



**Colilles, S. (2023) 'Inclusive pedagogies', *Early Education Journal*, 99, pp. 10-12.**

Link to journal website: <https://early-education.org.uk/books-resources/early-education-journals/>

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## **Inclusive pedagogies**

**Dr Sharon Colilles**

### **Inclusive, anti-discriminatory pedagogies work for everyone**

When early years' curricula support a 'school readiness' agenda and where policy dictates align with narrow expectations for teaching and attainment, it can be only too common to forget about what *children* need. Early childhood is a time when every child should be building a positive self-identity, a time when they need to explore who they are, and a time for understanding and making sense of their own place in the world. Speaking to pedagogy that already possesses a deep knowledge and understanding about how children learn and develop, it strikes me as an opportune time to reflect on what anti discriminatory approaches and inclusive pedagogies may mean for those working with young children. Here I intend to build on the legacy of what educators already know about child-informed experiences, particularly those experiences that are shaped by rich dialogic conversation informed by children's perspectives in play.

### **A rights-based approach**

There is much to celebrate across research and practice around teaching and learning, but for me effective inclusive pedagogy is built on a rights-based approach where individuals feel confident to give space amongst formal adult led experiences to reflect on the importance of thinking about the impact of their teaching on children. This means challenging approaches that have become so normalised, that issues relating to inclusive practice are taken-for-granted as embedded into the structural processes of education. Formal aspects of teaching and an outcome driven agenda are fore fronted to the extent that a professional confidence to question the purpose of our youngest citizens' learning becomes depleted.

### **We do not live in an equal society**

The education sector is not exempt from complex structural forms of discriminatory and oppressive practices that operate in overt positions of power and privilege, and also in nuanced and silent systems and procedures. Conversely children learn and develop in social worlds with multifaceted relationships between educators, parents/carers, and peers, and where their agency and participation in decision-making processes pertaining to their developmental needs may vary considerably.

### **What do we mean by inclusion?**

Defining inclusion is complex as it often depends on the level of importance given to establishing authentic practices. It also requires all involved to be willing to think, discuss and reflect on belief-led personal practices; prioritising difficult issues relating to inclusion. Birth to Five Matters effectively advises that inclusion is '*a process of identifying, understanding and breaking down barriers to participation and belonging*' (EYC, 2021:9). Fundamental to inclusive pedagogy therefore, is a need to create a deliberately conscious space for reflection on what inclusive pedagogy may look like for all children. An invitation to debate the importance of inclusive practice can trigger passionate responses; particularly as the early childhood sector reflects a varied range of understanding about what inclusion represents.

Despite the tensions created by adult-based, outcome-driven policy agendas, there remains an appreciation of existing research and practice that has continued to guide teaching and learning for young children and which should be celebrated. We know that educators are ideally positioned to continue to transform and improve lived experiences for all children because they hold the 'power' to shape what happens in the learning day. I make the call to educators to continue to question approaches in educational programme design for young children which do not meet the needs of some groupings of children. Work must continue - by individuals and settings – to develop inclusive pedagogies.

### **Inclusive principles**

The principles which follow are not exclusive, they build on existing excellence in teaching as well as a hope that they serve us as tenets to encourage confidence to inspire ongoing developmental approaches for anti-discriminatory, anti-oppressive and inclusive practice.

Inclusive principles for practice that focus on and encourage children's competency as well as maintaining a belief in a 'can-do' approach with children are features that enable all children to feel and be included. Maintaining children's competence and confidence usually involves clearly explaining the purpose of learning experiences, adapting if necessary and making learning relevant for each child, particularly in adult-led agendas. Conkbayir (2022) asserts that principles of pedagogy that can be applied to create approaches that are appropriate for any child must be developed from a position of relational approaches of *trust*. This important principle leads me to suggest that we must think about the *interactional nature of pedagogy*, where adults play a significant, influential role in advocating for and developing authentic and ethical inclusive practice.

Inclusive principles for practice embrace an understanding that some children will require more – or different - support than others and the use of observation approaches that are holistic in nature and informed by children's interests help us to further develop inclusive practices. Through observation and evaluation of the unique individual perspectives that children choose to share in their play repertoires educators can:

- strengthen inclusive practice;
- ensure against inadvertently discriminating or limiting young children's experiences;
- develop new understandings about inclusion, equality, and equity.

When children have a positive sense of self and a 'real' sense of belonging through the relationships they develop with trusted adults, the foundations for understanding the Unique Child is positioned in educational processes.

### **Promoting voice**

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) clearly advocates children have the right to be heard and to have their views taken seriously. It is also widely accepted that children's views should be embedded in educational decision-making processes. Recognising that inclusion is a process of identifying, understanding, and breaking down barriers to participation; developing curricula that gives status to children's 'voices' from an equitable standpoint is a key principle for engaging with children's unique contributions. Particularly so when these contributions are expressed in a myriad of ways including non-verbal communication. All children need support to develop the skill of language for communication in educational encounters. In these exchanges' reciprocity and acknowledgment of all contributions – in all

languages and forms - need to be encouraged and welcomed by educators whether or not children's thoughts align with intended learning. Indeed, learning which stems from their personal cultural contexts developed in home and community are of immense value. Identifying what each child knows and can do is the foundation for inclusive practice (EYC, 2021:9); validating 'voice' so that children are seen, heard, and their contributions are valued and acknowledged upholds their sense of worth and belonging. These inclusive approaches enable educators to notice and respond to complexities in children's narratives so that through processes of genuine dialogic conversation opportunities for rich exploration and learning abound.

### **Understanding and breaking down barriers to participation**

Young children possess a strong awareness of their own unique identity and are acutely sensitive to their surroundings where they rapidly acquire understanding of the people, places, and routines in their lives. They are highly competent and capable of participating in discussions, demonstrating empathy, and understanding of the perspectives of others (particularly peers), making moral judgments based on their funds of knowledge developed in home, localities and communities. Children will often challenge adult ideas during shared learning experiences.

Anti-discriminatory practice needs to respond to and call out oppressive practices that serve to marginalise and devalue the experiences of some children; particularly pedagogies that deny children the right to participate in learning. Being open to adapt teaching practice to support the 'unique individual child' (Colilles, 2020) (rather than following a homogenous 'one-size-fits-all' approach) encourages children to share their knowledge and, in so doing, ensures the growth of meaningful learning experiences. Play-based, principled approaches that nurture and value the contributions of *all* children can be a useful 'vehicle' for connecting with the ideas that children may choose to share, breaks down barriers to participation, and ensures equity in teaching and learning is provided. Essentially practice that gives due regard and responds to the perspectives of all children, their parents and families, positions democracy at the heart of participation and practice (Pascal and Bertram, 2012).

**Listening as an approach for understanding children's perspectives** is another essential principle of inclusive pedagogy. Current guidance advocates '*listening to children's voices and recognising these are expressed in a range of ways, including non-verbally is central to inclusive practice* (EYC, 2020:9). I believe ethical approaches for listening and understanding children's views need to be established in both personal and shared narratives, where strategies that celebrate children's sense of self, sense of belonging and confidence to express their views should be encouraged. Creating space for shared curricula narratives will inform the development of culturally reflective practice and inclusive curriculum, relevant for the needs of every child.

*"...practice that tunes into young children's views and experiences can draw attention to the difficult to measure and bring other kinds of knowledge into focus"* (Clark, 2020:137).

A 'shift' in practice is needed to illuminate new and ethical ways of challenging the unmeasurable when it comes to development of anti-discriminatory practice, which is transforming because at the heart of teaching is positioned a deep understanding of what children need, along with awareness of what contextual factors impact on their development, and what is needed to support their learning. Undoubtedly, ensuring that early years practice meets the needs of *all* children will involve approaches that include the perspectives of parents/carers. Listening to and including views from

meaningful conversations with families can inform developmentally rich pedagogical experiences based on features and practices that will enable every child to feel - and be - included.

### **Acknowledging the perspectives of 'Others'**

Addressing biases and prejudice requires conscious recognition that bias exists in teaching approaches with children, and injustices occur with some children being privileged while 'Others' are consistently and undeservedly disadvantaged. In these circumstances educators can be agents for change by challenging cycles of oppressive and discriminatory practice. Taken from my research is a view that early childhood educators tend to determine what knowledge harmonises best with existing pre-planned learning experiences, often ignoring the rich cultural knowledge that children themselves bring into settings.

**Educator judgments based on 'cultural knowledge' about the children they work with is a key principle for developing inclusive practice** (Colilles, 2020). Dialogic conversations with children and their families are good starting points for developing cultural knowledge. Approaches to understanding children's unique cultural capital should foreground the incorporation of multiple cultural viewpoints in educational processes. We need a critical consciousness in valuing and respecting difference and diversity (Hawkins, 2014) to guard against the dominant discourses which privilege 'whiteness' so as not to silence educators whose views are borne from many different ethnic origins. Approaches that afford the contributions of Others in early years settings (such as Hawkins' (2014) strategies to support teaching for anti-bias and social justice), should be the basis of evaluating inclusive practice and critically reflecting on dominant discourses. The voicing of multiple perspectives enables all practitioners to develop their own confidence to express ideas that would otherwise be silenced. Principled approaches that create opportunities for sharing different cultural perspectives validate new ways of meeting the diverse needs of children, demonstrate an appreciation of differing contexts, changes how scaffolding occurs and more importantly, how pedagogy occurs for each unique child. Educators who reflect on their positionality, particularly how they afford collaborative discussions about the development of pedagogy is a strong basis for exploring "*different ways of doing*" Pascal and Bertram (2012:488).

**The centrality of play** cannot be underestimated in participatory approaches of inclusion as observation of children in play that affords exploration will inform the individualised strengths as well as needs of each child (Stewart 2023). Play provides a lens into children's many ways of thinking about and understanding their world. It provides opportunities to establish what young children need in practice. Play-based pedagogy within the EYFS alongside guidance such as *Birth to Five Matters and Development Matters* (EYC 2021) support educators to question what they observed and consider ways of adapting practice to meet individualised needs. Essentially, the power of play forefronts children's capacities to demonstrate what they can do when they are in control of their learning. *Slow pedagogy* (Clark, 2017) creates time and space to reflect on the needs of children and families and creates opportunities to respond with pedagogical approaches that authentically foster a sense of belonging and worth.

**Inclusive provision** places an emphasis on the changes that can be made to children's learning environments so that children's diverse needs are respected and accommodated. When the

centrality of play is embedded, children can become deeply involved as they take things they already know and combine them in new ways of knowing so that their understanding deepens. Inclusive and enabling environments should create contexts where children are encouraged to reconnect with what they know and understand by introducing 'culturally appropriate resources' (Colilles, 2020) into programmes of learning. This includes resources which facilitate exploration, enable participation and connection with home-setting cultures and support reconstruction of knowledge about similarities and differences to self and others. Affording time and opportunities for deep exploration in play is highly beneficial for all young children but more importantly, when children see themselves in educational experiences then learning can truly begin!

### **Inclusive principles for practice are relevant for all children, their families, and settings**

Inclusive and anti-discriminatory approaches concern breaking down barriers so that all children feel, and are, included in their learning. Creating a sense of belonging and participation is about reflecting on and responding to sensitive and sometimes nuanced issues that impact on all children. Commitment to inclusion should be at the very heart of practice and educators are in powerful positions to facilitate and transform experiences for *all* young children.

Pedagogical practices may differ but if a principled approach to teaching and learning results in us 'getting it right' for individual children and groups, all who work in the setting are truly implementing inclusive pedagogies into practice. Now that's a cause for celebration!

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