

THE CONVERSATION

Inclusive education means all children are included in every way, not just in theory

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Just being in the same classroom doesn't make it inclusive. from www.shutterstock.com.au

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Recent articles on The Conversation and in The Guardian question whether inclusive education can do more harm than good – but neither article presents examples of inclusion. Rather, they present tragic examples of exclusion that are claimed to be inclusion-not-working.

What does 'inclusion' really mean?

There seems to be a lot of confusion and misinformation about what inclusion actually means. Inclusive education involves the full inclusion of all children. No children are segregated.

Supports for inclusion are embedded within everyday practices. If aides are employed they circulate around the classroom, or spend time assisting the teacher and making adaptations to materials, rather than being off in a corner with one particular child.

There are no separate areas or curricula for children who experience disability. All children are supported to be involved in all aspects of learning.



No separate areas or curricula exist for children who experience disability.

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At one school I visited in my research, a young boy with Down syndrome was learning a modified version of sign language, which supplemented his spoken language, with the rest of his class.

His teachers completed a one-day keyword sign workshop at the start of the year. His teacher introduced a unit on Auslan (Australian sign language) where all of the students learn about Auslan and learn new signs together each week.

Learning sign language in this way did not single him out.

However, it did create the opportunity for him to share his knowledge with his peers and support their learning, while also supporting him in his communication.

This example provides only one snapshot of inclusion within a classroom experience, but it illustrates some key elements of inclusion in action. The child in this example participates in the classroom experiences with the other children in the class, but with supports and adaptations as needed (for him and his peers).

That each child has individual differences is not ignored. It is embraced and valued as what makes each person unique. The goal is not to make any child “normal”, but rather to grow and learn together.

The child who experiences disability could be sitting in the same classroom, separate to his peers, with an aide who may or may not be using sign language. However, this would not be inclusion – this would be exclusion.

Common misunderstandings of inclusion

Common misunderstandings of inclusion relate to (incorrectly) considering integration 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.

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 classroom, unit, or school.

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; where a child is only permitted to attend for part of the day; present but not participating in the activities along with the other children in the setting; or present but viewed as a burden and not an equally valued member of the class or setting.



The concept of inclusion is commonly misunderstood and viewed as a process of assimilation. from www.shutterstock.com

While the recent article on *The Conversation* claims to explore research on inclusive education, studies cited in that article explicitly represent examples of macro or micro exclusion. It is alarmingly common in research and practice for examples of exclusion (micro and macro) to be reported as being about inclusion.

The journey from full segregation to inclusion

Special education commenced (gradually in the 1900s) as a then-revolutionary idea that children who experience disability can and should receive some form of education.

In the main, this was an important first step towards social justice for children who experience disability, who were previously routinely denied any formal education at all (albeit with some exceptions).

Following this commencement of formal education for children who experience disability, the 1960s and 1970s saw the development of ideas of “normalisation” and “integration”, as questions began to be raised about whether segregation was actually the best approach to



The idea that children have equal value and that education should be inclusive has developed in the years since special education was introduced. from shutterstock.com

education.

The 1992 Disability Discrimination Act made it unlawful for any setting to discriminate against a person on the basis of disability (though with some caveats). This paved the way for much greater integration and, eventually, for inclusion.

Since then, philosophical arguments and relevant research progressed from the initial recognition that children who experience disability can and should receive some form of education to the idea that children are of equal value; that the education of all children (including children labelled disabled) should be of high quality; and, therefore, that education should be inclusive.

Inclusive education vs special schools

Contrary to what could logically be expected (given the higher teacher-to-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.

Inclusive education has been found to have equal or better outcomes for all children – not just for children who experience disability. This includes better academic and social outcomes.

It is common for parents and teachers to 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 myriad other benefits of inclusion (including social and communication development and more positive understandings of the self), inclusive teachers engage with all children more frequently and at a higher cognitive level, with important benefits to all.

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 also significant barriers.

Inclusive education involves supporting each child in belonging, participating, and accessing ongoing opportunities, being recognised and valued for the contribution that he or she makes, and flourishing.



No evidence exists that special schools have any benefit over mainstream schools. from shutterstock.com