

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

*Through the Creative Arts
in the Early Years*

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DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN THE EARLY YEARS

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Chapter objectives

This chapter introduces you to these key ideas:

- Rights and inclusion - an anti-bias approach
- Diversity, identity and inclusion
- Understandings of disability
- Language and inclusion

INTRODUCTION

This chapter continues the discussion of inclusive education in the early years from the previous chapter. Here we explore the link between inclusion and young children's diverse identities, and how early years settings can foster positive self and social identities for all children. We delve further into what inclusion means through focusing on young children's identity formation. This gives the context for exploring the inclusive possibilities of the creative arts in the rest of the book. The importance of inclusion as part of an anti-bias, social justice approach is discussed, as well as the role of language in fostering inclusion.

A CAPABILITY AND RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO INCLUSION

Our approach here and throughout the book is capability- and rights-based. This means that we see all children as capable and competent, with potential to develop and learn. We respect every child's right to participate in every aspect of life, especially including education, and the right to experience a sense of belonging and being valued. We regard diversity as intrinsic to humanity, and as a rich resource to be celebrated for the benefit of all. We see children's identities as being socially constructed and understand diversity as differences in aspects of identity. Children's interests, opportunities, abilities, languages, ethnicities, cultures, families, environments and socio-economic backgrounds all play a part in their developing identities in the early years. Identity and diversity sit, alongside justice and activism, at the core of Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2021) anti-bias goals for education in the early years. Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2021, pp. 35–36) propose four core anti-bias goals:

Goal 1, identity:

- Teachers will nurture each child's construction of knowledgeable and confident personal and social identities.
- Children will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities.

Goal 2, diversity:

- Teachers will promote each child's comfortable, empathic interaction with people from diverse backgrounds.
- Children will express comfort and joy with human diversity, use accurate language for human differences, and form deep, caring connections across all dimensions of human diversity.

Goal 3, justice:

- Teachers will foster each child's capacity to critically identify bias and will nurture each child's empathy for the hurt bias causes.
- Children will increasingly recognize unfairness (injustice), have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.

Goal 4, activism:

- Teachers will cultivate each child's ability and confidence to stand up for oneself and for others in the face of bias.
- Children will demonstrate a sense of empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions.

Honoring every child's identity, as in anti-bias goal 1, and respecting every child's right to participate fully in early years settings, is intrinsic to inclusion and inclusive pedagogies. Inclusive early years settings are those which welcome all children as valued members of the learning community. The environments of these settings will reflect and celebrate the diversity in children's identities, so that all children feel that their ways of being are reflected in the physical and social environment. In inclusive settings, all children's learning needs are met in ways that foster a sense of belonging, so that each child can flourish. Any inequities and injustices, such as discrimination or marginalisation are actively challenged and disestablished through an anti-bias approach.

Creativity and the arts are integral to all our lives – they give us ways to explore and express our unique and diverse ways of being. An inclusive early years setting can provide rich opportunities for children to engage in playful artistic expression. The arts offer a safe space for children and early years professionals to explore ideas about difference, fairness and unfairness, so that biases and barriers to all children's rights to be included and valued are identified, addressed, and eliminated.

PERSPECTIVES ON DEVELOPMENT IN THE EARLY YEARS

Quality early years education and care aims to facilitate all aspects of young children's learning and development. With the appropriate support, all children can learn and develop in ongoing positive trajectories. Inclusive education will most effectively enable every child to genuinely participate, giving each child a range of opportunities to nurture their development and sense of identity.

The focus of attention in relation to young children's learning and development is often on physical, cognitive, and social/emotional domains. Identity development is not always considered to be integral to understanding and supporting young children's development. In the past, identity has not necessarily been a central concern of developmental researchers, whose research has most often been experimental or quasi-experimental, using mono-cultural sampling and aimed at evaluating children's performance in specific, measurable tasks. However, the field of child development now encompasses a broader range of theoretical perspectives. As the disciplines of social and cultural psychology have grown, new theories consider children more holistically, and recognise the role played by their social and material environmental contexts and their relationships both within and beyond their immediate families. The socio-cultural theory of Vygotsky et al. (1978) and the bio-ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979/2009) are especially important and are part of pre-service teacher education in

many nations. The work of both these theorists has helped to shift focus away from the individual child and towards understanding the role that social and cultural aspects of life play in shaping children's learning and development, including their identities.

The Influence of Vygotsky's Theories

Vygotsky explored the role of communication with others in the development of children's thinking and understanding of the world. Although he didn't specifically address issues of diverse identities or social groups, working as he did in Soviet Russia during the 1920s and 1930s, Vygotsky's research led him to regard learning as a process that happened through interactions and dialog with others. He also recognised that children learn not only *with* others, but *from* other, more capable peers or adults. This is captured in the theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which describes the process by which children can demonstrate greater capability or understanding when supported by more capable others, and through this gradually demonstrate new knowledge and capabilities independently (Vygotsky et al., 1978). Children enter the ZPD when either adults or peers offer just enough guidance, and only when requested, for the child to extend their capabilities, learning with and from others. The ZPD provides a powerful rationale for inclusive education, as it highlights the potential learning when children of diverse backgrounds, capabilities and levels of development are together in an educational setting.

The Influence of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner also recognised the need to view children's development as socially and culturally constructed. He regarded children as existing and developing within a complex interwoven set of social and cultural systems that encompass physical, economic, social and cultural aspects of their lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979/2009). His bio-ecological systems theory provides a framework for analysing and understanding the ways in which children's backgrounds and interactions offer different contexts, resources and possibilities for learning and thus shape their development. This framework is very different from that of developmental psychology, with its focus on quantitative research paradigms which many regard as implying universal common developmental pathways (Shute & Slee, 2015). It also provides a context for considering the relevance of critical theories such as those of Freire or Bourdieu, who highlight the way differences in social and material environments impact people's opportunities to participate fully in the various systems of their communities and nations.

These more holistic theories and the extensive research that they have informed, have transformed understandings of young children's learning and development and have strongly influenced teachers' knowledge, curricula and pedagogies, especially in early years settings. In spite of conflicting pressures from increasingly assessment driven educational systems in many nations, early years practitioners are now encouraged to recognise the importance of understanding and supporting young children's identity development.

YOUNG CHILDREN'S IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AND INCLUSION

Identity is central to our understanding of inclusion, as being included – feeling a sense of belonging – nurtures a positive sense of identity. Fundamentally the concept of identity centres around the question ‘Who am I?’. Identity is not fixed, but can be seen as a process of becoming, influenced by experiences, environments and relationships with others (AGDE, 2022). The importance of supporting the development of positive self and social identities in the early years is advocated in many curricula (e.g. AGDE, 2022; Kuusisto et al., 2021; Te Whāriki, 2017).

Our identities are rooted in our belonging, beginning with the secure relationships between children and their parents/carers in infancy, through which infants gradually begin to distinguish between self and other. As children grow and interact in the world, even in the first two years of life they start to identify themselves and their families with groups, and also show awareness of visible forms of difference between themselves and others, such as differences between genders and between their home language(s) and other forms of spoken expression (Bennett, 2011). And while young children’s awareness of these aspects of diversity are developing, so too are their attitudes towards the meaning and relative values attached to diversity by those around them. They can begin to perceive that some types of people or ways of being seem ‘normal’ or ‘better’ than others (for example, see Ivy’s reflection in Chapter 8). Thus, the seeds for inclusiveness and equity, or marginalisation and oppression, are planted and begin to grow almost from the beginning of life.

To think about...

- Reflect on your earliest memories, to recall how you felt about yourself. What aspects of your identity were most important?
- In your childhood, what aspects of yourself were you proud of? Were there some parts of being you that you wished were different?

Commodified Childhoods

Our connections with others, which contribute to our evolving sense of identity, are based on what we share. This starts within families but moves outward to encompass children’s various community contexts, such as early years settings. Young children’s social identities are often partly related to material things that they share with others. In urbanised societies, these may for example be stories, music, toys, TV and other digital media characters and related merchandise. For example, consider how common it is in cities across the world to see children dressed in clothing portraying popular children’s TV or movie characters. Childhood in many places, particularly in urban environments, has been described as highly ‘commodified’ (Vanobbergen, 2018), which has implications for equity and for creating conditions for

inclusion or exclusion. As Bourdieu states: ‘identities should also be seen as associated with differential resources (e.g. material, social, symbolic, etc.) that can play an important role in shaping individuals’ opportunities, obligations, actions’ (Bourdieu, 1986, as cited in Bennett, 2011, p. 358). This statement is significant because the shaping of children’s opportunities is crucial in their experience of inclusion or exclusion.

Another important influence on young children’s identities is the stereotyping that can be enacted through material commodities, for example clothes, toys, video games and apps, as well as artistic ‘materials’ such as songs, books, TV and movies. From cartoon superheroes, through Elsa from *Frozen*, to Peppa Pig and her family, Harry Potter or movie superheroes, a plethora of commodities related particularly to media characters is increasingly available around the world, and heavily marketed to children and families. The ubiquity of white skin, non-disabled bodies and gender appearance stereotypes in these everyday cultural resources, and the absence of other types of visual features, are important signals to young children of what is recognised and valued (Ellis, 2015). It is important to understand the influence of resources such as these and the stereotyping they might lead to, not just because of the influence they may have on children’s sense of identity, but because of the impact of stereotyping on shaping expectations of some children depending on their gender, ability or culture.

Physical Diversity

Physical attributes and capabilities also play a part in children’s developing identities, but this is dependent on children’s perceptions of others’ views about them. Values regarding particular physical attributes and capabilities are socially constructed, and are often influenced by stereotypes, with consequent implications for inclusion. If educators or peers in an early years setting have limited expectations for a child because of stereotyped understandings of an aspect of their identity, the child may end up feeling devalued, marginalised or excluded. Inclusive education requires getting to know each child, understanding their backgrounds, interests, strengths and challenges, finding ways to acknowledge and value their unique identity, and engaging in an anti-bias approach in resisting any stereotyped assumptions or inclination to see some ways of being as ‘normal’ or ‘more normal’ than others (see the example in Chapter 5 from Zitomer and Reid’s research on an inclusive dance program).

Gender

Gender is another important aspect of children’s developing individual and social identity in the early years. Reflection on gender, in relation to the arts and beyond, is essential to inclusive education. In considering gender as early years practitioners, it is important to acknowledge our own gender identities and consider how these might impact our perceptions of people in the communities around us, including children. A discussion of the complexities of gender identity construction is beyond the scope of this book; however, growing acknowledgement of the social and cultural constructions of gender identities and attitudes means that reflection on our attitudes and interactions is part of any inclusive journey. While genuine respect for and

celebration of gender diversity is growing in many countries, experiences of marginalisation or discrimination still exist. By supporting young children to express their identity, including their gender, in diverse ways and celebrating that diversity, early years settings can lay foundations for more inclusive communities.

Disability

In the 21st century in many parts of the world there is increasing awareness of the inequities caused by some forms of discrimination, particularly racism or sexism. While there is a long way to go, early years curriculum and pedagogy in many countries seek to challenge limiting notions of gender and ensure that ethnic differences are not a barrier for children or families. Cultural diversity may be a learning resource that is utilised in many early years settings, as the importance of multicultural education is increasingly recognised (Barton & Ho, 2020).

Disability, however, still commonly remains outside the ‘accepted’ and valued forms of human diversity. Therefore, children may encounter the oppression that constitutes disability through the experience of having their identities defined in the eyes of others primarily, and negatively, by their impairments. Such definitions are often underpinned by stereotyped assumptions about diagnostic labels and by others’ implicit beliefs about impairment and the experience of disability. We, who do and do not experience disability, see disability as a positive form of diversity, not as a problem or a tragedy. We understand though, that this way of viewing disability can be more challenging for some to grasp in comparison to other forms of diversity. This is perhaps why many children and families experience disability as discrimination or stigma, even in generally friendly and welcoming settings such as early years education and care. For this reason, we now focus specifically on understandings of disability.

Defining Disability

Definitions and understandings of disability, as with any form of diversity, have been socially and culturally constructed over time. These understandings are reflected in many explicit and implicit ways throughout our lives, so that it is only with deep critical reflection that we may be able to identify our underlying feelings and beliefs and begin to see how they have been formed. In the past, children who experience disability were mainly educated in special schools, segregated from their peers and communities (a practice still advocated by some), and up until late in the 20th century it was not uncommon for children who experience disability to be in institutional care rather than at home with families. These practices were all related to understanding disability *as* impairment akin to illness that needed to be cured or eliminated, and the lives of people who experience disability as not worth living and necessitating being hidden from society.

Recognising such social attitudes as problematic, with deep and broad implications for people’s lived experiences, disability activists began to refer to this generally accepted and deeply embedded negative view of disability as a medical model. In working to help others understand the challenges that are part of the everyday, and the problems with attitudes and

systemic barriers, a social model of disability was developed as an alternative way of understanding disability. It is only through the development of the social model that the medical model was identified. However, in identifying this (still pervasive) model, disability activists identified its key features – that a medical model views disability as existing within a person and as a tragedy or aberration, and a medical problem to be remediated or ‘fixed’.

Medical Model Thinking

The term ‘medical model’ was not ever intended as a suggestion that medicine and *medical care* is a problem. In fact, a medical model of disability often underpins decisions to withhold medical treatment, and the fight for equitable medical care is a key aspect of the application of the social model. Instead, the term medical model is intended to illustrate that, rather than viewing impairment as a natural part of human diversity, a medical model of disability views people as ‘broken’ and needing to be fixed or eliminated, and fails to recognise the oppression that people face on every day.

Viewing some people as ‘broken’ leads to ableism - forms of thinking that result in stigma and discrimination of people on the basis of disability. Ableism can be directly paralleled with racism, ageism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and so forth. In essence, it is a process by which we create a ‘them’ and ‘us’, with ‘us’ being seen as superior to ‘them’. ‘Ableism plays out insidiously in everyday situations. The sense that an interaction or relationship between a person who does and a person who doesn’t experience disability is somehow benevolent on the part of the non-disabled person; the frequently unquestioned inaccessibility of places, events and materials; patronising interactions such as the often cited congratulatory remarks that a person who experiences disability may receive from strangers for simply being out and about – these are all examples of ableism’ (Cologon, 2019, pp. 35–36).

Disability studies scholar Rosemary Garland-Thomson wrote that disability is ‘a culturally fabricated narrative of the body, similar to what we understand as the fictions of race and gender’ (Garland-Thomson, 2002, p. 5). From an ableist perspective it is a narrative ‘benevolent prejudice’ – one of tragedy and suffering necessitating sympathy, pity, cures, treatments, and preventions. The ableist perpetuation of exclusion and segregation is based on the myth of the ‘normal person’, which results in a division of people into ‘normal’ and the inferred ‘Other’, which is constructed as ‘abnormal’. From an ableist viewpoint, therefore, a child who experiences disability is negatively constructed as ‘abnormal’. This difficult to shake belief is deeply entrenched as the basis of many approaches to and beliefs about education (Campbell, 2012). It is thus important to acknowledge that ableism and anti-ableism can occur alongside each other. As we engage with proactive efforts towards anti-ableism, we ‘dip in and out’; of ableism and anti-ableism as our awareness grows.

Social and Social-Relational Model Thinking

To challenge the pervasive ableism in society, disability studies scholars have posed a social model of disability. This holds that disability is created by society and caused by attitudes, policies and social provisions (or lack of provisions) that cause discrimination and exclusion of

those of us labeled as disabled (Oliver, 1983). In the field of disability studies, there is ongoing discussion and debate about how best to understand and conceptualise the experience of disability. While all advocate strongly against medical model understandings, and for the need for fuller honoring of the rights of those experiencing disability, not all see the social model definition as fully encompassing the lived experience of those seen as disabled (Corker & Shakespeare, 2002; Thomas, 2009).

A perspective on disability that is valuable for early years practitioners is the social relational model (Thomas, 2009). This takes aspects of social model thinking as its starting point – in particular the idea that those of us without impairments are more powerful than those of us with impairments, leading to the experiences of oppression and exclusion. According to the social model, this oppression and exclusion is the sole cause of the experience of disability. However, Thomas argues that this power inequity, while certainly a crucial part of the experience of disability, is not the whole story. She stressed that the effects of impairments should not be ignored – life is experienced differently by those of us with visual impairments, or who use wheelchairs for example. Thomas and others point out the dangers of ignoring bodily experience and over-simplifying or generalising the experience of disability: ‘The global experience of disabled people is too complex to be rendered within one unitary model or set of ideas’ (Corker & Shakespeare, 2002, p. 15). Thomas also provides an important extra perspective on the oppression identified by social model thinkers. She states that ‘The oppression that disabled people experience operates on the “inside” as well as on the “outside”: it is about being made to feel of lesser value, worthless, unattractive, or disgusting as well as it is about “outside” matters such as being turned down for a job because one is “disabled”, or not being offered the chance of a mainstream education because of “special needs”’ (Thomas, 2004, p. 31). Thomas, taking a social-relational perspective, terms the ‘outside’ experience of disability ‘barriers to doing’, the ‘inside’ effects ‘barriers to being’ and regards these two, along with the bio-social effects of bodily or cognitive impairments, as jointly constituting the experience of disability. If you would like to read more about this debate over understandings of disability and its history, a link to Thomas’s 2019 article is available at the end of this chapter.

The social-relational model has important implications for early years practitioners aiming to facilitate inclusive education. While it was developed in relation to the experience of disability, some aspects are relevant to any experience of difference that involves exclusion or social oppression. It provides principles that can guide us in reflecting on our environments, curricula, resources and pedagogy. We can use these principles to work towards the removal of any barriers to doing or being, and any impairment effects that may relate to physical, cognitive, linguistic or cultural differences. Social relational thinking highlights the importance of inclusive educational provisions, so that no child is disempowered because they are in some way different from some of their peers. Social relational thinking can guide us for example in implementing creative arts play using open-ended resources that reflect all the interests, languages, cultures, ethnicities and abilities of the children in

our early years education and care communities. Thus, when engaging in the arts children will not experience any barriers to being or doing – all children will be able to participate fully in their own ways and experience a sense of belonging.

The exploration of identity development and discussion of understandings of disability in this chapter provide a basis for recognising the importance of inclusive education, so that differences do not lead to barriers to participation or hinder the development of a positive sense of identity by all children. Social-relational model thinking can guide early years practitioners in providing inclusive early years education and care that will nurture positive identities and a sense of belonging for all. Given young children’s interest in creative and artistic play, and the diversity inherent in artistic expression, the arts can be appropriate and useful for removing those barriers to doing and being that can impede the development of positive identities. When children feel recognised and valued for whom they are, and relationships are based on mutual respect and trust, participation is possible in a wide range of ways. When curriculum and resources are representative of the range of ways of being of everyone in an educational community, every child can develop a positive sense of identity as a person and as a learner.

WE ARE NOT THE SAME, BUT WE ALL BELONG: LANGUAGE AND INCLUSION

The ways that we talk about and with each other, for children and adults, will both reflect and create ways of thinking about identities and diversity. Language can bring us together or keep us apart; it can challenge bias or create it. Discriminatory language – sexist, racist or ableist for example – can create the ‘barriers to being’ that Thomas speaks about (2009). There are many examples in history, politics and news media of where language, particularly labeling of people or ways of being, can lead to dehumanisation that then makes discrimination acceptable. The focus on human rights during the 20th century has led to increased public awareness in many parts of the world of the importance of language and terminology that convey respect or equity in relation to race, gender, religion and ability. For example, the rise of feminism in the 1970s led to a push for less discriminatory forms of address, and any exploration of media reporting on same sex relationships will reveal significantly different terminology now as compared to 50 or more years ago, when this way of being was regarded as aberrant and was often illegal. In relation to disability too, language has changed as social attitudes, laws and policies have recognised the unfairness, marginalisation, discrimination and even cruelty imposed on people labeled as disabled. One example of this is the debate amongst disability rights activists and disability scholars about ‘person-first’ (a child who experiences disability) versus ‘identity-first’ language (a disabled child) (Botha et al., 2021). There is still a distance to travel in terms of widespread use of inclusive, respectful, rights-based language. Early years practitioners, informed by the anti-bias goals, can reflect on their language use around diversity, with the aim of supporting every child’s sense of belonging.

Early years practitioners are role models for children during a critical time for language and identity development; the words we use to talk with and about children will influence their individual and social identities and their attitudes towards peers. Using language that is respectful and inclusive will help us to develop welcoming, positive and trusting relationships in early years communities.

The Languages of the Arts

The need to communicate and connect with others is part of being human. The open-endedness inherent in creativity and the arts means that children can explore and communicate their different interests, ideas and feelings through the 'languages' of the arts. Children can also develop and express aspects of their identities through art forms such as music, dance, drawing, painting, storytelling and drama. In the case study below, two children of different ages, backgrounds, genders and abilities express their identities and connect with each other through music.

Mika (aged five) and Tommy (aged four), play together regularly while at preschool. Their personalities, developmental capabilities and communication styles are quite different - while Mika is talkative and sociable, Tommy is a mostly non-verbal communicator who often plays alone. Their bond began with musical play, which both children choose to do often, and now they often make music together. During free play time soon after the children's arrival at preschool one morning, Mika was playing on the colourful xylophone. Tommy noticed and started to imitate what she was doing, taking over the xylophone from her. Since Mika likes playing with Tommy, she let him play the xylophone and she started playing the clap sticks. Every time Tommy played two or three different notes and stopped, Mika would tap two or three times. Both realised they were making a pattern and repeated it a couple of times. This way they created their own music, communicating just through eye contact and listening to each other's sounds. (Niland, 2020, Early years educator's observation notes)

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have outlined the inclusive perspective on diversity and difference that underpins this book. Our aim in writing a book about the many inclusive possibilities offered by the creative arts, is to take a positive approach; however in this chapter we have also acknowledged the importance of recognising that some attitudes and practices in early years settings and communities can present significant challenges for the development of inclusive education and care. We hope that the issues and questions raised will inspire you to look deeply as you work towards building inclusive settings in which every child experiences a sense of belonging and being valued for whom they are.

To think about...

- Thinking back to your early childhood, how was your identity and those of your peers reflected in your preschool or early school classrooms? Were all children's identities recognised or valued?
- What are your thoughts about how the words you use as an early years professional can communicate to children that everyone's identities are welcome?

FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child:

<https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/crc.pdf>

- In relation to the arts see Article 13
- In relation to children with disabilities see Article 23
- In relation to education see Article 28
- In relation to children's diverse identities see Article 29

The anti-bias principles:

<https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/nov2019/understanding-anti-bias>

A deeply reflective article by Carol Thomas on the social relational model of disability:

Thomas, C. (2019). Times change, but things remain the same. *Disability & Society*, 34(7–8), 1040–1041.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09687599.2019.1664074>

A useful resource that aims to eliminate barriers that language can impose:

United Nations. (2021). *Disability-inclusive language guidelines*. <https://www.ungeneva.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/Disability-Inclusive-Language-Guidelines.pdf>

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