

Queensland kindergarten learning guideline

Professional development | Resources



Inclusion in the early years

This resource looks at current theory and practices for inclusion in the early years.

Inclusion is legislated

As part of a broader human rights agenda, anti-discrimination legislation seeks to ensure the rights of all are upheld through the responsibility of others. For example, the Australian *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* and *Disability Standards for Education 2005*, provide guidelines for curriculum, enrolment and participation. This legislation has been influenced by global agreements such as the United Nations' *Convention of the Rights of the Child* (1989) and *Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disability* (2006).

What is inclusion?

Inclusion has become a global social approach that encourages us all to build communities that develop and celebrate everyone's achievements (Booth, Ainscow & Kingston, 2006). In inclusive settings, educators strive to improve all learners' participation and learning, regardless of age, gender, religion, culture, socioeconomic status, sexual preferences, ability or language. Inclusion encourages everyone in the community to participate and achieve.

Inclusion in early years and childcare is as much concerned with the participation of practitioners as with the involvement of children and young people. Participation implies playing, learning and working in collaboration with others. It involves making choices about, and having a say in, what we do. More deeply, it is about being recognised, accepted and valued for ourselves.

Booth, Ainscow & Kingston (2006, p.3)

Access to early years programs allows children to progress with their neighbourhood friends. Ultimately, this offers all children a more inclusive future (Wall, 2011).

Sometimes educators or community members object to inclusion, believing that some children would be 'better off' attending specialised settings. Common concerns about staff not having the required skills, other children being disadvantaged, and cost are not supported by research (Jackson, 2008; Loreman, Deppeler & Harvey, 2011; Queensland Parents for People with a Disability, QPPD, 2011).

It is clear from research that children do not need to be protected from each other (Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education, n.d.). They belong together, with advantages and benefits for everyone. Research results recommend inclusive early childhood education as an ethical and responsible way to teach all children (Winter, 2007).

Early years research

Early years education has been influenced by social-constructivist theory. Theorists such as Vygotsky have influenced early years practice, emphasising the importance of social interactions in child development. This has led to the recognition and implementation of play-based learning and intentional teaching in the early years.

Research overwhelmingly supports inclusion of students with disability (Jackson, 2008) and confirms that there has been a high level of acceptance of inclusive practices in early years settings (Llewellyn, Thompson & Fante, 2002). Research by Mohay and Reid (2006) confirms positive attitudes towards inclusion in Queensland childcare centres.

Diversity

The term diversity is used broadly referring to the various ways young children and their families differ from one another.

Winter (2007, p.17)

Queensland is a culturally and linguistically diverse society with approximately 20.5% of the population born overseas and 9.8% speaking a language other than English at home (ABS, 2011). Families are diverse and family groupings are culturally, linguistically, socially and economically diverse and practise a range of beliefs (Arthur et al., 2007).

Diversity contributes to the strength of our communities. It is a rich resource for life and learning, rather than a problem to surmount (Booth & Ainscow, 2000). For example, immigration of people from around the world can mean greater economic prosperity and cultural enrichment as society includes those who bring new talents, experience and skills to the community (Darling-Hammond, 1996).

In education, respectfully incorporating diverse perspectives, histories, cultures and technologies helps our children to develop connections across and within communities, e.g. making connections between children's personal cultural heritages and those of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Australia (QSA, 2010, p. 3).

Incorporating diverse perspectives extends to cooperative planning, teaching and learning. Assistants, parents/carers, extended family and local community members all have something valuable to contribute.

The educational programs offered within communities, including kindergarten, are an important hub within the community. It is crucial to the diversity and richness of our communities that children experience and develop positive attitudes toward difference. This diversity strengthens our programs for young learners and the communities in which they learn (Loreman, Deppeler & Harvey, 2011).

High expectations

Teachers who hold high expectations for all children and accept the challenge of guiding each child to success are likely to attain high-quality instruction.

Winter (2007, p.185)

The *Queensland kindergarten guideline (QKLG)* states that children achieve when all partners hold high expectations and promote equity and success for all (QSA, 2010, p. 6). High expectations are promoted through responsiveness to children, building inclusive partnerships and environments, and promoting children's learning and development.

The expectations we have for young children become evident in how teachers program learning in the early years (Arthur et al., 2007). If we have low or stereotypical expectations for certain individuals, we sometimes subconsciously plan, observe and evaluate based upon those expectations. For example, if one child has an older sibling with an intellectual disability, staff may inadvertently look for signs of disability in the younger child. Many children are thus conditioned into behaving below capacity, based upon what is expected of them long before they attend formal schooling (Knowles & Lander, 2011). Early years professionals have the opportunity to establish high expectations for their learners and interrupt this cycle.

The language used to describe the diversity of children and their families has a very powerful influence on the education of young children. This choice of words, for example the use of labels, can contribute to either inclusive or exclusive attitudes of others and ultimately teachers' own practices (Graham, 2007).

The language used to describe or discuss children's families, situations and progress, should be positive and strengths based. Strengths-based language has a direct influence on the expectations of adults and how they view children's development and potential (Hattie, 2009).

... we seek to re-introduce teachers to the enduring importance and value of knowing and understanding one's students, not through diagnostic labels or reductive 'how-to' manuals but through the pedagogical art of observation, the ethical commitment to really hear, the ability to read children and intuit what their behaviour means, to analyse those performances, and work out how best to respond to them.

Graham (2007, p. 12)

Inclusive practices

Children's participation in all aspects of early years programs encourages their development of tolerance, compassion and understanding. Carefully planned environments engage and enable children to co-construct learning and build deep understanding (QSA, 2010, p. 24).

Inclusive settings and practices, through their physical and social systems, can enhance children's social interactions as well as physical and cognitive development.

Research into outstanding inclusive early years classrooms has identified three main opportunities that enhance opportunity to learn (Katz & Galbraith, 2006, p. 14):

- Open-ended activities provide opportunity for peers to interact and teach each other.
- Transitions between routines can become the impetus for social, physical, emotional and cognitive learning and enhance opportunities to develop skills and knowledge.
- Staff working collaboratively to plan and provide situations for open-ended and transition activities is vital.

Only inclusion has the potential to reduce fear and to build friendship, respect and understanding.
Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education (n.d.)

Collaborative planning

Input by a team of people is essential to meet the needs of an inclusive classroom (Booth & Ainscow, 2000; Loreman, Deppeler & Harvey, 2011; Winter, 2007). This team approach is mutually beneficial to specialists, parents/carers, teachers, assistants, community and children. For example, understanding the lives of families is crucial to building bridges between home and early years programs (Winter, 2007).

Explicit planning for successful inclusion requires administrators, teachers and assistants to provide input and observations about children, settings and resources. Staff play an essential role by collaboratively and deliberately planning inclusive experiences (Arthur et al., 2007; Friend & Cook, 2007; Winter, 2007).

Regular, ongoing reflection about the success of collaborative planning is vital for ongoing improvement (Mogharreban & Bruns, 2009; Wall, 2011).

Conclusion

Teachers need an understanding of current research and practices in relation to inclusion so that they can create a culture that maximises participation of all learners and respects the social, civil and educational rights of all children. Such a culture promotes community cohesion and integration through understanding of and respect for others. Inclusive settings recognise, support and celebrate diversity and high achievements for all children.

More information

The QKLG is available at: www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/10192.html.

Additional information and resources are available to support inclusion and diversity at: www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/12974.html

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