

## Let me in: Inclusion through challenging traditional concepts of early childhood practices

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*Inclusive practices in early childhood in Aotearoa New Zealand could be defined as teachers acknowledging and celebrating the diversity of children and families/whānau, and removing obstacles to their engagement in a rich, full curriculum (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017). The rights discourse guides teachers' practices as they acknowledge children's right to agency and full participation, and modify both their practices and the environment, to support equitable outcomes (Cologon, 2014a; Moffat, 2011). However, research indicates that it is the outdoor classroom that encourages the calm, attentive, inclusive relationships that children with diverse needs and their teachers and parents/whānau seek. In the outdoor classroom, their inclusion and belonging can be cultivated.*

### What is an inclusive environment?

In Aotearoa New Zealand, inclusive environments are those where teachers acknowledge and celebrate children's and parents'/toku whānau diversity and their right to fully participate in all aspects of curriculum and community. The national early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum (Te Whāriki)* (MoE, 2017) requires teachers to engage in inclusive practices as they support the learning and development of all children and respect their needs, rights, and abilities.

In order to remove barriers from children's participation, early childhood teachers must constantly engage in mindful practice as they observe and recognise children experiencing, or at risk of, marginalisation, underachievement, and exclusion. To meet the needs of each child, and ensure equitable outcomes, teachers need to be collaboratively and individually involved in an ongoing process of changing and adapting both their practices and the children's learning environment (Cologon, 2014a; Moffat, 2011). This approach is based on the rights discourse which promotes children as citizens with rights, including social justice and the right to inclusion. This implies the right to protection from discrimination and injustice, the right to participate, to be consulted, and to be listened to, and the right to the provision of education, care, play and wellbeing (Te One & Dalli, 2009). A rights discourse seeks to recognise and remove barriers that hinder children's learning and development (Moffat, 2011).

In comparison, the medical discourse views children and families with diverse needs through a deficit lens, seeing them as people with a problem (Macartney, 2011). In this discourse, teachers believe children's needs require some form of early intervention before children can fit successfully into the learning environment. Therefore, the child must adapt to the environment (Moffat, 2011). Conversely, when children with diverse needs are respected as citizens, pedagogical practices will support a strength-based approach.

### Pedagogical practices

It is essential that children with diverse needs experience a sense of belonging to support their growing self-confidence. Central to this is the child's sense of agency, where their right to participate and contribute is acknowledged and valued (Cologon, 2014b). Moffat (2011) recognises that the most effective, inclusive environments are child-led. In these environments, teachers plan and implement learning experiences in response to the individual child's interests and development. Teachers maintain a non-directive approach, allowing children to learn through play with as little teacher intervention as possible. Instead, children are encouraged to engage in tuakana-teina

relationships (peer to peer), as the older or more learned child supports and teaches the other (Nind, Flewitt & Theodorou, 2014).

Teachers can find this low level of engagement, or intervention, difficult, especially when working with large groups or with children they consider problematic (Nind et al., 2014). However, this approach allows the children, rather than the teachers, to contribute to discussions, present ideas, and co-construct knowledge. Directive teaching styles frequently result in teacher domination over social interactions, lessening opportunities for children to demonstrate inclusion. Rather than intervene, teachers support children's inclusive practices by playing alongside them, enjoying their experiences and acting as a role model for the children (Nind et al., 2014).

This play-based approach allows children with diverse needs to relax, play, and talk with their peers in a natural way. To support child-led, play-based learning, teachers need to provide a rich play environment that encourages dispositions of curiosity and exploration. When this is accompanied by warm, sensitive interactions, teachers, working collaboratively with parents/whānau, provide a supportive, responsive and inclusive environment for all children (Nind et al., 2014).

### **Inclusive, healthy environments**

The environment is central to children's sense of belonging as well as their learning and development. It communicates what is valued and how children may participate, learn, contribute, and interact. The environment guides active participation through design, use of space, and children's access to resources that facilitate their learning and development. The environment also makes subtle messages to children and whānau on how they should engage and connect (Shearsby, 2015).

In recent years, early childhood teachers have begun to recognise the effect of the outdoor environment in increasing children's inclusivity. Recent research reveals that when children play in a 'green' or natural outdoor environment, positive social interactions increase and inclusive relationships are developed (Davis, 2015; van den Berg & van den Berg, 2010). In addition to this, playing in nature has been found to reduce children's levels of anxiety while heightening their self-confidence (Davis, 2015). Conversely, playing in environments bereft of nature can generate negative results. In his now famous book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature Deficit Disorder*, Louv (2008) recognised a link between children spending less time in nature and an increase in attention difficulties, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and diminished sensory development.

In recent years, a return to outdoor play-based learning has resulted in the growth of nature-based centres and kindergartens. In nature-based early childhood environments children spend either full or part days, engaged in hands-on experiences in forests and woodlands regardless of the weather (Stasiuk, n.d.). In these settings, a child's learning and development occurs holistically as their cognitive, emotional, physical, social, and spiritual domains are engaged in each moment of the sensory, environmentally rich experiences. In this environment, children's sense of personal and collective responsibility are encouraged (Williams-Siegfredsen, 2017). Children's self-determination, so important for those with diverse needs, is increased as their sense of autonomy is encouraged (Davis, 2015).

While many question the benefits and risks of children engaged in outdoor experiences during periods of rain, wind, and even snow, the children in nature-based kindergartens experience stronger health than children who spend long periods indoors. Swedish research compared young children in an urban child care environment with children in a nature-based environment. Tall buildings overshadowed the urban centre and there were few plants in the grounds; in the other, children played in an orchard amongst trees and fields. The results revealed that the children within the 'green' environment had higher levels of concentration and coordination as well as stronger motor skills (Louv, 2008).

While a full submersion in rural spaces may be impossible for many urban early childhood centres, research has revealed that even providing children with a view to a natural environment has a strong psychological impact by reducing high levels of stress in both children and adults (Wells & Evans as cited in Charles & Senauer, 2010; Louv, 2008).

In recent research from the Netherlands, teachers found that primary aged children diagnosed with ADHD showed different levels of concentration, co-operation, and social competence depending on their urban or nature based environment. While their enthusiasm remained the same, those in an urban environment showed impulsive, hyperactive behaviour with little social competence. These were not exhibited in the nature-based environment. When children were restricted to small spaces that limited their freedom of movement, ADHD symptoms became exaggerated. This confirmed earlier research that revealed higher levels of concentration after a simple walk in the park (van der Berg & van der Berg, 2010).

Ritchie (2010) believes that urbanisation and a dependency on ICT has created a sense of disconnection from the natural world. Louv (2008) called this Nature Deficit Disorder, which has depleted children's psychological, emotional and spiritual strength and wellbeing. According to Linke (2016) this disconnection has been directly linked to increased anxiety levels, depression and, more recently, increasing levels of near-sightedness in children (Turbert, 2014).

### **Changing views of the classroom**

When an early learning environment is located in an urban street with no park or greenery within walking distance, Nelson (2012) recommends viewing the outdoors as a classroom free of physical constraints such as walls and ceilings. Here, children take the lead, using a rich variety of resources to engage in deep learning and strong, inclusive social connections.

In the last few years, the word classroom has increased in use to describe the indoor rooms of early childhood centres in Aotearoa New Zealand. However, it is important to recognise that play-based learning occurs both indoors and outside. Classrooms are traditionally indoor structures where children engage in a range of learning experiences such as reading and science, however, outdoor classrooms can provide quiet, secluded or open spaces that support children's diverse needs. Outdoor reading or quiet play spaces, in tents or under trees, provide calm oases for children while others explore, searching for insects or tending the garden (Brewer, 2016). Quiet spaces can also be created close to the classroom with active play areas further away in the playground. This will support children with diverse needs to acclimatise as they move between indoor and outdoor play. It also acts as a buffer by decreasing the flow of outdoor noise into the indoor classroom (Brewer, 2016).

Surrounding each early childhood setting is an outdoor environment rich in learning opportunities. Vincent-Snow (2017) highlighted the importance of place-based learning in supporting children's sense of identity as they connect with the environment around them through beyond-the-gate experiences. When children connect with and explore the land around them they have the opportunity to engage in rich, meaningful relationships based on ethics of care for both the land, and each other. When a child can identify their place in their surrounding environment, a sense of identity is developed. For children with diverse needs, identity builds on their sense of belonging and this flourishes into self-confidence (Cologon, 2014c). The creation of their pepeha (introduction), where the children's connections to people, their land, mountain and river are stated, further supports a deep-seated sense of belonging and identity (Vincent-Snow, 2017).

When parents of children with diverse needs were asked what they considered important for an inclusive environment, one stated "Belonging is a fundamental right - in that it is a value, respect, acceptance of people. Inclusion to me is like

belonging - the ability of my children to join in with any activity reinforces their rights to belong, have a go, to fail, succeed, to be cared for regardless of how it goes” (Cologon, 2014c, p. 96). Another wrote, “Not just being accepted, but embraced” (Cologon, 2014c, p. 96).

### **Conclusion**

While the inclusive, calming yet energising qualities of outdoor, natural, play-based learning continue to be researched and discussed, evidence repeatedly reveals the powerful and positive impact it has on children with diverse needs. Teachers are the doorkeepers to this environment. Teachers’ attitudes, cultures, and beliefs inform their practices and need to be regularly reflected on, to ensure practices and learning environments are in-line with rights-based, inclusive, supportive values. This may mean challenging practices and working differently to support the diverse needs of the individual child. Teachers play a powerful role in supporting equity and celebrating diversity through modelling these practices to the children they teach as well as their families/whanāu and communities.

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