Inclusive Education within the 21st Century

The practice of placing children with cognitive or physical disabilities into specialised education facilities was widely accepted as general society and educators alike believed it was impossible to integrate people with special needs into the mainstream education systems. As a result, people with disabilities became marginalised and were often excluded from access to a well-rounded education as they were ‘cared for’ rather than educated. This lack of basic education meant that as adults many people with disabilities were often unable to find paid employment, live independently or live a full and active adult life. Over the last twenty or thirty years this mindset has been slowly changing as doubts have been raised as to whether these practices were actually discriminatory and whether, often with the best of intentions, people with disabilities were being actively prevented from reaching their full potential. This changing ideology culminated in a world conference in Salamanca, Spain in 1994 when representatives from ninety-two governments and twenty-five international organisations met to discuss the concept of inclusive education. The result was the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994).

Inclusive education policies require that schools move away from segregated models and become instrumental in promoting an inclusive educational community. Teachers are key players within an inclusive model as they are responsible for devising suitable classroom structures and adapting teaching materials, curriculum and assessment to cater for an increasingly diverse range of learning styles. The challenge facing the education system in general is the need to develop a suitable curriculum, provide a physical environment that is appropriate for children with special needs, recruit more teacher aides, provide training and professional development for existing staff and, of course, funding.

Legislation and Policies

According to national law Australian schools are required to accept any and all students for enrolment. The creation of these laws and policies have been influenced by international conventions, declarations and statements which have paved the way for the notion of inclusive education in Australia today. Some of the legislation affecting the delivery of education is listed in the table below:
The outcome of an international conference on inclusive education in Salamanca, Spain in 1994 was a Five Point Statement and an Action Framework relating to special needs education. The Statement called for major reform of the existing education systems premised on the belief that special needs education cannot advance in isolation but must form part of an overall educational strategy (UNESCO, 1994). The Statement emphasised that children with special educational needs should be accommodated within an inclusive education framework that celebrated differences, supported learning, responded to individual needs and urged governments, throughout the world, to implement inclusive educational practices (UNESCO, 1994).

In 2005 Education Queensland (EQ) adopted an inclusive education statement to foster a learning community that questions disadvantage, challenges social injustice, maximises the educational and social outcomes of all students, identifies barriers to learning and ensures all students value diversity (EQ, 2005). The Archdiocese of Brisbane Catholic Education Council released their own Policy Statement in 2007 relating to students with disabilities, based on the principles of valuing diversity (Archdiocese of Brisbane Catholic Education Council, 2007). The policy outlines how the Catholic Education Council will welcome students with disabilities and work collaboratively with parents/caregivers to ensure an inclusive learning environment is provided (Archdiocese of Brisbane Catholic Education Council, 2007). The commonalities found within all of this legislation are: rights and responsibilities; benefits for all; facilitating maximum individual growth and participation in local community and neighbourhood (Sargeant, 2012).

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*Table 1*

Assignment 2 – Inclusive Education Journal Article
Jenna Swan (Wednesday 12pm-1pm)
Principles of Inclusive Education

Access to an inclusive education system is important on two levels, not only does it provide individuals with knowledge, it also symbolises society’s affirmation of previously marginalised groups (Thomas & Loxley, 2007). Vygotsky’s theory (as cited in, Udvari-Solner & Thousand, 1996) postulates that learning is a social activity occurring within and through social interaction and therefore, all people learn more effectively within a social setting than in isolation. In 2004 the Western Australian Government produced a model of inclusion that identifies seven principles of inclusive education (See Figure 1).

![Figure 1](Department of Education and Training (WA), as cited in Hyde, 2011)

It can be seen from the above diagram that Western Australia has taken the basic principles of the UNESCO Salamanca Statement and expanded two areas to encompass the actual delivery
of an inclusive curriculum. Items 4 and 6 both relate to the need to develop an inclusive framework, adequately resourced and flexible enough to meet changing student needs. It is not apparent from the diagram whether the Western Australian Government’s view of diversity is broad or if it is devoted to students with a disability or impairment that falls within a target group previously identified within state legislation (Hyde, 2011). According to Kauffman, Landrum, Mock, Sayeskie & Sayeskie (2005) some educators have concerns that full inclusion is only appropriate for students with mild disabilities and policies that advocate inclusion of all students is not the least restrictive learning environment for some children. There are also concerns that individuals with severe and multiple disabilities may require a level of physical care and management which surpasses their educational needs (Westwood, 2007).

**Practices**

An inclusive educational environment is no different to a standard classroom setting, in that it aims to provide students with a safe, flexible learning environment where educational outcomes, consistent with capabilities, can be readily achieved (Pagliano & Gillies, 2012). According to Shaddock, Giorcelli & Smith (2007) “Teachers’ willingness to engage in co-teaching and to find creative ways of working together with others to support students with disabilities in the mainstream are hallmarks of effective inclusive practice” (p. 4). This requires a change in thinking by educators who are used to operating in an exclusive educational setting. Previously when a student’s behaviour became an issue that threatened to disrupt the normal workings of the classroom the standard response was to isolate that student and perhaps recommend a special program, but within an inclusive educational setting the focus is to expand and adapt the standard classroom practices to accommodate that student (Shaddock et al., 2007).

**Assessment**

In the interest of equity, assessment tasks and conditions need to be modified to allow for the differing capabilities and physical skills of students with special needs. The Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) (2012) suggests five adjustments when administering assessment to allow students to better demonstrate their abilities. They are:

- **Timing** – additional time can be allocated and frequent breaks given,
- **Scheduling** – break assessment tasks into manageable chunks,
Setting – change seating and/or location to a less stressful environment,

Presentation – provide cues and prompts; specialised equipment and resources (laptops, iPads, inclusive learning technological aids),

Response – allow verbal, written, non-verbal (use of specialised equipment and technology).

Some latitude may also be granted when administering tests – more emphasis on oral questions and answers, the use of a scribe, audio device or laptop/iPad (Westwood, 2007). For those students who lack the physical or intellectual ability to undertake any type of formative or summative assessment, educators may use a range of methods to collect evidence of knowledge, skills, competencies or classroom participation. These can include: annotated photographs, video evidence, observation checklists and anecdotal observations (QSA, 2012).

Inclusive education is about providing education for all within a social justice framework. Students with special needs are given the same educational opportunities but are not necessarily expected to achieve mainstream assessment benchmarks. For this reason the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) makes no mention of students with special needs apart from the FAQ section of their website. Students who are already accessing support and assistance within the classroom are allowed to utilise their existing support mechanisms while sitting NAPLAN tests. Exemptions are allowed for students with severe intellectual or functional disabilities and those from non-English speaking backgrounds who have been learning English in Australia for less than one year (Conway, 2010).

Differentiated Teaching Practices
Howard Gardner (as cited in Krause, Bochner, Duchesne & McMaugh, 2010) states that “... intelligence comprises a set of separate intelligences, each of which is specialised for acquiring knowledge and solving problems in different areas of cognitive activity.” (p. 294). Gardner’s learning theory should form the basis of creating an inclusive curriculum that is accessible to all students while fostering cooperation and collaboration (Gillies & Carrington, 2004). A successful inclusive educational environment is heavily dependent on the attitudes, skills and abilities of the educators involved. According to a recent study, conducted in a regional Queensland primary school, both teachers and administrators expressed concern
about a lack of necessary resources. All study participants “... articulated a desire to improve both whole school and individual inclusive practices through increased and better utilised human and material resources, and relevant and contextually appropriate professional development.” (Anderson & Boyle, 2011, p. 11).

In 2006 a study was conducted involving sixty-four teachers across five primary schools to ascertain their beliefs regarding inclusion and differentiated teaching practices for students with difficulties in literacy. Data was gathered using three short surveys administered during two separate staff meetings over a two week period. The study findings indicated that 88% (56) of respondents held positive beliefs about inclusion and differentiated teaching practices and were confident that all children can learn. However, five teachers felt that all students would not be successful in their class and a further 26 teachers were unsure of their ability to ensure successful educational outcomes for all students. From discussions after the survey it emerged that some staff members believed that students with special needs were unlikely to demonstrate knowledge and skills at the same level as their peers and would therefore not be deemed successful. A full day of professional development, planned by the Learning Support Teachers (LSTs), was provided to all survey participants and feedback was collected using evaluation forms. Follow up meetings with the LSTs revealed that there is now increased dialogue in the schools about differentiated and inclusive teaching practices and teachers are working to develop techniques which are then shared with other staff (Scott & Spencer, 2006).

Adapting curriculum

Inclusive education systems need to focus on a common universal design that caters for the diverse needs of students as a group rather providing individualised education. An inclusive curriculum will enrich and extend the learning for all students while recognising that all learners are diverse (Opertti & Brady, 2011). It has been identified that learning is enhanced for students with impairments if they are able to take an active role; strategies to be considered include:

- Pace content presentation,
- Provide a choice of tasks to be completed,
- Allow self-evaluation and debriefing activities,
- Organise students into small work groups and teams,
Set co-operative learning tasks,
Encourage brainstorming,
Set open ended tasks,
Encourage risk taking (Pagliano & Gillies, 2012).

**Partnerships with families and the professional community**

Parents/caregivers are the best source of information in relation to their children and it is important that families collaborate with educators and associated professionals regarding issues within the home that may impact on classroom behaviour. Input from all stakeholders forms an integral part of the new ‘pedagogy’ as everyone works together to increase teacher knowledge and improve inclusive practices within the school environment (Loreman, Deppeler & Harvey, 2010). Building relationships with parents and the professional community ultimately contributes to creating inclusive learning environments that are safe and supportive. The involvement of all stakeholders in the planning and implementation of strategies benefits teachers as it increases their knowledge and skills ultimately enhancing student learning.

**Individual Education Plan (IEP)**

Within inclusive education each student with special needs requires an IEP to establish their present level of functioning and set achievable long and short term goals. The IEP is developed collaboratively by the teacher, parents/caregivers, LSTs (if applicable), occupational therapists and the student – depending on their age and cognitive ability (Woolfolk & Margetts, 2010). An IEP will contain a list of services and resources to be provided for the student and a description of the student’s participation within the mainstream classroom; it will also include a schedule of goals attained and evaluations undertaken (Woolfolk & Margetts, 2010). Parents/caregivers are constantly informed and made part of the decision making and, at any time, are entitled to obtain an independent evaluation of their child’s progress (Woolfolk & Margetts, 2010).

**Conclusion**

Inclusive education is beneficial to the Australian community as it promotes equity for all students while also providing mainstream students with the opportunity to gain an understanding of diversity. The UNESCO Salamanca Statement highlighted the fact that students with special needs had become marginalised and could be readily taught within
existing mainstream education systems provided adequate resources and appropriately trained educators were available. The Salamanca philosophy is that all children have the right to participate in a state based education system where children with special needs learn alongside their mainstream peers, and educators have the opportunity to respond to the uniqueness and diverse nature of each and every learner.
References


