Inclusive practice

Adopting inclusive practices involves viewing children in context, rather than as individuals who exist in isolation. It also requires educators to shift from deficit- to strengths-based models of practice. This means focusing on children’s abilities rather than their needs, viewing family and cultural diversity as a strength, and seeking ways to maximise children’s engagement, rather than modifying experiences to cater for perceived deficits or limitations. A key question to ask is: How can I build on this child’s/family’s/community’s strengths to maximise engagement and the child’s learning?

Building inclusive ways of working is an ongoing journey that requires professional commitment and focused reflection. It requires consideration for different perspectives and frameworks that enable educators to respond to new challenges and complexities. As Fleer and Williams-Kennedy (2002) suggest, while attempting to understand diverse cultural frameworks is challenging, it also brings rewards, including the ability to connect with and begin to see the world from different perspectives.

Children’s perspectives

Children’s learning and development is shaped directly and indirectly by social relationships, experiences and contexts. Their immediate interactions with their families during everyday activities are shaped by their shared family histories, cultures and experiences. The interpersonal relationships children establish with familiar people play a pivotal role in how they engage with the wider world. For many children, educators also play a significant role.

Beyond these immediate personal relationships, children’s experiences are linked to a variety of connected systems, such as community, health, education and care services. Each of these systems is influenced by wider social systems, such as government policies and broader social agendas. While children do not interact directly with these broader systems, their everyday experiences are indirectly impacted by them. For example, these systems shape how education services operate, the services families can access and the support families receive, which in turn affects personal interactions and relationships in children’s daily lives.

Parents’ and families’ perspectives

Parents and educators often hold different perspectives and experiences that shape how they support children’s learning and development. For example, differences in perspectives may be evident in a family’s approach to feeding, comforting and interacting with their child, family routines and explicitly stated values or expectations. When linguistic, cultural and socioeconomic factors come together, family practices and priorities can be diverse. They also often differ from the practices and priorities of educational service providers.

Educational services can be intimidating and overwhelming places for many parents and family members. Their prior experiences with educators and personal priorities shape their interactions with and expectations of educators. Dockett and Perry (2007) note that a family’s apparent reluctance to engage in their child’s education should not be interpreted by educators as a sign of
the family being indifferent. To engage diverse families, educators need to understand each family’s perspective, priorities, expectations and values. These understandings provide a basis for identifying new ways to engage families that have positive outcomes for children, their family members and the educational service.

**Educators’ perspectives**

Educators’ views tend to reflect dominant Western values and practices and often differ from those held by family and community members. Educators’ professional priorities and expectations are influenced by frameworks and standards as well as their own cultural scripts. These scripts do not always fit with the cultural scripts of families. For example, educators often focus on promoting children’s individuality and independence, while parents may value cooperation and participation. In addition, each educator’s personal experiences influences how they interpret the stories and practices that families and children bring to the setting (Fleer and Williams-Kennedy 2002). As members of educational teams, each educator brings their personal perspectives to their work. It is the combination of various personal and professional perspectives that shape the interactions and relationships children and families experience on a day-to-day basis.

**Frameworks for promoting inclusive practices**

Working with children and families from diverse backgrounds presents both opportunities and challenges for educators. Educators need to identify ways to reflect and value the social and cultural contexts of children and families. They also need to acknowledge the significant role communities play in children’s learning and the variability of individual children’s learning and development. To achieve this, services can use and adapt existing frameworks to build more inclusive approaches.

**Index of inclusion**

The *Index of inclusion* (Booth, Ainscow and Kingston 2006) provides a useful framework for examining perspectives and building inclusive approaches. The framework focuses educators’ attention on three dimensions. These are:

**Cultural dimension**

Creating inclusive cultures involves establishing a secure, accepting, collaborative and stimulating community where everyone is valued. Shared inclusive values are developed, conveyed and used to guide decisions about policies and moment-to-moment practice.

**Policy dimension**

By producing inclusive policies and identifying specific strategies that maximise the participation of all children, families and educators, services can increase the capacity of their setting to respond to diversity and coordinate all forms of support.

**Practice dimension**

Evolving inclusive practices requires a focus on ensuring experiences and interactions are responsive to diverse children, their families and communities. Educators build on children’s knowledge and experiences, and encourage children to be actively involved in learning. They organise people and materials to support play, learning and participation. Table 1 provides a tool for reflection and planning to help services develop inclusive programs.
Table 1: Index of inclusion dimensions: Focuses for reflection and planning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Child</th>
<th>Parents and families</th>
<th>Educator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Creating inclusive cultures</strong></td>
<td>How do we help children to feel secure and accepted? How do we promote, collaboration and actively engage children as part of the learning community?</td>
<td>How do we help parents/carers and families to feel secure and accepted? How do we promote, collaboration and actively engage parents/carers and children as part of the learning community?</td>
<td>How do I help my team members to feel secure and accepted? How do we promote, collaboration and actively engage team members as part of the learning community?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Producing inclusive policies</strong></td>
<td>How do our plans and policies promote participation of all children? What specific strategies and support can be mobilised to maximise each child’s learning?</td>
<td>How do our plans and policies promote participation of all parents/carers and families? What specific strategies and support can be mobilised to promote parent and family engagement in their child’s learning?</td>
<td>How do our plans and policies help team members to engage fully to support all children and families? What specific strategies and support can be mobilised to promote our team’s ability to engage fully to support all children and families?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evolving inclusive practices</strong></td>
<td>How do we ensure learning experiences and interactions build on children’s family and community experiences? How do we build on each child’s strengths and encourage their active involvement in learning?</td>
<td>How do we interact and engage with diverse parents/carers and families in ways that are responsive and encourage participation? How do we ensure learning reflects family and community experiences and priorities?</td>
<td>How do we collaborate to bring together resources (people and materials) to support play, learning and participation? How do we ensure experiences and interactions reflect our inclusive cultures and policies?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Belonging, being and becoming

Belonging, being & becoming: the early years learning framework for Australia (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2009) also provides a useful framework for examining and building inclusive practice. Table 2 provides a tool for reflection and planning to promote inclusive practice.

Table 2: Belonging, being and becoming: Focuses for reflection and planning more inclusive programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EYLF</th>
<th>Child</th>
<th>Parents and families</th>
<th>Educator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Belonging</strong></td>
<td>How do we support each child to feel a sense of belonging? What different actions/interactions are required to help all children to develop a sense of belonging?</td>
<td>How do we support each family to feel a sense of belonging? What different actions/interactions are required to help all families develop a sense of belonging?</td>
<td>Where do I belong? How do we support colleagues in our team to feel a sense of belonging?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### EYLF

#### Being

- **Child**: How do we value each child and support them to engage positively each day, in the ‘here and now’?
- **Parents and families**: How do we value each family and support them to engage positively each day with children and staff?
- **Educator**: How do I value and support myself as an educator? How do we value and support colleagues in our team to engage positively each day with children and families?

#### Becoming

- **Child**: How do we promote significant learning and development and build each child’s strengths and potential?
- **Parents and families**: How do we build each family’s strengths and potential as significant contributors to their children’s lives?
- **Educator**: How do I build my own strengths and potential to contribute to the lives of children and their families? How do we promote our colleagues’ strengths and potential to contribute to the lives of children and their families?

### References


