclusion is always the best choice for every child. Sometimes the decision to "mainstream" a child appears to be based more on appeasing the anxieties of their parents, as well as the ideology of the education system.

Inclusion doesn't always work

The inclusion philosophy is based on the contact hypothesis - that by repeated contact/exposure to children with a disability, the general student population will be accepting of diverse needs and build friendships. However, research suggests this is not necessarily the outcome. In fact, on-site inclusion of children with certain types of disability may increase negative attitudes in the general student body.

Although there may be many benefits for the child with a disability, they are not unequivocal. These studies directly compared mainstream against special education settings. They found no difference in mainstreamed students' social competence/functioning, as well as a lower self-concept (how someone thinks about, evaluates or perceives themselves).

Finding the right balance

Should we automatically start with the assumption that inclusion always works best for everybody? There is a fair suspicion that a child in a mainstream school who frequently and intensely acts out, does so for a purpose (to achieve removal from an environment in which they cannot cope).

At what point should we "listen" to their behaviour and accept maybe this isn't the best placement for them? At what point does a child's behaviour become unsupportable in a classroom environment, regardless of whether it arises from an underlying disability?

In the messy reality of implementing the noble ideal of inclusion, there is not a universally clear path to best practice. Rather, there appears to be a worrying tendency to consistently preference ideology over the best interests of the child(ren).

Author: [Rachael Sharman](#)

Lecturer in Psychology at University of the Sunshine Coast

Disclosure statement

Rachael Sharman does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

[The University of the Sunshine Coast](#) provide funding as a member of The Conversation AU.
