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Partnerships for social justice in early childhood education

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To be included in the early childcare and education centre's curriculum is a basic right for all children and their parents (Ministry of Education, 2021; United Nations, 1989, 2006, 2016). In *Te Whāriki* Aotearoa New Zealand's early childhood curriculum, the child is seen as "inherently competent, capable and rich, complete and gifted no matter what their age or ability" (MoE, 2017, p. 12). In this article I explore social justice as an important aspect of inclusive practice for children who have a disability as well as for their parents. I will discuss why social justice is especially important for children who have a disability and what social justice might look like in early childhood education. This article draws on my doctoral research at the University of Auckland, which is now in its final year, exploring the wellbeing and belonging of parents who care for a disabled child in early childhood education.

Introduction

Over a quarter of parents who have a disabled child experience exclusion or discouragement from enrolment in early childhood education (Education Review Office [ERO], 2022). This is surprising in view of the commitment to inclusive practice of the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* in Aotearoa New Zealand. According to the early childhood curriculum "kaiako promote equitable opportunities for children and counter actions or comments that catergorise or exclude people" (MoE, 2017, p. 40). Despite *Te Whāriki's* commitment to inclusion of *all* children, there are no consequences for centres who exclude children on the grounds of disability. Exclusion can be very covert (Rietveld, 2010). Instead of point blank refusing to enrol a disabled child, a centre manager might subtlety discourage the parent from enrolling their child by saying the centre is less suitable to cater for the child's specific needs. Other early childhood centres become a 'magnet' for children with additional needs as a result (Tomorrow's School Independent Taskforce, 2018). Another way in which exclusion takes place is by requiring the parent to be on call for support at times the Education Support Worker is not there (ERO, 2022) or by frequently asking the parent to pick up their child early when the child has become upset. Having to move their child to a new centre because of frequent requests to pick up their child early was the experience of the parent participants in my research project. When a child is already 3.5 years or older by the time he or she is enrolled in the second centre, the child and his parents are already at a disadvantage. This article is about how kaiako (teachers) can promote social justice in their centre and how this can benefit the whole community.

Learning in a neoliberal society

Mitchell (2022) explains that New Zealand society has experienced decades of neoliberalism influencing decisions around children's education and this is not expected to change soon. Neoliberalism is responsible for competitive attitudes and individualism (Ligocki, 2019; Slee, 2011). Children are seen as 'human capital' and their education is seen as a stepping stone to the best position on the jobs market. Education becomes an individual concern rather than this being a concern for the community as a whole (Kessler, 2019). Because individuals are held responsible for their own success (or failure) society becomes immersed in 'ableist' perspectives on what each child should know and do to attain success in society (Allan, 2019; Graham et al, 2023). Ableism measures how well children can compete with others for success in all areas of development (Cologon, 2019). Ableist views are normative and can lead to discrimination and exclusion of children who do not fit the norm, such as children who are seen to disrupt the school curriculum. For parents who have a child with additional needs, negative judgements and witnessing

exclusion of their child can be intensely felt, despite studies showing inclusive practice is beneficial for *all* children (Beneke, 2019; Cologon, 2019; De Bruin, 2020).

Parent-teacher collaboration for social justice

Parents who have a child with additional needs may require additional support, especially when the child experiences distress and has limited language to express themselves or calm themselves. For teachers though this is not so easy, firstly because they may not have sufficient understanding of the child's disability and secondly because early childhood regulations do not guide teachers to provide emotional support to parents as part of their partnership. Instead, teachers are advised to ask parents about their aspirations for their child's learning (MoE, 2017, New Zealand Government, 2024). The ERO (2022) however found that 69% of parents with children with high needs did not have discussions with their child's early childhood teachers about the next step for their child's learning. Most discussions were focused on getting the child comfortable and how to manage the child's behaviour. Mann and Gilmore (2023) found that parents who have children with high needs are less likely to complain about the lack of planning when they see teachers spend extra time meeting their child's needs. Teachers often assume parents have support from professionals. Unfortunately, many parents lack support. They may be tired because their child may have high caregiving demands, not only during the day but at night, as well as being aware of negative comments from the centre community about their child (Mann et al., 2020). Mann et al. (2020) conclude that partnerships with parents who have children with additional needs require "additional considerations" (p. 337), in other words: social justice.

Social justice in early childhood education

Social justice first and foremost requires awareness of the disadvantage specific groups of children and their parents experience (Dares, 2018). It also involves making sure everyone has a voice and that inequities are responded to. Awareness of disadvantage is important because the child and their parent may be at risk of marginalisation and non-participation. Disabled children and their parents often experience negative attitudes especially when the disability is not overt, which is often the case when the child is on the autistic spectrum. The child may respond in ways that are not easily understood by the other children and adults which causes stigmatisation and exclusion (Connor & Berman, 2019).

Because of the negative experiences out in the community and in interaction with peers, parents may feel worried their child will not be accepted by his peers. It is hard for parents when they see their child not joining in or even being actively excluded (Connor & Berman, 2019). Cohen (2022) goes as far as saying exclusion feels like physical pain. Cologon (2019) agrees that negative attitudes towards the child and their parents is the biggest barrier to inclusion. To avoid judgmental attitudes, parents often decide to stay home with their child when there is an excursion, special event or even a small birthday celebration for a child at the early childcare and education centre (Macartney, 2012, 2019). Missing out on events means missing out on curriculum, and for both parents and child missing out on opportunities to get to know other parents and find friendship and support (Connor & Berman, 2019). Social justice then involves the rights of the child and the parents. According to the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006, 2016) not only do all children have the right to fully be included and experience acceptance, compassion, and empathy; their parents have the same rights, as well as the right to protection, assistance, and support. Social justice according to Dares (2018) and Kelly-Ware (2018) involves an awareness of the issues around exclusion and marginalisation, hearing and understanding the child's and parents' voice to take note of and acknowledge their needs and the ability to respond and take action in ways that promote inclusion and acceptance.

Awareness of inequity

Awareness of normative attitudes is the first step towards social justice (Bloch, 2019; Dares, 2018; Picower, 2012, as cited in Klees, 2017). While children are generally taught to include their peers, Tembo (2023) points out that

exclusion often happens in subtle ways that can be missed by teachers. It is important to notice which child dominates the play and who stays on the outside. Teachers can promote friendships and belonging by pointing out similarities (for example two children liking the same activity), however at the same time teachers need to be aware that inclusion and understanding of social justice also entails teaching children an appreciation for difference (Kovač & Vaala, 2021).

Awareness and acceptance of difference can be encouraged by keeping *all* children in mind when planning an activity (Black-Hawkins, 2015). Whyte (2024a) in describing the difference between exclusion, integration, segregation, and inclusion, points out that 'integration' in particular, is often mistaken for inclusion. Integration happens when teachers try to integrate the child into activities without catering for their specific needs and interests. If the child subsequently does not display the expected behaviour, the teacher may end up correcting the child or even removing the child from the activity. Peers may pick up on the fact that the child's behaviour did not fit the norm and call the child 'naughty,' which further isolates the child. Through slight adjustments in the learning activity, learning needs can be catered for, however normative judgements are harder to change (Cologon, 2019).

When a child is called 'naughty' by their peers, the teacher could explain the child learns differently. The Ministry of Education's (2025) *Kōwhiti whakapae* explains that it is important that education around social justice starts early. *Kōwhiti whakapae* shows young children can be taught about fairness and learning to stand up against bias and exclusion (MoE, 2025). This aligns well with *Te Whāriki* curriculum that guides teachers to encourage children to have "confidence to stand up for themselves and others against biased ideas and discriminatory behaviour" (MoE, 2017, p. 37).

Further awareness could be fostered by taking a social perspective on disability rather than a medical perspective. The social perspective contends that negative normative judgements and exclusion are more disabling than the impairment itself (Macartney, 2012). The medical perspective on disability with its focus on getting the child to fit the norm, often leads to teacher directed goals or having an Education Support Worker doing activities with the child in isolation from the other children on goals that are not related to the child's interest. The medical model is also used for the diagnosis of a disability, which often takes place during early childhood. This time can be a very stressful time for parents. The Individual Education Plan set by the Early Intervention Team, can interfere with the teachers' learning goals for the child that are relevant to the child's interest and that the teachers would normally decide on together with the parents (Whyte, 2025).

Making sure everyone has a voice

If we think of social justice in terms of ensuring all children and adults' voices are heard, this opens possibilities for action. Asking parents to share their thoughts and experiences however does not automatically lead to sharing, especially not if parents who have a child with high additional needs do not want to over-burden the teachers (Mann & Gilmore, 2023). Building a trust-relationship, showing an openness and willingness to listen is a crucial first step (Bath, 2011; Mann et al., 2020; Mann & Gilmore, 2023; Morton et al., 2023). Listening is linked to Noddings' (2012) notion of care relationships, that requires the teacher as the receiver of information, to make sure that the information is also adequately responded to. When a parent shares a learning experience of their child from home and there is no response, the purpose of sharing becomes unclear. Higgins and Cherrington (2017) investigating parent responses on e-portfolios, found that nearly half of parent responses to learning stories only had an affirmative reply and only 20% of the replies added to the learning of the child or offered avenues for further learning. Especially when the child is non-verbal the parent voice could contribute significantly to the understanding of the child, their prior knowledge and how they learn. Social justice then includes sharing a voice to further contribute to planning and learning for the child. Pennells (2018) confirms that while the teachers are seen as the experts on the curriculum, the parents are the experts of the context of the learning.

When a child is non-verbal, peers can be encouraged to notice non-verbal cues and respond to their peer's non-

verbal communication through gestures and verbal language (MoE, 2020, 2025; White, 2016). Teachers can model oral language and sign language (MoE, 2020), including singing, extending on beginning verbal communication, and model describing language. McMahon-Morin et al. (2025) advises making sure children with additional needs not only get a turn but also keep the turn for sufficient length of time. Checking to see if everyone is heard becomes a habit. Partnering with whānau includes checking what language and terminologies (including signs) are used at home as these may be different from the regular Makaton signs used at the early childcare and education centre. Early childhood centres also use specific words and phrases the parents may not be aware of when the child has limited language and likewise the child and parents may have developed their own way of communicating that can be shared with the teachers (Whyte, 2024b).

Photo stories may be used to enable the child and the parents to share a voice, before the teacher tells the parent what learning happened (Whyte, 2015, 2024b, 2025). Often the teachers are perceived as the expert by the parents, and it can be hard for parents to know what information might be useful for teachers (Whyte, 2015). Photo stories show a photo of the child at play, and the parent is asked to note down their child's (verbal and non-verbal) response as well as their own understanding of their child's learning at home. The photo stories increase teachers' understanding of activities at home as well as generating further dialogue between the teacher and parents about the child's learning.

Taking action: Responding to inequities

Dares (2018) and Kelly-Ware (2018) believe action towards social justice needs to be undertaken by the whole (centre) community. Instead of responding to inequities being the sole responsibility of the teachers or the parent whose child has a disability, action for social justice is stronger when it is backed by the 'person responsible' of the centre, which may be the manager or owner of a centre. According to the Office for Disability Issues (2024) an entire shift is needed in people's thinking, rejecting the notion of ableism and individual responsibility for success. Ableism involves seeing disabled people as 'less than' other people because they do not have certain skills and abilities that are valued in society (Campbell, 2009; Cologon & Thomas, 2014; Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2013, as cited in Cologon, 2019). The person lacking the abilities is often seen as 'broken' and in need of 'fixing.' These are normative values, which can be seen as a significant barrier to inclusion (Office for Disability Issues, 2024).

When difference of ability is understood as an asset, new opportunities for learning can unfold. Peers learn to take different perspectives, for example taking the intra-active perspective of a child on the autistic spectrum on their environment as the starting point of an exploration of how materials behave in the environment, may encourage scientific observation, discovery, and discussion (McAnelly & Gaffney, 2020). While teachers can work on an anti-bias curriculum with the children in the early childhood centre, *all* parents need to be brought on board (Gunn, 2020). Parents can be made aware that inclusive practice has benefits for each child. Hehir et al. (2016) and Cole et al. (2019), as cited in Cologon (2019) highlight the social skills children learn through inclusive practice through providing peer support. *Kōwhiti whakapae* (Ministry of Education, 2025) emphasises social and emotional learning, such as kindness and awareness of each other's needs.

Changing normative values and beliefs can be challenging. Slee (2011) explains that certain attitudes go unchallenged for such a long time that they are not noticed anymore. It is harder to change something we have done in a certain way for a long time. One example is asking parents for their aspirations for their child's learning as explained above. The fact that 69% of parents who have children with high needs indicated that they are missing discussion on the next step in their child's learning (ERO, 2022) is an indication that these parents' aspirations have not been met or perhaps not even shared in the first place. Looking into the deeper reasons why parents did not follow up on the lack of planning for their child, may mean an 'additional consideration' in the partnerships for parents who have children with high needs is needed (Mann et al., 2020). Whyte (2024b) has called for equitable parent partnerships in the same vein as teachers prepare equitable learning opportunities for children with additional needs. Promoting equity involves noticing when parents are repeatedly opting out of events or excursions

for example or pick up their child early out of fear their child may disrupt mat time or a birthday celebration at the centre. By planning events, centre routines and celebrations with all parents and children in mind (not just for *most*, but *all* as Black-Hawkins, 2015 suggests), teachers might be able to offer some alternatives such as smaller get-togethers with limited numbers at pre-planned times, a collaborative activity with just a few parents or a presentation on a certain topic. As parents might not always take the lead on social justice, it is important that teachers assume the need for inclusion, involvement with community and partnership around planning for learning is there.

Conclusion

Learning in a neoliberalist society often leads to ableist attitudes that in turn can lead to marginalisation of children with additional learning needs and their parents. To achieve *Te Whāriki* curriculum's vision for inclusion of *all* children in early childhood education a focus on social justice is needed. Social justice encompasses understanding the rights of children as well as their parents' rights to inclusion and support. I have discussed awareness of disadvantage and possible causes of marginalisation, ensuring everyone's voice is heard and possibilities for action. Understanding the impact of normative attitudes on parents can help to consider 'additional considerations' of unspoken aspirations and work together on inclusion and appreciation of difference in our early childhood centre communities.

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