Inclusive education

By Dr. Kathy Cologon

Inclusion is one little word that produces dramatically different responses from varying people ranging from fear, to excitement and passion, to dismissiveness. Along with these diverse emotional responses there are probably even more varied understandings of what inclusion really means – and different experiences influenced by these understandings. In fact, there are a lot of examples called ‘inclusion’ that are actually exclusion. In this article I will draw on research to clarify what inclusion is really all about.

As someone with personal and family experiences of disability and as an educator and researcher in the field of inclusive education, I first want to acknowledge the complexity of the issues around inclusion and inclusive education. While the research evidence clearly shows the benefits of inclusion, and while inclusive education is unshakably the right of EVERY person – without exception – sadly, for many people who experience disability and their families, the journey to inclusion often feels more like an ongoing battle than a simple ‘choice’ or ‘right’. This often makes the decisions that families have to make difficult and sometimes painful. Fortunately, inclusion – and specifically inclusive education – has grown over time and it can only be hoped that the ‘journey’ will become easier with time. However, for families faced with the daunting task of making decisions for their children, each family can only make the best decision based on the information available and their individual circumstances at any one time.

So what is inclusion really?

I was recently discussing inclusion with my brilliant brother Tim (who happens to have Down syndrome). We are working on some research together and Tim shared his own perspective on inclusion. He said, “Being included is awesome. Being included is something. When I’m included I feel good.” Going on to explain that, “Excluded is being left out. Included – you’re in.”

In my research with families who experience disability, families have shared that exclusion is deeply painful and that it happens at many different levels – beyond the official arenas of enrolment location or employment status and so on. Inclusion, too, occurs at many different levels. However, in contrast with exclusion, families shared that inclusion is a life affirming experience marked by joy.

As I explored in my recent book on inclusive education (see: www.oup.com.au/titles/higher_ed/education/9780195597011), for the families in my research, inclusion can be understood as belonging, participation, opportunity and recognised contribution. Inclusion is about much more than simply being present in a ‘mainstream’ setting. In fact, families shared that inclusion is dependent on belonging, participation and opportunity; further to this, it requires being valued for the contribution that a person makes to the family, community and society. The families in my research reported that their children could not be truly included without recognising what their children have to offer. As one family shared:

“Inclusion means all people are able to contribute to their community and have their contribution recognised while fully participating in their society and having their differences and the contribution those differences make, valued.” (Family #120, see Cologon, 2014)

Tim and the families who have generously shared their perspective and stories in my research have a clear sense of what inclusion REALLY means based on their own lived experiences, yet misunderstandings of inclusion still abound.

As I explored in an article in The Conversation in the latter half of last year (theconversation.com/inclusive-education-means-all-children-are-included-in-every-way-not-just-in-theory-45237), common misunderstandings of inclusion relate to (incorrectly) considering integration (which often involves only partial participation) 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 or as a privilege instead of a right.
As one family in some of my research shared:

“Unfortunately some people still like to remind me of the GREAT EFFORT and EXTRA things that need to be done to maximise my daughter’s participation at school. This disclosure of effort is the barrier. This is what teaching is – being responsive, finding what works for students, modifying curriculum to meet levels of ability. The reminders are subtle ways to keep reminding me this is still possibly a ‘privilege’ to have my child placed at the school and not her right.” (Family #82, Cologon, 2014)

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 area, classroom, unit or school. While in various forms, none of these are inclusion.

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; or where a child is only permitted to attend for part of the day. Other examples of micro exclusion are where a child is present but not given the opportunity to participate in the activities along with the other children in the setting or is present but viewed as a burden and an unequally valued member of the class or setting. This is not inclusion.

Unfortunately, though it is alarmingly common for examples of exclusion (micro and macro) to be reported as being inclusion.

So what does inclusion REALLY look like?

Aydn* and his classmates are learning sign language together. Aydn has Down syndrome (amongst some other labels) and supplementing his spoken language with manual signs assists in creating shared communication amongst the whole group. His teachers and the teacher’s aide completed a one-day key word sign workshop at the start of the year.

Following the signing workshop and some reading and thinking, Aydn’s teacher introduced Auslan and the children have been learning many Auslan signs, along with learning about Auslan as a language. While Aydn’s teacher is not fluent in Auslan and the children are using Auslan signs along with spoken English (an approach called Key Word Sign), Aydn’s teacher is careful to introduce the language in a way that is respectful of the Deaf community of Australia. This has led to some rich conversations that support children in coming to value multiple forms of communication, thus contributing to a broader culture of inclusion.

Learning sign in this way does not single Aydn out. However, it does create the opportunity for Aydn to share his knowledge with his peers and support their learning whilst also supporting shared communication. Everyone in the class has been enjoying learning some sign and the families are interested, so the teacher has been sharing ‘signs of the week’ with families.

Although the teaching staff attended the sign workshop to assist Aydn’s communication, the teacher and aide have been finding sign very useful in supporting many students in the class. In fact, Aydn’s teacher and aide share that they have found that incorporating Key Word Sign has helped them to think more flexibly about how to provide multiple ways for all of the children to participate throughout the activities. As they do so, the educators feel they are noticing more about where each child is at with their learning.

In addition to facilitating shared communication with Aydn, Braxton is now saying and signing “hello” to greet the whole group in morning circle time whereas previously he was silent during group times. Michael, Alice, Keiko and Jack seem to be finding signing the letters of words really helpful as they attempt to spell and write new words. The signed alphabet and colours have become favourite transition songs and games.

*All children’s names are pseudonyms
This example is only one snapshot of inclusion within an everyday classroom experience but it illustrates some key elements of inclusion in action. As can be seen in this example, inclusive education involves valuing and facilitating the full inclusion of all children. This means that supports are in place for each child as needed to ensure that the child can participate meaningfully in each activity. However, these supports are implemented in ways that do not segregate the children from each other. Aydn’s teacher and/or aide could have become highly skilled signers, but if the whole class wasn’t learning sign then this would not have facilitated Aydn’s inclusion, nor had the additional benefits to many of Aydn’s classmates.

Aydn could be sitting in the classroom, separate to his peers, with an aide. However, even if the aide was using sign this would still be exclusion. In the example above, the aide is circulating around the small group activities and supporting the teacher in including all of the children in the setting. Aydn participates in the same activities as the other children in the class, but with supports and adaptations as needed (for him and his peers). In this setting each child’s differences, including for Aydn, are not ignored but are embraced as what makes each person unique. The goal is not to make any child ‘normal’ but rather to grow and learn together.

**Outcomes of inclusion**

Contrary to what might logically be expected (given the higher teacher: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. In fact, inclusive education has been found to have equal or better outcomes in all areas for all children. This includes positive outcomes for social, academic, cognitive and physical development in all children (for a comprehensive review see: http://www.cda.org.au/_literature_159457/Inclusion_in_Education_-_2013_PDF).

For example, in inclusive classrooms, children show increased communication development, more positive behaviour and better outcomes in reading, writing and mathematics. Children also show a more positive sense of self-worth. Again contrary to common assumptions, while bullying does unfortunately happen in all types of educational settings (‘mainstream’ or ‘special’), inclusion has been found to be the best antidote to bullying. Inclusive education creates an improved sense of community and belonging.

Genuine inclusive education can and does happen. But at the moment in Australia we do not have inclusive education for all students. Many students who experience disability are denied equal access from early childhood through to adulthood.

It is my hope that a better understanding of the research evidence can contribute to addressing this. For example, sometimes teachers and parents of children who do not experience disability 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 the myriad of other benefits of inclusion (including social and communication development and more positive understandings of the self for all), inclusive teachers engage with all children more frequently and at a higher cognitive level, with important benefits to all.

**Going forward**

Unfortunately, the 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 significant barriers to actually bringing it about.

Contrary to suggestions that it is a ‘nice idea in theory, but not practical’, in reality inclusion is a big idea but it exists, and is lived out in the nitty-gritty of everyday moments.

Inclusion is an ongoing, step-by-step process. It cannot be captured in a checklist, nor marked as ‘complete’. Instead it requires an approach to education that is flexible and evolving in response to the children within each given context – and a genuine recognition and valuing of each step we take, in every aspect of life. It can be painful and joyful. This can make it seem daunting, but it is also heartening – none of us will be where we ideally want to be with inclusion tomorrow and some of our ‘steps’ will be ‘missteps’ along the way. However, through ongoing commitment, respectful collaboration and frequent critical reflection, little-by-little we come closer to where we want to be with all the benefits for everyone involved. As one family shared:

“It has been wonderful to have her in educational situations where the organisation hasn’t just taken her, but have actively wanted her and rejoiced with us in every little step of progress. Our daughter has had aides and teachers who meet us at the end of each day, excited about our daughter’s day and what she achieved.” (Family #89, Cologon, 2014)

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Dr Kathy Cologon is a Senior Lecturer in Inclusive Education at the Department of Educational Studies, Macquarie University. Kathy has a particular interest in research and practice relating to the development and support of inclusive education, with a view towards greater recognition of the rights of all children.