

Book Review

The exceptional child: Inclusion in early childhood education**by K. Eileen Allen and Glynnis E. Cowdery****Maxine Dyer** | *New Zealand Tertiary College*

This book, written by experienced United States early childhood educators Allen and Cowdery, provides valuable guidance on inclusive practice for teachers, student teachers, parents and specialists working with children with special needs. It is divided into four main sections and comprises 19 chapters, each of which begins with specific learning objectives and ends with a short quiz reviewing the main points covered in the discussion; a helpful way to re-examine the wealth of information that the book covers.

The first section begins by defining inclusion as the right of every child to participate in mainstream education programs where they are accepted and supported and their educational needs are met. Chapter one looks at the benefits and challenges of inclusive practice and provides a rationale for inclusive early childhood education from ethical, social and developmental perspectives. The third chapter extends on this and looks at how to provide quality inclusive programs for young children. This includes discussion on the importance of secure relationships, safe and responsive learning environments, and developmentally appropriate programs and resources.

Section two discusses likenesses and differences among children. Chapter four picks up the theme of the exceptional child and explains atypical and exceptional development in relation to the typical development of young children. It also discusses children at developmental risk and children with special talents and gifts. The point is made that many children with developmental disabilities are also gifted but that these talents may not be recognised due to educational or cultural biases. Chapter five goes on to outline the causes and classifications of developmental disabilities, including both genetic disorders and complications following birth. Included in this is a discussion on the influence of poverty on children's wellbeing and development. The next few chapters cover a range of specific needs, including sensory impairments, physical disabilities, and learning and behaviour disorders, along with their potential impacts on children's development.

The third section is a practical one and looks at how educators can plan for inclusive practice in their settings. This begins in chapter nine with a discussion on working in partnership with families and sets out ways to establish family-centred practice based on reciprocal relationships between practitioners and families. Of particular interest in this chapter are six types of parental involvement and steps teachers can take to become culturally competent educators. Chapter ten then looks at the value of assessment in the early identification of developmental delays and the important role of both families and teachers in this process. This information is followed up in chapter 11 with a discussion on the characteristics of effective teachers in inclusive early childhood programs. This highlights the importance of teachers working as a team and the need to develop qualities such as patience, flexibility and a sense of humour. It also stresses the importance of teachers acting as facilitators of appropriate and interesting learning opportunities for children, as well as taking the role of mediators between the child and the learning environment.

Section four discusses ways to implement inclusive early childhood education programs, including arranging the learning environment to reduce noise, promote safety, and minimise confusion. It also provides advice on supporting the development of children's self-care, adaptive, and independence skills. Chapter 15 then focusses on the importance of facilitating social development and looks at ways social skills can be reinforced in an early childhood setting. The influence of play is highlighted, along with strategies to teach children with developmental disabilities important play behaviours. Chapter 16 builds on this by looking at the acquisition of language and communication

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skills and the sequence these typically follow. This includes discussion on alternative language systems, such as sign language or picture/symbol exchange. Chapter 17 highlights the need to provide developmentally appropriate and enjoyable pre-academic experiences and describes the interrelationship between cognitive development and emerging literacy. Of particular interest is the information on what brain research tells us about children's development and the role of warm responsive care on a child's ability to learn. The following chapter looks at challenging behaviours and provides a range of strategies to assist teachers in managing disruptive and destructive behaviours in the classroom. The final chapter looks at transitions and how early childhood teachers can assist children with special needs to move from familiar to new environments. This is a fitting conclusion to a comprehensive discussion on inclusion.

This book makes a significant contribution to the provision of quality education programs in early childhood settings. What stands out most is the practical nature of the information and the clear guidance provided on how best to meet the needs of all children in early childhood settings, including those of the exceptional child. This will be a valuable reference tool for educators and one that they will return to again and again.

Reference

Allen, K. E., & Cowdery, G. E. (2015). *The exceptional child: Inclusion in early childhood education* (8th ed.). Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning.