Philosophy, Principles and Practices of Inclusive Education for Diverse Learners

The Oxford Little Australian Dictionary (1996, pp. 190) simply defines diversity as “variety.” Inclusion is defined by Hyde, Carpenter and Conway (2010) as “the right to active participation and achieving equity in all aspects of daily life.” Therefore, inclusive education for diverse learners could be defined as giving every student the right to actively participate and achieve equity in all aspects of their education despite the students’ “variety” or differences.

Throughout this article the philosophy, principles and practices of inclusive education for diverse learners will be discussed along with current legislation regarding diverse learners and the importance of collaboration with families and the professional community.

Inclusive education, as a term, over time has come to refer to an educational philosophy which holds the belief that all students should be educated in mainstream schools (Florian, 1998). There are certain principles that go along with this philosophy. Florian (1998, pp. 29) states the principles as follows:

- “all children have the right to learn and play together;
- children should not be devalued or discriminated against by being excluded or sent away because of their disability or learning difficulty;
- there are no legitimate reasons to separate children for the duration of their schooling. They belong together rather than need to be protected from one another.”

This philosophy of education is also supported by Woolfolk and Margetts (2010) who believe in a “least restrictive environment” for children with diverse needs. The term “least restrictive environment” refers to children with diverse needs participating in an educational environment that is as similar as possible to the environments children their age without diverse needs would participate in. The point is also made that “inclusion is more than just integration.” (Woolfolk & Margetts, 2010, pp. 150). Inclusion provides children with diverse needs the opportunity to participate in all activities taken part in by their peers, if the student is unable to partake themselves inclusion means that assistance will be given to them so they are able to participate. Integration involves children with diverse needs being enrolled in a mainstream school, however, students are provided with special classes and activities rather than being included in the activities of students without diverse needs (Woolfolk & Margetts, 2010).

There are many legislative and policy documents which support inclusion of children with diverse needs, not only in Australia but throughout the world. The United Nations (UN) have created policies such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the UN standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1993) and the UNESCO Report on the education of children with disabilities better known as the Salamanca Statement (1994) (Florian, 1998).

The Salamanca Statement outlines key policies for inclusive education and has been taken on board by many countries throughout the world. Following is an abstract of some of the fundamental ideas set out by the Salamanca Statement.
“We believe and proclaim that:
- every child has a fundamental right to education, and must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning,
- every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs,
- education systems should be designed and educational programs implemented to take into account the wide diversity of these characteristics and needs,
- those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child-centered pedagogy capable of meeting these needs,
- regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system.”
(UNESCO & Ministry of Education and Science Spain, 1994)

In Australia The Disability Discrimination Act 1992 is a legislative document that supports the inclusion of children with disabilities. The document states under section 22 regarding education that:

1. “It is unlawful for an education authority to discriminate against a person on the ground of the person’s disability;
2. It is unlawful for an education authority to discriminate against a student on the ground of the student’s disability;
3. It is unlawful for an education provider to discriminate against a person on the ground of the person’s disability;
4. This section does not render it unlawful to discriminate against a person on the ground of the person’s disability in respect of admission to an educational institution established wholly or primarily for students who have a particular disability where the person does not have that particular disability.”
(Commonwealth Consolidated Acts, 1992)

Having philosophies, principles, policies and legislations all supporting inclusive education for diverse learners, however, doesn’t mean that it’s going to be successful straight away. One of the most important aspects to good practice in teaching children with diverse needs is teacher preparation. A large proportion of beginning teachers feel unprepared to teach students with diverse needs. This statistic indicates that Universities may need to introduce more units in educating teachers on inclusion as a whole as well as the inclusion of individual diverse needs such as disability, culture or background (Hyde, et al, 2010).

Florian (1998) outlines several practices for teachers teaching children with diverse needs. The first is creating a positive attitude among staff. If staff involved in educating children with diverse needs in mainstream schools truly believe that those children belong their they will be much more successful in teaching them than those who don’t believe that the children belong there. The second practice involves rethinking teaching roles and responsibilities to create collaborative teams for curriculum development and instruction. If teachers accept that inclusion means participation rather than something that is simply made available to students with diverse needs to feign participation then changes in professional thinking and practice will be required.

Parent involvement in a child’s education is another important practice. Parent involvement is considered to be helpful to a child’s development as by being involved in their child’s education parents develop a better understanding of educational practices used in the classroom which they can then build on at home (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000). Hughes and MacNaughton’s views are supported also by Breen (2009, pp. 15) who states “the family as the unit of care is central to the philosophy and practice of contemporary childhood settings.”
Although inclusion may not be in full practice yet it is apparent, through research, that philosophy, principles, policies and legislation have all been thoroughly considered. As long as there is continued support from professionals, teachers, parents, government and above all children full implementation of inclusive education for diverse learners will be something to look forward to in the future.
References:


