



Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane Australia

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Who has rights to what? Inclusion in Australian early childhood programs

Abstract

In early childhood settings prior to school and in the early years of primary school, debate continues over the meaning of inclusion and its scope in terms of the groups under consideration. The genealogies of early childhood education and care, early primary school, special education and cultural education were examined to identify recurring and emerging approaches to inclusion within Australian programs for children aged birth to eight years.

Approaches to inclusion encompassing multiple forms of diversity co-exist in the Australian educational literature with targeted approaches focused on disabilities or risk. These differing approaches reflect underlying ideological divisions and varying assumptions about diversity. Multiple approaches, including the expansion of early childhood services, reflect tensions over children's rights, conceptualisations of inclusion, expectations of teachers, system coordination, economic constraints and political pressure to cater for a complex range of young children in varied settings. The paper incorporates discussion on underlying philosophical tensions within the early childhood field.

Keywords: *Diversity, genealogy, inclusion, integration, mainstreaming.*

Who has rights to what? Inclusion in Australian early childhood programs

Introduction

Early education for diverse groups in Australia focused historically on early intervention through two distinct types of provisions: special education programs for children with disabilities and general early childhood programs for children deemed to be *at risk* (Mellor, 1990). More recently definitions of diversity have broadened to encompass children with multiple differences in culture and ability that impact on learning and development. Further, policies of inclusion have challenged the normative assumptions that underpinned earlier models of provision in which socio-economic risk and disability were seen as deficits to be managed through specific interventions (Corbett & Slee, 2000; Ng, 2003). Currently, several approaches to inclusion in early education exist in Australia, each framed by differing assumptions about diversity. Debate continues over the relative merits of these approaches, the rights of specific diversity groups, the capacity of early childhood teachers to enact inclusion, and the possibility that attention to broader diversity categories increases labelling at the expense of effective educational reform (Cole, 1999; Forlin, Hattie & Douglas, 1996; Graham, 2006; Kilgallon & Maloney, 2003; Mohay & Reid, 2006).

Hehir (2005) has argued that resolution of disputes concerning inclusion requires critical reflection on unexamined assumptions about ability. Genealogies of early childhood programs and of inclusion offer further opportunities to understand conflicts in response to diversity in early education settings (Canella, 1997; Gabel, 2005). A genealogy is not intended to be a linear historical sequence, but to interpret the descent of historically-constituted ideas and the emergence of new ideas in order to facilitate consideration of new possibilities. It is defined as a history of the present to indicate its value in questioning the various approaches, power-relationships, discourses and beliefs about a current problem (Meadmore, Hatcher & McWilliam, 2000). It considers the processes

through which beliefs and practices are produced, to permit a deeper understanding of how these emerged in a specific context, and how this informs the present (Tamboukou & Ball, 2003). The literature selected for genealogical interpretation for this paper included government reports, journal articles, texts and teaching literature that may have influenced or reflected understandings and practice. While approaches to diversity in early childhood are discussed in order of their emergence, recent versions (e.g., partial segregation) are discussed with their historical antecedent to illustrate the continuing co-existence of philosophically opposed approaches in early education.

Development of a genealogy of inclusion in early childhood in Australia is hampered by fragmentation of the literature. Although early childhood programs in Australia have encompassed the age range birth to eight years for an extended period (Press & Hayes, 2000), there is a lack of Australian inclusion literature spanning this wider age range. The existing literature reports on either early childhood programs prior to school or on schooling generally, with little attention to the early years of school (Briggs & Potter, 1999). This creates challenges in the preparation of early childhood teachers to work across both early childhood education and care and early school education. Further, Australian early childhood literature reports separately on diverse ability and cultural diversity. This presents a challenge for teachers in enacting inclusion, since conditions requiring support may be undiagnosed, unclear or represent multiple categories (Porter, 2005; Ng, 2003).

This paper seeks to identify both recurring and emerging approaches to inclusion in Australian programs for children from birth to eight years, by examining policy and teaching literature on early childhood education and care, early primary schooling, compensatory and special education through the lens of assumptions about diversity. This paper identifies four approaches framed by underlying varied assumptions - child deficit, normative development, neediness and participation rights – and considers the role that critical evaluation of current

approaches plays in challenging accepted practice in early childhood programs.

Deficit assumptions: Specialised services and discrimination

The social attitudes that supported special education and early childhood programs in nineteenth and early twentieth century Australia were framed by economic restrictions on public provision and by deficit assumptions (Ashman, 2005). Since it was initially thought that some children were incapable of learning, children with disabilities were hidden, and schooling was not available to children in poverty and Indigenous children (Ashman & Elkins, 1998; Mellor, 1990). In the early twentieth century, international trends in specialised program development prompted the establishment of institutions in Australian capital cities, to address sensory, intellectual and mental health impairments (Andrews, Elkins, Berry & Burge, 1979). Public pressure to ameliorate the anti-social behaviours of children in poverty influenced philanthropic groups to establish city kindergartens, nurseries and infant classes in primary schools as a social service (Briggs & Potter, 1999; Mellor, 1990).

Discrimination on the basis of ability and ethnicity was evident in public provision and specialised programs. Indigenous children did not have the right to public education, yet dual heritage children were deemed European and placed in non-Indigenous foster care to attend school (Mellor, 1990). The introduction of compulsory universal primary school education for children from six years of age following the federation of Australian states in the early 20th century drew attention to those whose abilities were outside narrow academic expectations. However, government schools remained restricted to those considered able to benefit from academic instruction until opportunity schools were established from the 1920s for children who were considered *backward* (Ashman, 2005). Wider public awareness of impairments arising out of disease epidemics in the 1920s and 1940s encouraged further development of programs for children with disabilities, yet most of these specialised

programs remained reliant on voluntary agencies because of a lack of entitlement to public funding (Spearitt, 1979).

Fluctuating government funding (Mellor, 1990) indicated that the expansion of services to preschool children and isolated school children arose from their construction as philanthropy rather than as a universal entitlement. Emerging recognition of people with disabilities following the return from World War II of service personnel with war-related impairments, led to the expansion of government funded disability services and special schools for children over the age of six (Ashman, 2005). Limited services for preschool children with disabilities emerged as extensions of school programs or as university-based early intervention programs until parental pressure attracted public funding for therapeutic programs in the 1970s and 1980s (Pieterse, Bochner & Bettison, 1988). Educational access was expanded through targeted provision of mobile preschools, itinerant teacher programs, and Distance Education Centres for some isolated rural children, children in caravan parks or low-income housing estates and children with health or development concerns (Mellor, 1990). However, the uncoordinated and unsustainable nature of such provision indicated not only that economic pressures limited public funding of programs but also that education was not considered a right of all young children.

Although the continuation of specialised programs in contemporary Australia may reflect practical challenges, an alternate interpretation is that deficit assumptions remain. The current provision of specialised programs for children with disability and for cultural and linguistic diversity groups has been attributed to their pragmatic value (Elkins, 1990; Sarra, 2007). Some specialised provision is based on lack of general educational access: for example, hospital preschools, School of Distance Education, or circus schools (Ashton & Bailey, 2004; Danaher, 2000). However, educational support for children with disabilities, English as a second language or learning difficulties in general schools is still addressed

through partial segregation in the form of dual program enrolment, class withdrawal, or ability grouping (Foreman, 2008). Underlying these pragmatic solutions may remain assumptions of equity provisions as philanthropy, understandings of difference as deficit or narrow constructions of the role of class teachers in providing for diversity.

Normative assumptions: Mainstreaming and cultural assimilation

Provision for a range of children within mainstream education arose as a functional necessity in a country with vast space and sparse population and a lack of specialised services outside major cities (Ashman & Elkins, 1998). It also addressed increased demand for preschool education to enhance the school readiness of children deemed to be socially *disadvantaged* (Fry, 1971; Watts, Elkins, Conrad, Andrews, Apelt, Hayes, et al, 1981). Further, Ashman and Elkins (1998) contended that the movement from special schools to general schools was based on the assumption that educating children with disabilities in general schools would reduce costs. Although mainstreaming indicated awareness of children with disabilities and children deemed *at risk*, it also reflected normative assumptions, economic barriers and an understanding of placement in a general program as adequate provision.

Mainstreaming was further framed by international pressure to moderate racial and disability discrimination. The move to accept enrolment of a broader diversity of children into general classrooms was influenced by developments outside Australia, particularly negative reaction in the United States during the 1960s to the use of special education programs and the 1971 United Nations statements on disability (Foreman, 2008). Young children with undiagnosed disabilities were able to attend mainstream Australian early childhood centres without additional support services because these centres offered individualised programs and had favourable staff-child ratios relative to schools (North & Carruthers, 2008). Alternatively, early years teachers in primary schools worked with classes of up to 40 children without assistance. In recognition of the limitations on schoolteachers'

capacity to cater for diversity in this situation, children were streamed by ability to form homogeneous school classes (Ashman & Elkins, 1998). Debate focused on the appropriateness of general classes for children with disabilities in the light of a lack of justification for keeping students in restrictive settings (Foreman, 2008). The gradual extension of general school access to children with disabilities (McCall, 1954) did not mean that such children received appropriate education. Over a period of two decades (1970s and 1980s) a lack of support resources was identified as a barrier to the implementation of mainstreaming policies, with claims that children with disabilities were experiencing *maindumping* rather than mainstreaming (Gow, 1990).

While mainstreaming offered opportunities for children from culturally diverse backgrounds to enter the broader Australian community, notions of risk and assimilation framed approaches to cultural and linguistic diversity (Elkins, 1990). Improved provision for cultural and linguistic diversity was prompted by the post-war migration of non-English speaking European families to Australia and the referendum on Indigenous citizenship (Elkins, 1990; Mellor, 1990). Since mainstreaming implied that children should be ready to meet classroom expectations, culturally and linguistically diverse groups were offered compensatory education (Moffit, Nurcombe, Passmore, & McNeilly 1973). Australian Indigenous preschool programs modelled on the Head Start programs in the US emphasised highly structured English language instruction to accelerate more normative academic achievement (Edmonds, 1979; McConnachie & Russell, 1982). The public expectation that children from culturally diverse backgrounds would assimilate into the educational and social mainstream meant that they were immersed in English and little adjustment was made for cultural differences (Elkins, 1990).

Although mainstreaming is identified as an historical approach, the normative assumptions that it implies remain, perhaps related to accountability pressures on teachers

such as statutory assessment (Conway, 2008). Criticism of some contemporary education programs is based in argument that funding and support restrictions identify them as mainstreaming or even maindumping rather than inclusion (Elkins, 2005). In such circumstances, it has been asserted that full inclusion is not feasible (Cole, 1999), that specialised services for children with disabilities may be lost or other students disadvantaged (Forlin, et al., 1996), and that provision for cultural diversity is inadequate (Talay-Ongan, 2004).

Neediness assumptions: Integration and cultural tokenism

The Civil Rights movement and enactment of Public Laws on Handicapped Children in the United States (Cook, Klein, Tessier & Daley, 2004) and the demands of the increasing proportion of the population born overseas influenced social attitudes in Australia during the 1970's to 1990s, promoting greater acceptance of diversity. Integration programs arose from a growing concern about human rights and poor outcomes for children from minority backgrounds, evidence on the impact of early intervention, and changed awareness of disability arising in part from the involvement of public figures in the United States (Osgood, 2005). It was acknowledged that simply placing children with differences into general education did not adequately support their learning and that more specific interventions were required (Cook, et al, 2004). Therefore, integration went beyond placement in the least restrictive environment to incorporate adaptations of teaching facilities and provision of support services such as speech therapy and instruction in English as a second language (Ashman & Elkins, 1998; Mellor, 1990). Prompted by the landmark Karmel and Collins reports on the learning potential of all children and the need for improved educational equity, government departments increasingly took responsibility for special education programs previously offered to school-aged children by voluntary agencies (Collins, 1984; Karmel, 1973).

Improvement in educational access was framed by assumptions about need (Fry, 1971; Watts, et al., 1981). Australian educational discourse in the 1980s and 1990s revealed continued emphasis on disability and neediness framed as *special needs* or *additional needs* (Ashman & Elkins, 1998; Briggs & Potter, 1999; Forlin, et al., 1996; Palmer, 1998; Petriwskyj, 1992; Sims, 1995). Even teaching literature on giftedness was framed as meeting children's needs (Porter, 1997). Serious gaps in early childhood provision were identified through Australian research, resulting in the prioritisation of educational access for all school-aged children and transfer of early intervention from health to education departments (Pieterse, Bochner & Bettison 1988; Watts, et al, 1981). Preschool integration programs were supported by visiting advisory services and by publication of teaching literature on disability, minimal brain dysfunction and hyperactivity (Center & Bochner, 1990; Department of Education Northern Territory, 1973; Grounds, 1972; New South Wales Department of Education, 1989; Petriwskyj, 1992; Plummer, 1986). The impact of early intervention identified in the 1978 Warnock Report in the United Kingdom (Jones, 2004) and the 1986 Education of the Handicapped Amendments in the United States (Osgood, 2005) prompted the development of Australian programs for children under three years of age (Pieterse & Bochner, 1990). An underlying notion shared across these early childhood programs was that early intervention programs addressed need.

While the initial focus of integration programs was on disability, international attention to children's rights during the 1980s and 1990s also promoted the development of broader anti-discrimination legislation and of programs for cultural minorities (Mellor, 1990; UNICEF, 1989). Following the influx of Vietnamese refugees, bilingual programs were established to address concern about the language skills of migrant groups, although incorporation of home cultures was tokenistic (Dempster, 1984; Schurch & Waterford, 1979). In response to family dissatisfaction with such tokenism, multicultural resource centres were

established in cities to assist early childhood teachers in incorporating aspects of varied languages and cultures (Dempster, 1984; Mellor, 1990). Concern for the poor educational progress of Indigenous children supported federal government funding of urban and rural initiatives such as pre-preschool programs, out-station mobile programs, and flexible school groups catering for Indigenous lifestyles (Butterworth & Candy, 1998; MCEETYA, 1996). However, the expansion of preschool and childcare during the 1970s and 1980s as a social welfare initiative for children deemed to be in need generated debate about whether compensatory constructions of early education were appropriate (Ashby, 1972).

Public expectations, raised by policy attention to equity, children's rights and broader diversity groups, were not fully met by limited program provisions. Gaps in public provision were met by voluntary agencies offering disability programs and programs for gifted children (Larsson, 1990; Porter, 1997; Waters & Cooper, 1978). Further, the assumption that that policy and structural change would ensure improved outcomes failed to take account of the pragmatics of enactment in early childhood classrooms. Teacher resistance to grade acceleration or curricular enrichment for gifted children, as well as to education of children with disabilities within general early childhood programs was identified as a barrier to successful policy implementation (Braggett & Bailey, 2005; Forlin, et al., 1996; Porter, 2005). Such resistance may have arisen from anxiety about teachers' professional capacity to address extremes of ability, or from assumptions that gifted children will achieve without additional support, or from teachers feeling overwhelmed by increased expectations to cater for diversity (Forlin et al, 1996; Porter, 2005). Alternatively, Hehir (2005) has asserted that teacher resistance to catering for a wider range of children was based in ideologies of ableism and historical acceptance of segregation.

Pragmatic barriers associated with funding restrictions have played a role in sustaining negative reactions to change in contemporary Australia, since a focus on prioritisation of

access and structural provisions such as support services in general programs is evident.

Teacher responses may also have been framed by ideological stances that emphasize equality rather than equity, and children's needs rather than rights. Attention to equity and children's rights marked significant policy shifts (Karmel, 1973; Press & Hayes, 2000; UNICEF, 1989) that have increased service access, without addressing concerns about teachers' attitudes, sense of professional competence or support provision.

Participation rights assumptions: Inclusion and cultural competence

The policy emphasis has shifted in the twenty-first century to the role that general teachers in inclusive programs play in attending to children's educational participation rights (Allen & Cowdery, 2005; OECD, 2006). Recent definitions of inclusion go beyond access and support, to incorporate curricular and pedagogic differentiation supporting children's sense of belonging and being valued (Carrington, 2007). The circumstances of this policy shift include an emerging understanding that learning is culturally grounded, an awareness of the competence of young children and an increased emphasis on the responsibility of educational programs in enhancing learning for all children (Stables, 2003). A broader and more positive view of difference and its re-framing as a school or centre responsibility, rather than a child and family problem has been reflected in a shift in discourse to *diverse learners, or diverse learning rights* (Frigo & Adams, 2002; OECD, 2006). The negative connotations of the term *at risk* have led to suggestions that the term *educational inclusion* is more appropriate to use in relation to broad social justice issues (Singh & Taylor, 2007).

Assumptions about the equity role of general early childhood programs have framed more universal provision of prior-to-school services and the public funding of childcare support programs for children with disabilities and for children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Mohay & Reid, 2006; O.E.C.D., 2006). Based on the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (Nutbrown & Clough, 2006) and evidence of effective

intervention approaches (Miesels & Shonkoff, 2000), school programs have been re-framed as inclusive programs supported by specialised services (Foreman, 2008; OECD, 2006). However, access to support services has remained dependent upon formal diagnosis of disabilities or learning difficulties, and upon specific provisions within separate state jurisdictions (Dempsey, 2005). Such restriction and fragmentation of support provision appears to assume a level of teacher competence and confidence in addressing diversity that may not reflect the reality across Australian early childhood programs (Kilgallon & Maloney, 2003; Luke, Ladwig, Lingard, Hayes & Mills, 1999; Singh & Taylor, 2007).

Inclusion literature for teachers also continues to address single categories of diversity, indicating limited awareness of overarching equity and participation rights questions (Ng, 2003). There is separate consideration in the early childhood literature of ability categories such as chronic ill-health, disability, giftedness and learning difficulty (Foreman, 2008; Ashton & Bailey, 2004; Hay & Fielding-Barnsley, 2006; Porter, 2005) and of cultural categories such as Indigeneity, refugee status, geographic mobility, rural isolation, gender, non-traditional family, religion and socio-economic status (Ashman, 2005; Comber & Kamler, 2005; Frigo & Adams, 2002; Henderson, 2004; Nyland, 2001; Raban, 2002; Rhedding-Jones, 2005; Sims, et al., 2000; Vuckovic, 2008). Such separation of equity categories fails to take into account the argument in the international literature that narrow views of inclusion focusing on single issues such as disability rather than multiple forms of inequality are a barrier to understanding inclusion and to effective education that supports all children (Ng, 2003; Nutbrown & Clough, 2006; Siraj-Blatchford, 2006). It supports assertions that labelling may be taking place at the expense of education reform directed towards more inclusive approaches (Dempsey, 2005; Graham, 2006). Further, omission of giftedness from some discussions of inclusion, and a retained focus on disability and disadvantage indicates that assumptions of need and risk continue to frame educational

thinking (Foreman, 2008).

Critical evaluation: Overarching reform in systems and pedagogies

International critical evaluation of accepted approaches to inclusion and early education coupled with an understanding of children as active negotiators of their own learning, has drawn attention to social constructions of difference and increased demands on teachers to address the participation rights of all children (Benjamin, et al, 2003; Grieshaber & Canella, 2001). Recent federal government initiatives to reform early childhood provisions across Australia have been framed by philosophies of children's rights, cultural recognition, social inclusion, child agency and family and community partnership (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2007). This shift from children to families, communities and education systems has been accompanied by rhetoric about empowering families and communities, respecting cultural capital, and reframing early education to support all children's progress more effectively (Pendergast, Chadbourne & Danby, 2009; Singh & Taylor, 2007; Talay-Ongan, 2004). This raises questions about whether the rhetoric is matched by the reality in early childhood programs prior to school and in the early years of school, or whether power imbalances between teachers and families remain.

Enhanced participation in early childhood programs of a wide range of children has challenged assumptions at both a whole school and classroom level. Curricular differentiation and *personalisation*, which incorporates pedagogic individualization, parent empowerment, community involvement, and cultural competence of teachers, have been advocated to address learner diversity (Carrington, 2007; Howard, Williams & Lepper, 2005). Reforms to extend participation of a wider range of children have drawn on equity research and initiatives in the UK such the Index of Inclusion (Booth, Ainscow & Kingston, 2006; Gillies & Carrington, 2004). Concern that schools were ineffective in catering for diversity has provided impetus for overarching reform approaches such as Productive Pedagogies

incorporating recognition of difference, relevance to children's lives, and a supportive classroom (Luke, et al, 1999). However, the impact of such reforms on early childhood practice is unclear.

Opposition to the critical view that difference is a social construct incorporating wider equity groups has been framed by concern for the realities of disability, the potential loss of specialised provisions developed over time, and the challenges of working with diverse families (Forlin, et al., 1996; Talay-Ongan, 2004). Early childhood teacher preparation now incorporates cultural diversity and disability, yet limited staff knowledge, negative attitudes and inadequate support provisions have continued to hamper inclusion (Kilgallon & Maloney 2003; Mohay & Reid, 2006). Criticism of inclusion support provision in non-compulsory early childhood services relates to fluctuating funding, limited access, low program quality, over-reliance on teaching assistants, and lack of service coordination (Gavidia-Payne & Jobling, 2005; Llewellyn, Thompson & Fante, 2002; Pelusi, 1994; Sims, 1995). Such challenges imply a recurring emphasis on addressing needs rather than rights.

While these debates appear to be based in teacher sensitivity to the feasibility of inclusion, deeper ideological tensions within the early childhood field are evident. Re-conceptualisation of early education has challenged normative assumptions and traditional power relationships, drawing attention to children and families who have been marginalised (Grieshaber & Canella, 2001). It reflects the critical evaluation of child and family empowerment, celebration of diversity and varied pedagogies apparent in approaches framed by recognition of difference or personalisation. Such ideological shifts are not necessarily attended by changes in the underlying beliefs of practitioners about the role of early education. This suggests that turning the vision of inclusion into a reality may require deeper professional debate.

Conclusion

While trends in the US and UK have prompted the development of inclusive early childhood programs in Australia, the structure and focus of such programs have been determined by the translation of national social, political and economic trends into policies for either schools or early childhood education and care services. Wide variations in contextual circumstances, family expectations, children's needs and access to support highlight the value of a national commitment to ensure basic universal entitlements together with support programs to cater for diversity in local contexts.

Structural divisions between education and care, preschool and early school education, government and community services and various state and federal jurisdictions present a challenge to effective continuity of inclusive approaches for children from birth to eight years and beyond. This is exacerbated by different legislative and administrative arrangements, varying outcome expectations, limited funding and inadequate professional education of teachers (Dempsey, 2005; Mellor & Chan 2002).

Both general early childhood programs and specialised programs have played a role in equity provisions in Australia. However, there are on-going tensions between conceptualisations of inclusion, children's rights, economic circumstances, support provisions and political pressure to cater for an increasingly wide range of children (Mellor & Chan, 2002). The identified concerns about teacher capacities, school or centre support, locus of responsibility and the balance between universal provision and individual learning must be addressed if early childhood inclusion is to be effective. However, a sustained emphasis in the extant early education literature on specific needs and service access, rather than the rights of all children to equitable provision, is a challenge to educators to engage in deeper ideological reflection and debate.

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