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Inclusion in the Early Years Foundation Stage

Jonathan Glazzard

Introduction

The principle of inclusive education has dominated educational policy for nearly two decades and under the previous Labour administration inclusion was a key policy imperative. It was embedded within the *Every Child Matters* agenda (HMSO, 2003) and is central to the Early Years Foundation Stage framework (DfES, 2007). This article takes the stance that inclusion is a broad concept which applies to all learners. I argue that inclusion needs a proactive response and that settings should actively take steps to increase the participation of all children. Additionally, I argue that inclusion is a continuous process rather than an end state as practitioners constantly strive to meet the diverse needs of different learners.

Legal framework

The Equality Act (2010) brings together previous legislation on equality under one umbrella. The legislation identifies nine characteristics which are protected from discrimination of any form. Thus, discrimination on the grounds of disability, gender reassignment, marriage or civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race (ethnicity), religion or belief, sexual orientation, sex (gender) and age is unlawful and all settings must take positive action to protect groups and individuals from discrimination. In relation to early years settings managers must consider this legislation both as an employer and as a service provider. It is important for ensure that the physical environment, admissions and curriculum policies ensure equality of opportunity. Additionally, staff need to reflect on their own attitudes and prejudices towards individual and groups. This includes the way that they interact and communicate with parents and carers and the way that they treat colleagues. Practitioners must ensure that all children are given equal opportunities to participate in education and to achieve their full potential and make the necessary adjustments necessary to break down barriers to learning. All aspects of the provision should be reviewed in relation to the Equality Act to ensure that provision is free from both direct and indirect discrimination.

Inclusion as a rights issue

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) is a legally binding agreement which protects children's rights to develop their potential both physically and mentally. It demonstrates an international commitment to the rights of children to benefit from full participation in education and the right to

have their needs met, feel valued and have a sense of belonging. Inclusion is very much a rights issue and is therefore an entitlement. All providers must therefore ensure that policies and practices fully reflect these rights.

Inclusion in the Early Years Foundation Stage

The Early Years Foundation Stage framework aims to provide every child with 'the best possible start in life and support to fulfil their potential' (DfES, 2007: 07). Early years settings therefore need to ensure that they provide children with equality of opportunity and demonstrate a commitment to anti-discriminatory practice. The framework emphasises that no child should be 'disadvantaged because of ethnicity, culture or religion, home language, family background, learning difficulties or disabilities, gender or ability' (DfES, 2007: 07). One of the four themes in the framework relates to the *unique child.* This is underpinned by the principle of inclusive practice which places a duty on all practitioners to value diversity in individuals and communities. The framework emphasises that no child or family should be discriminated against and that additional early support should be provided for some children whose development is at risk. These children may have special educational needs or disabilities. Effective, coordinated multi-agency working will ensure that children receive the support they need in order to make good progress. Additionally, practitioners should be aware of the impact of external factors which can negatively impact on learning and development. Thus, children from traveller communities, asylum seekers, refugees or those from diverse linguistic backgrounds may be at risk of underachieving. All children are entitled to achieve (and exceed) their potential and an inclusive education which meets the needs of each individual and engages them will enable all children to thrive.

Inclusive settings treat children fairly and with respect. All practitioners should engage in a process of self-reflection and should evaluate their own values, beliefs and attitudes towards different groups and individuals. Practitioners could start this process of reflection through their engagement in a series of team meetings which focus on developing a shared understanding or common view of inclusion within the setting. These sessions could focus on different groups of learners, such as traveller children, refugees and asylum seekers. Each session could explore common prejudices towards each group as well as strategies to facilitate effective inclusion. Inclusive settings welcome all individuals and engender a sense of belonging. In such settings all children feel a sense of self-worth and this helps to develop confident learners. The language used in these settings is overwhelmingly positive and the focus is on what children can do.

Inclusion is also a rights issue. All children have a right to succeed, to be treated fairly and not to be discriminated against (DfES, 2007). In addition, all children have a right to feel valued and to be listened to (DfES, 2007). Anti-discriminatory

practice enables all children to feel safe and inclusive practitioners challenge bullying, harassment and discrimination.

Early years settings, like all educational institutions, are part of the community. Inclusive settings maintain a strong link with the community and exploit the expertise locally for the benefit of children's education. Practitioners can invite people from the community into the setting to share knowledge and skills and they can ensure that children benefit from the facilities in the community. Parents, carers and all practitioners who work in the setting should also feel included and have a sense of belonging. On a superficial level, a welcoming, happy environment within the setting will engender a sense of belonging. On a deeper level the involvement of all stakeholders in decision making processes will help to create an inclusive environment where different voices can be freely expressed, listened to and acted upon.

Defining inclusion

It has been argued that 'inclusion is a bewildering concept which can have a variety of interpretations and applications' (Avramidis *et al,* 2002: 158). Thus, personal understandings of what constitutes inclusive practice inevitably influences the ways in which inclusion is implemented within settings. This is supported by Sikes *et al* (2007) who found that practitioners defined inclusion in various ways and that '…understandings are not shared between, within and across individuals, groups…and larger collectives (p.357).

Jenny Corbett (2000) defines inclusion as a celebration of difference. She writes about a three-tier model of inclusion. At the first level the settings have a policy of inclusion in place. However, inclusion at this level tends to be quite superficial. At the second level structural modifications to the curriculum and the environment enable all learners to participate within the learning process and achieve. The final tier represents a deep form of inclusion:

> *…the third level…is that of what I call deep culture, the hidden curriculum of fundamental value systems, rituals and routines, initiations and acceptances which forms the fabric of daily life…I feel this depth of 'inclusion' is very hard to monitor or even to fully define, but I do believe that it forms the most satisfying type of educational 'inclusion'.*
>
> (Corbett and Slee, 2000: 140-1)

It is difficult, if not impossible to pin down the precise meaning of inclusion. Inclusion means different things to different people because personal interpretations are shaped by one's experiences and personal values.

Nutbrown and Clough (2006) interviewed 182 practitioners from a range of settings about their personal understanding of inclusion. They categorised these into narrow and broad definitions of inclusion. Narrow definitions of inclusion tended to focus on the importance of catering for the needs of children with special educational needs. In contrast, broad definitions focused on the education of all learners and celebration of diversity. These definitions represent 'a spectrum of understanding of what inclusion *means*' (Nutbrown and Clough, ibid: 44). The notion that inclusive education is a broad concept that reaches out to all learners is an important point. In inclusive environments all learners feel a sense of belonging and there is a strong focus on children's social, emotional and academic development. Inclusive practitioners base their practices on key principles and consequently are committed to equality of opportunity, justice, fairness and partnership working.

Sikes et al (2007) emphasise that 'understandings of inclusion are not fixed or definite, but rather are 'becoming', developing and changing as they are articulated and lived' (p.367). It has been argued that:

> *Inclusive education is an unabashed announcement, a public and political declaration and celebration of difference. It requires continual proactive responsiveness to foster an inclusive education culture.*
>
> (Corbett and Slee, 2000, p.134)

Practitioners in settings have daily challenges to face in terms of meeting the needs of a diverse range of learners. Inclusive practitioners engage in regular reflection and dialogue with colleagues in the process of developing strategies to meet the needs of all children. This is no easy task and it is important to recognise that what works for one child may not work for another. Within one setting practitioners may be charged with thinking about the needs of children with diverse special educational needs, children with English as an additional language, gifted children and children from different ethnic groups. Inclusive practitioners also develop approaches to engage boys and girls in the learning process and so gender falls within the inclusion debate. Inclusive education embraces all social backgrounds and lifestyles and diversity and difference are viewed as energising and have the capacity to enrich teaching and learning. Thus, inclusive practitioners use religion, culture, ethnicity, race, social class and sexual orientation as vehicles for educating children about diversity and enriching their practice. There are no hierarchies within inclusive education and consequently one way of life is not viewed with superiority over another. Practitioners should exploit the diversity within their setting and use this as an opportunity to educate learners about different beliefs, values and ways of life.

Inclusive practitioners develop strategies to meet the differing needs of learners in their setting and evaluate these regularly. Inclusive settings adapt to meet the needs of the learners rather than the learners fitting in with the systems and

routines in the setting. Flexible routines and systems are therefore important. Inclusive practitioners are able to identify the barriers to learning, participation and achievement for all learners and transform their practices to make learning accessible for all learners. Policies, systems, routines, the physical environment and approaches to learning and teaching are regularly reviewed in inclusive settings and adapted to enable all learners to thrive.

Inclusive settings are experimental and strategies to meet children's diverse needs will be developed in consultation with parents, carers, the child and other adults within the setting. Carrington and Elkins (2005) argue that 'above all, inclusion is about a philosophy of acceptance where all pupils are valued and treated with respect' (Carrington and Elkins, 2005: 86).

Challenges of inclusion

Cole (2005) has emphasised that a commitment to inclusion 'in its present form is very much about risk' (p.342). The risks can manifest themselves in different ways. Children with special educational needs can place great demands on practitioners' time to the detriment of other learners. Additionally, children with challenging behaviour can dilute the quality of the educational experience for other learners. A mainstream setting may be deemed to be inappropriate for some children, especially if a child does not appear to be coping within the setting. However, Cole (ibid) questions

> *As a society shouldn't we be the ones willing to take more positive risks?...be willing to commit ourselves to the challenge of inclusion; to commit ourselves to 'good faith and effort' in the cause of equity and social justice. We need to acknowledge the 'risks' and believe that they are worth taking.*
>
> (Cole, 2005: 342)

Inclusive practitioners demonstrate a commitment to every child and experiment with various approaches in order to provide an enriching experience for each child. They demonstrate a willingness to try new approaches and consult regularly with parents, carers, children and other professionals in this process. It is all too easy to give up on children and to declare that a child's needs are better met in alternative provision before adaptations have been made to the educational provision. Children with social, emotional and behavioural issues present challenges to practitioners on a daily basis. These children might demonstrate destructive play or fail to comply with the behavioural expectations of staff in the setting. They might be frequently uncooperative and they may display violent outbursts towards other children or staff. In such instances it is easy to dismiss inclusion as an ideological idea and to claim that one-to-one

support will address all the problems, without any real engagement with why the child may be behaving in a particular way. Such children provide practitioners with a real opportunity to reflect on their own practice and to address key questions:

-are the activities interesting and related to the child's interests?

-are there sufficient opportunities for the child to plan their own learning?

-are there opportunities for consulting the views and perspectives of children about their education and are these acted upon?

-are there external influences which are negatively impacting on the child's dispositions and attitudes?

-have sufficient opportunities been planned to develop the child's social skills?

-are sufficient opportunities planned to develop the child's self-concept?

-is the child involved in reviewing their own progress?

-is there a close partnership between the home and the setting?

-is there a clear system for rewards and sanctions?

-is the child clear on what constitutes appropriate behaviour within the setting?

-does the child have clear targets for behaviour and if so, is the child aware of these?

-is the child involved in monitoring and reviewing their own targets?

-do all practitioners consistently demonstrate respect and positive attitudes towards the child?

These questions are not exhaustive but will facilitate a process of reflection, which will help practitioners to modify provision to best meet the needs of the child. No child should be 'written off' and practitioners must demonstrate that they have reflected on the extent to which the child's behaviour might be influenced by the systems and policies in the setting. These need to be sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of all children.

It is important for practitioners to tune in to the perspectives of children, parents and carers and to develop a pedagogy based on listening and mutual respect. Sikes *et al* (2007) refer to the '*Yes Buts'* (p.360) of inclusion:

Yes, inclusion is a good thing. But the teachers don't have the training to deal with kids with a variety of special needs.

Yes, inclusion may be a good goal. But what about the rest of the class?

(Sikes *et al:* 361)

It is all too easy to dismiss inclusion as an ideology which cannot be translated into practice without a real commitment to transforming existing approaches and systems. It is all too easy to say that inclusion cannot work without demonstrating a real commitment to making it work. Inclusion necessitates a willingness to embrace diversity and to change practices. A genuine commitment to inclusion demands a willingness to reflect on one's practice and experiment with new approaches and practitioners should actively seek professional development in meeting the needs of diverse learners.

Warnock (2005) argues that inclusion is about a sense of belonging and participation in education rather than the type of setting that learners attend. I argue here that inclusive environments can be evident in both mainstream and special settings and that a diverse range of settings are required to meet the needs of diverse learners. However, where learners can benefit from mainstream environments, practitioners should make every effort to ensure that they do.

Inclusive learning environments

In inclusive educational environments parents, carers and children are welcomed into the setting. Great attention should be paid to the visual environment. This should include print in different languages and photographs and artefacts related to different cultures, religions and children's lives outside of the setting. Many settings now have a 'welcome board' with a greeting displayed in different languages. Positive images of disability should also be displayed around the setting.

The physical environment must enable children with physical or sensory disabilities to access the educational opportunities. Teaching should meet the needs of all children and take account of their starting points. The most effective teaching is informed by accurate assessment of what children know and can do and knowledge of children's misconceptions. Regular on-going observational assessment should inform the planning process and planning should address children's 'next steps' in learning. A rich, stimulating play-based environment is the most effective way of meeting the needs of all children. The environment should provide opportunities for children to learn through visual, auditory and kinaesthetic approaches. The provision should engage both boys and girls and practitioners will need to monitor children's access to specific areas of provision to ensure that all children are able to benefit from a broad range of educational experiences. Provision areas should be regularly evaluated in terms of whether

they embrace diversity and children should be consulted in the development or enhancement of areas of provision. Teaching and learning resources should be evaluated to ensure that they reflect diversity. The use of multicultural puppets or texts which address ethnicity, diversity of family backgrounds and disability can help to challenge children's existing stereotypes. It is also important to check that texts do not perpetuate gender stereotyping.

The emotional environment should be free of intimidation or bullying. Practitioners need to ensure that children, parents, carers and other adults are spoken to in a respectful manner and the language used should be positive and celebrate what children can do. Practitioners should be empowered to challenge discriminatory values, regardless of whether these come from children, parents or carers. This is no easy task, especially where parental and practitioner values clash. Practitioners should develop the confidence to be assertive (yet calm) and challenge inappropriate comments from parents. They should explain that discriminatory attitudes and prejudice will not be tolerated within the setting, even if they are characteristic of life in the home. Children should be encouraged to value each other and treat everyone with respect. However, respect is of course mutual and children should be able to command the same respect in turn.

Practitioners should exploit opportunities for educating children about diversity when planning within areas of learning. Children need to learn first and foremost about diversity within their own community before being introduced to wider aspects of diversity.

Barriers to learning and participation should be identified and removed. Children who lack verbal communication can be encouraged to communicate by using picture-exchange communication systems or other non-verbal ways of communication. Children with autistic spectrum disorder may benefit from the use of visual timetables which help them to understand the structure of a day. Children with severe behavioural difficulties may benefit from the use of a reward system specific to the child. The nature of the intervention will depend on the needs of the child. However, practitioners should remember that all children are unique and although some children share impairments, children may not respond to intervention strategies in the same way. A strategy which is effective for one child with autism may not be effective for another. Labels often cloud our thinking and channel our thinking in a particular way. Practitioners will need to experiment with their pedagogical approaches for individual children rather than developing blanket approaches for groups of learners who share similar characteristics. Not all children with autism respond effectively to a visual timetable.

Including all parents

Inclusive practitioners value all parents and carers and treat them with respect. However, Nutbrown and Clough (2006) found that practitioners made less effort to include parents who they perceived to be neglectful in comparison with the efforts made to include parents of children with learning difficulties or parents from different cultural groups. Neglectful parents present challenges on many levels and practitioners may even be frightened of them. Practitioners may have formed negative viewpoints about their lifestyles and may be reluctant to approach them.

However, all parents and carers should be treated with respect and listened to. Practitioners' personal values should never influence interactions or communications with parents and all parents should be made to feel welcome in the setting. In exceptional cases parents who demonstrate inappropriate behaviour towards staff or children should be prevented from accessing the setting.

The use of a parent notice board is invaluable for communicating a range of information to parents. Additionally, daily diaries forwarded from the setting to home and vice versa help to facilitate information sharing. Parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities may be vulnerable themselves and may need to be signposted to other services for help and support. Practitioners should take steps to familiarise themselves with the full range of services that are available to support parents. Parents can be invited into the setting to work with practitioners and children and this should extend to fathers. The Penn Green Centre has developed a reputation for developing parent partnership. Additionally, practitioners should take steps to involve parents and carers in the assessment process (Glazzard et al, 2010) and parents should be consulted for feedback or about developments which are under discussion. Written communication with parents and carers should be inclusive by making it available in different languages and practitioners should develop alternative approaches for communicating with semi-literate or non-literate parents.

The Code of Practice for Special Educational Needs (DFES, 2001) emphasises the importance of developing partnerships with parents and carers and involving them in decisions. Parents should be involved in setting targets for their child's development and these should be reviewed in consultation with parents on a regular basis.

Including all children

Including children in decisions about their learning is central to inclusive practice. Effective practitioners capitalise on children's interests by developing provision which takes these interests into account. Children should also be included in making decisions about what resources they would like to see in specific areas of

the setting. Inclusive practitioners also consult children about assessment (Glazzard et al, 2010) and involve them in selecting pieces of evidence for inclusion in their assessment portfolios or in setting and reviewing targets for their own development. This can be implemented through regular child-practitioner 'learning conversations', perhaps led by the Key Person. Including children and parents in decisions about a child's education deflects power away from the practitioner and creates a fairer system of education and care. According to Foucault, resistance is 'an energy that is reviving' (1991: 289). Thus, children with behavioural difficulties may in fact be resisting the labels that have been assigned to them or the practices imposed on them. This presents an opportunity for practitioners to reflect on their own practice and to modify it in some way. Consulting young children about what and how they like to learn can provide practitioners with a different perspective from the position of the child.

Including all practitioners

All practitioners need to feel a sense of belonging and feel that they are able to articulate their views freely. Practitioners need to feel that they have been consulted about policies and developments within the setting and that their voices have been listened to and acted upon. Nutbrown and Clough (2006) found that some practitioners felt 'something akin to unconsulted servants' (p.132) in that their professional knowledge, attitudes and skills were not recognised. However, others felt a sense of belonging and ownership and were included fully in the life of the setting (Nutbrown and Clough, 2006).

The views of practitioners external to the setting should also be listened to, valued and acted upon. This includes specialist staff from multi-agency teams who support children with specific special educational needs.

Theories of disability

Goodley (2007) warns of the danger of viewing children as 'eternally lacking' (p.322) and he urges educators to think in terms of the 'ever-changing, ever moving, becoming learner' (p.324). It is pertinent to consider how the use of labelling can categorise learners and perpetuate a deficit model where educators focus on what learners cannot do and make referential comparisons with the non-disabled majority. He invites practitioners 'to resist over-coding' (p.329) and to experiment with new approaches:

> Pedagogies should engage *alongside* learners…resisting over coding and the subtle forms of segregation brought about by assessment…alongside this learner, the…pedagogue cares for the ever-changing, ever moving becoming learner.

(Goodley, 2007: 324)

Models of assessment which compare learners and label them as failures (on the basis of a socially constructed norm) are highly exclusive. The Early Years Foundation Stage profile is a more inclusive model of assessment than National Curriculum assessment because it enables children to demonstrate their abilities in a broad range of areas. However, it is important to keep the focus on what children can do rather than what they cannot and to avoid comparisons between one child and the next. Goodley (2007) urges educators to see themselves as learners as they experiment with pedagogy, thus allowing learners to develop in different ways, following their own individual pathways. Within this model, learners and educators remain connected and support each other and children are not measured, compared or judged.

The medical model of disability has traditionally located the source of disablement within the person. It conceptualises people with impairments as victims and fails to differentiate between *impairment* and *disability.* Categorising children on the basis of labels (for example, autistic or ADHD) perpetuates a 'within-child' view of disability where the cause of disablement is attributed to biological factors within the person. In contrast, the social model views disability as a socially constructed phenomenon. Within this model impairment and disability are differentiated and the source of disablement is society's failure to make adaptations and adjustments to enable people with impairments to have full equality of opportunity. Tregaskis (2002: 457) argues that 'the social model of disability has been an emancipatory force in the lives of many disabled people'. The model acknowledges that people may have impairments as a result of biological factors but challenges the assumption that impairment should automatically lead to disability. Thus, practitioners can make adaptations and adjustments to their practices to ensure that children are able to access fully the educational opportunities within the setting. This could include building in *access strategies* to enable learners with impairments to participate in learning experiences and benefit from them. Additionally, practitioners should ensure that they provide children with learning experiences which are developmentally appropriate; taking account of children's learning styles. The social model encourages practitioners to view behavioural difficulties as a product of inappropriate pedagogy rather than as something which is inherent in the child. The model invites practitioners to reflect on the social barriers which may result in children not being able to access and benefit from learning experiences.

Individual education plans

Although individual education and behaviour plans may usefully focus practitioners' attention on children's individual targets, they can result in exclusion. Skidmore (2004) emphasises that the use of individual education plans results in 'an objectives-based model of teaching' (p.16) which can restrict

more creative, innovative approaches to learning. He argues that the Code of Practice for special educational needs (DFES, 2001) can result in ‘a largely individualized model of learning difficulties’ (Skidmore, 2004: 16) which ignores other institutional factors which can result in exclusion. These could include the ethos and culture of the setting, practitioner attitudes and value systems, practitioner quality and the resources children are presented with. The social model places an onus on practitioners to reflect on the extent to which socially constructed barriers can result in disablement.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to address inclusion on both a practical and theoretical level. It has emphasised that inclusive values are shaped by practitioners’ personal attitudes and values and that a process of individual reflection is necessary before the rhetoric of inclusion can be translated into reality. In the absence of a clear definition of inclusion, the ways in which practitioners implement inclusion will ultimately be shaped by their own personal interpretations of inclusion. However, practitioners should develop a shared understanding of what inclusion should look like within their setting. The formulation of a shared policy of inclusion will help to secure consistency of practices within the setting. Children, staff, parents and carers should contribute to this shared vision in order to engender a sense of ownership. The challenges of inclusion are very real for practitioners who are charged with meeting the increasingly complex and varied needs of different learners on a daily basis. Developing approaches which meet these diverse needs is no easy task and the difficulties associated with this should not be underestimated. However, practitioners should persevere with their commitment to inclusion because educational inclusion helps to prepare children for life in a diverse society. Finally, inclusive educational environments help to break down prejudice and eradicate discrimination and ultimately this will create a fairer society in which diversity is positively celebrated.

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