

*Chapter Nine***The Challenge****Marion Shields***Avondale University College***Abstract**

Christian educators advocate that faith and learning should be holistic and integral to Christian education, but is this available for all students? The inclusion of students with disabilities does not have a strong record of implementation within Christian Schools. This chapter briefly recounts the history that led to the legislation mandating inclusion, and discusses the very real issues that concern teachers and parents today. The question posed is: should children with disabilities be enrolled in Christian schools? Responding in the affirmative, nine research-based strategies are described in detail, which provide solutions to the challenges faced in inclusive classrooms. Children with disabilities are capable of learning; and in order to receive a holistic Christian education they need to be included in Christian schools.

Introduction

Most Christian educators believe that the integration of faith and learning should be holistic and natural within a Christian learning space. However, many find it more difficult to accept that this environment should include children with disabilities, particularly in their own classes. Interestingly, many of these teachers actually

support the concept of inclusion, as Malki and Einat (2017) found, as long as they were not required to have students with disabilities (SWD) in their own classes. Consider the following scenario as an example:

Sally felt stressed and apprehensive as she drove to Browne Christian School that morning. She was dreading facing her new class of 23 year-four boys and girls. Last year had been a reasonable year, but she felt as if her 20 years of teaching experience was no match for the class that she was expected to teach this year. For starters, a quarter of the class had special needs, ranging from a mild visual impairment through to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), as well as a child with high level autism. Furthermore, six of them were on individualised education plans (IEPs). Too young to retire and needing her salary, Sally felt trapped and resentful.

This chapter discusses the implications of scenarios such as this, for Christian schools and teachers. So, as the title implies, the challenge lies in determining whether students with disabilities should be permitted to join Christian schools; and if yes, what can be done to facilitate their inclusion.

The Historical Challenge

In the mid-20th century, children with disabilities were denied school enrolment; however, parents pushed for their children to be accepted as capable of learning and deserving of an education (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2015). Supported by psychologists such as Nirje (1967), Bank-Mikkelsen (1969) and Wolfensberger (1972), these courageous parents fought rejection by educators and advocated for their children. Many parents joined together and even organised home schooling for their children. Eventually they were successful and the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act in the United States of America, was enacted. This legislation stipulated that education for children with disabilities was to be free, mandatory and to occur ‘in the least restrictive environment’ (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2015). In Australia, following the Disability Discrimination Act in 1992 (DDA) and the Disability Standards for Education in 2005 (The Standards), increasing numbers of students with disabilities have been included in mainstream schools. Both legally and ethically, students

with disabilities are entitled to an education and the opportunity to be educated alongside their peers.

In 1994 over 300 participants—including 92 governments and 25 international organisations—met in Salamanca, Spain, to address the issue of special needs education under the auspices of UNESCO. A statement was issued from this conference which concluded that regular schools with an inclusive orientation were the best option for students with disabilities.

However, the path to inclusion in regular schools has been a long and difficult one for students with special needs. While inclusion has been achieved to a certain extent in state schools, Independent and Christian schools have been slow to follow this lead and enrol children with special needs (Stymeist, 2008) until comparatively recent times.

In discussing the intersection of faith and disability, Carter reminds us that “disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to participate in or contribute to society” (2016, p. 167). Carter’s research identified that the overwhelming desire of the young people with disabilities in his study was the need to belong. Within this concept were several subcategories, beginning with the need to be present and concluding with the need to be loved. Being present is the first step towards actual inclusion.

The Christian Challenge

If students with disabilities are to be given an opportunity to have the holistic experience of faith and learning in a Christian environment, then they must be allowed to be present, that is, to enrol in Christian schools. Furthermore, overall programs must be tailored to meet their needs. Inclusion means more than just placement in a mainstream classroom; therefore, intellectual, physical, social and spiritual needs must be addressed to ensure that students with disabilities enjoy a meaningful educational experience. Ramirez and Stymeist (2010) express the issue in this way:

Christian schools must increase their interaction with students with special needs in order to provide an equitable education for all. When Jesus wanted to challenge, grow, and better His disciples, He exposed them to people they would not usually

serve—Samaritans, women, children, and tax collectors. He provided opportunities for His disciples to interact with people who were different so that they might develop His heart for all mankind. If Christian schools wish to be ‘fruitful bearers of the image of Christ,’ they must educate students with His heart, exploring how to embrace those who learn differently, and how to educate them well. (p. 4)

If this is the ideal, what are the barriers that make inclusion difficult, and how can students with disabilities be ‘educated well’?

The Current Challenge

A number of challenges face those who would advocate for the inclusion of students with disabilities. Of the approximately 336,000 students with disabilities in Australia, 115,862 were enrolled in Independent schools in 2018, representing 19 per cent of the Independent school student population; most of these students attend mainstream Independent schools (ISCA, 2018). However, Graham, Proctor and Dixon (2016) point out that gatekeeping, that is, exclusionary practices, is a common occurrence in Independent schools. “As these schools compete for enrolments and top exam results, there is a disincentive for them to take any risk that might dilute those results” (Graham et al., 2016).

Achieving the goal of inclusion depends to a great degree upon the supportive school climate engendered by the school’s administration team through advocacy, policy and team-building. This climate impacts the attitude, determination and skills of the teachers to successfully differentiate the curriculum to meet the needs of the various students in the classroom. Additionally, the development of a holistic, accepting and caring ethos within the school as well as the classroom is equally important. Collaborative relationships with parents may assist, yet may detract, from effective inclusion.

In 2017 the Association of Independent schools in the state of New South Wales, Australia (AISNSW) acknowledged some of the real difficulties faced by teachers regarding the inclusion of children with special needs:

A tension exists between the principle and practice, where teachers confront the difficulty of educating a wide range of

students in the same setting, particularly at the point where they have to address the significant challenge of students whose behaviour disrupts lessons. (p. 8)

For school principals this is a difficult situation; research shows that for some there is a tendency to leave decisions up to others on staff. Lashley (2007) described this as a dangerous game, given that the responsibility for upholding special education legislation is the responsibility of the principal.

A Lack of Self-efficacy

Many teachers feel inadequate and lack self-efficacy when it comes to educating students with disabilities, which is exacerbated in an inclusive classroom with other students who also need attention and education. This issue was reinforced by research from Able, Sreckovic, Schultz, Garwood, and Sherman (2014), Vaz et al., (2015), and Finke, McNaughton and Drager (2009) who found that a sense of low self-confidence in educating students with disabilities was a serious issue for many teachers. Furthermore, this lack of self-efficacy in educating students with disabilities led to negative attitudes towards inclusion. In addition to negative attitudes and resistance to inclusion, lower perceptions of self-efficacy can have very detrimental effects on teachers, including higher stress levels and burnout (Vaz et al., 2015).

A Changing Educational Environment

The 2017 an AISNSW Report also noted that the landscape of special education has changed:

The striking feature of special needs education in all school sectors has been the great expansion in numbers of students with a disability or other learning difficulties enrolled in mainstream schools, reflecting a change in the nature of special education. (p. 2)

Given this expansion, described in the report as a ‘great expansion’, it seems likely that some of the research reports on successful mainstreaming that occurred years ago (e.g. Staub & Peck, 1994), do not replicate the structure of classrooms today. Managing mainstreamed classes with a substantial number of students requiring additional assistance can be extremely challenging for teachers.

Community Attitudes

McHatton and Parker (2013) found that the attitudes of teachers, as well as their expectations towards students with disabilities, was crucial in achieving effective outcomes for these children. Community attitudes can also have a critical impact on the decision to enrol or refuse students with disabilities. Unfortunately, there is often a perception that students with disabilities lower the image that the school likes to portray, as this comment by Konza (2008) reveals:

Students who may not necessarily contribute to a profile of academic excellence are viewed as not making a contribution to the overall appeal of the school. While special schools present themselves as centres of excellence for their population of students, few mainstream schools are prepared to advertise that they accept students with significant special needs for fear that they be seen as a “dumping ground”. This is true even of schools that claim to offer high levels of pastoral care and an ethos that contributes to the overall development and potential of all students. Being able to claim a high percentage of students in the upper bands of ability on state-wide assessments attracts more students than does a claim that the school welcomes and caters for all comers. (p. 41)

Writing about the barriers to inclusion, Forlin, Loreman, Sharma, & Earle, (2009) note that a further challenge that continues to create significant barriers to inclusion is the attitude of society. These authors explain that the considerable diversity of Australia’s population, in terms of cultures and racial groups, may explain some of the different perceptions about disabilities.

Lack of Teacher Knowledge and Preparedness

Despite the number of years that inclusion has been advocated for students with disabilities, there are still many teachers who complete their training lacking the basic strategies that are needed. Mngo and Mngo (2018) found that teachers’ resistance to inclusion mostly related to their lack of knowledge and preparedness. Important strategies, such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Differentiated Instruction (DI), and Response to Intervention (RTI) were unknown or not well understood. Additionally, many experienced teachers undertook teacher-education before special education was included in undergraduate teaching courses. Vaz et al., (2015) found that teachers

aged 55 and over held more negative attitudes towards students with disabilities. Moreover, male teachers and those with a low self-efficacy in teaching were also more likely to be unwilling to have students with disabilities in their classes.

Forlin et al., (2009) found that “without formal education in inclusive teaching, in-service teachers show decreased willingness to appropriately teach children with special needs” (p. 199). The possibility that these negative attitudes amongst older teachers may influence younger pre-service teachers on practicum is of considerable concern.

Issues for Principals

Unfortunately, Independent schools do not receive the additional funding for the education of students with disabilities that government schools do. Therefore, to enrol or not, is an issue for many Independent school principals. Boyle and Hernandez (2016) investigated inclusion issues in Catholic schools and commented on the difficulties faced, noting that “there is an implicit tension between the call for Catholic school principals’ sense of justice to include students with disabilities and the practicalities of how to do this with integrity” (p. 194). Regarding mainstream principals, Frick, Faircloth and Little (2013) noted that many principals lacked appropriate training to be confident that students with disabilities would receive an education that was both differentiated and equitable. Frick et al., (2013) found that a child with a disability was more likely to be enrolled if the principal had earlier involvement with, and knowledge of, their disability.

Some Solutions to the Challenge

Leadership

Principals have the responsibility of leading inclusive schools, which is “complex work that requires a substantial knowledge base and an understanding of diverse learners and the systems that support their learning and long-term success” (Billingsley, McLeskey, & Crockett, 2017, p.6). Prior (2018) has also described this leadership role as multidimensional and demanding, noting that by what they say and do, leaders influence culture. It is therefore essential that principals receive training in special needs legislation and policy, as

well as organisation of programs to support students with disabilities. In addition, the principal needs to model a positive approach towards inclusion, developing a team ethos and articulating the vision (Boyle & Hernandez, 2016). Lohrman and Bambara (2006) investigated the perceptions of teachers as to what constituted essential supports in their inclusive classrooms. The teachers described three aspects of their schools' practices that they believed were essential and effective in supporting their work: (1) there was a clear and articulated school-wide vision for inclusion, (2) a collegial atmosphere had been developed which encouraged teachers to support each other and to ask for help if needed, (3) in-class support personnel were available when needed (p. 163). These three supportive aspects were led by the principal and the administration team. Principals also need to be aware of the legislation and policies relevant to the education of students with disabilities, to ensure that correct procedures are followed. For example, the development of a student's IEP should be a collaborative effort that involves parents, educators, other professionals and older students, as they plan for the student's education. Grocke's (2018) research found that numerous studies have identified problems in the IEP process, including: lack of support and guidance for parents, lack of genuine, caring communication with parents and lack of collaboration in the implementation of the IEP. School leaders can and should set the tone of professional, caring support, together with a genuine interest in the child and appropriate supervision to ensure that the process is conducted in a professional manner undergirded by Christian values.

Attitude

If the goal is to ensure that children with disabilities are given the opportunity to experience a Christian education, a number of features need to be in place. One of the most important, is attitude. This delightful, proactive quote from Dan Beerens (2016) summarises the situation well:

As Christian schools, we have a unique opportunity to enrol, support, and receive the blessings of students with disabilities as valued members of our communities. Rather than compete solely in academic achievement, we can shine a light on a path for Christian schools that demonstrates in real, visible, and incredibly effective terms what it means to be a Christian community. We do this by willingly and enthusiastically including students with

disabilities in the fabric of a school, not because we are mandated by law to do so, but because we believe each student is a child of God. (p.18)

This quoted perspective on students with disabilities trumpets the reminder that these students are children of God. Furthermore, this perspective needs to be embraced by the school community as a whole; the principal, the administration team, the teachers, the parents and the students, if it is to succeed. Twinam (2018) investigated attitudes towards the inclusion of students with disabilities in a K-8 Christian school; he reported that “this sense of community was purposefully cultivated as [participant] expressed, “So, we talk a lot about community, and we work really hard so that the dynamics and the culture of that community is a positive environment” (p.167). A sense of community doesn’t happen by chance. In this example, staff members and the administrative team worked together to build a sense of community and regularly articulated the concept and value of an inclusive Christian community.

Knowledge of Legislation and Policy

Legislation regarding the education of students with disabilities is very clear and specific. In addition to the DDA (1992) and the Standards (2005), Australia also ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities in 2008. “In relation to education, the Convention states that persons with disability should be guaranteed the right to inclusive education at all levels, regardless of age, without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity” (Forlin, Chambers, Loreman, Deppeler, & Sharma, 2014, p. 4). As pre-service teachers learn about the educational needs of students with disabilities, they begin to develop their own beliefs and attitudes about inclusion. Sokal and Sharma (2017) found that a knowledge of mandated legislation was critical in the broadening of their understanding, and more importantly, their acceptance of the rights of students with disabilities.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is a particularly important factor that contributes towards success in inclusive schools. Teachers with a high self-efficacy, the confidence to believe they can succeed, have higher rates of success. Twinam (2018) investigated the issue of self-efficacy in

a K-8 Christian school where the teachers perceived themselves as having a high self-efficacy in teaching students with special needs. Their high levels of self-efficacy correlated with stronger inclusion practices. This high self-efficacy was due in part to teachers' perceived sense of community, administrative, collegial and specialist support. As principals and administrators embrace inclusion, articulate its importance and value, and buttress it with team ethos and specialist support, teachers will feel empowered in their work with students with special needs. Holzberger, Philipp, and Kunter (2013) also found that the quality of instruction correlated with the teacher's sense of self-efficacy and went on to say: "Self-efficacy can improve through instruction, modelling, experience, and collaboration" (p.21). This concurred with Lohrman and Bambara's (2006) research which found that both preservice teachers and in-service teachers held more positive attitudes towards SWD if they had a family member with a disability or if they had experience teaching in an inclusive classroom. Konza (2008) also noted that teachers needed to feel that they really made a difference for the children with disabilities, which would sustain them when meeting challenges.

Teacher Education

For teachers who have not had special needs education as part of their teaching qualification, there is a need for upgrading or in-service, so that they gain a better understanding of students with disabilities and their needs. In addition, because the field of special education is continually developing, and because of increasing numbers of students with special needs, all teachers need ongoing professional development to keep up with pedagogy and management in this rapidly changing field. Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2008) found that professional development improved teachers' attitudes towards students with disabilities, while Vaz et al. (2015) observed that teachers who had undertaken training in disability studies upheld more positive attitudes. The need for ongoing professional development for teachers, particularly in inclusive classrooms, cannot be emphasised enough. The 2018 OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) found that in Australia, 74 percent of teachers undertook special education studies as part of their training, but only 38 percent felt ready to work with students with disabilities. Furthermore, teaching special needs students was the professional development

topic most highly requested by teachers (TALIS, 2018). Research by Able et al., (2015) also strongly advocated the need for professional development for teachers, emphasising that such development should go beyond pedagogy for students with special needs. Teachers in this research study advocated for applied experiences working with students with disabilities as well as understanding inter-disciplinary collaboration, as part of their basic teacher training. Furthermore, teachers expressed the need for evidence-based practices (EBPs) in social-related challenges for students with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs). Lastly, the teachers called for increased advocacy on behalf of students with disabilities and their parents, including the authentic involvement of the student in his/her IEP process.

Teacher Influence

A recent concept to emerge within special needs education is that of the ‘invisible hand’. Farmer, Dawes and Hamm (2017) note that several aspects of social support for students with disabilities are frequently used in inclusive classrooms. These may involve training in social skills for all of the children in the class or providing opportunities for informal interactions. Additionally, many teachers encourage a buddy system, whereby peers in the classroom provide a variety of supports to a student with special needs.

However, in their writing about the “invisible hand of the teacher”, Farmer et al., (2017) submit that teachers have the ability to strongly influence the social dynamics of inclusive classrooms. The concept of the invisible hand “serves as a metaphor to suggest teachers have the potential to unobtrusively manage the classroom social context in ways that can promote both a positive classroom culture for all students while supporting individual interventions for socially vulnerable youth” (Farmer et al., 2017, p. 181). This teacher influence can occur in two ways. The first is the way they manage and organise their classroom, while the second is the way that they interact with a particular student. Students themselves tend to form groups which evolve and change throughout the school life. However, teachers can group students in different ways for different activities, ensuring that the student with special needs has the opportunity to work collaboratively with a variety of peers. These peers can be intentionally placed with a student with special needs in a particular

group to provide academic support and encouragement. In addition, the way that teachers interact with a particular student influences the reactions of other students. If teachers intentionally model interest, respect, empathy and humour, with a consistently positive approach, and share their Christian faith within their classrooms, students with disabilities will benefit.

Leigers, Kleinert, and Carter (2017) explored the concept of peer support for more severely disabled students. Two or three peers would be given an induction and then would support the special needs student academically by helping them with “staying on task, or summarizing key concepts” (p. 75). Social support was also provided, such as “making introductions to classmates, or initiating conversations” (p. 75); behavioural needs were also addressed, such as “redirecting the student when he or she is off-task” (p. 75). “Research indicates students with severe disabilities benefit by having more interactions, increased academic engagement, increased skill acquisition, expanded social networks, and new friendships” (Leigers et al., 2017, p. 76). In addition, the supporting peers also benefited from the involvement, as Leigers et al., reported that they experienced: “enhanced academic performance, improved attitudes regarding disability, unanticipated personal growth, and lasting friendships (p. 76).

Collaboration

A recurring theme in studies of inclusion, is that of collaboration. Collaboration with paraprofessionals or other professional staff and with parents has posed problems for some teachers in inclusive classrooms. Teachers in Lohrman and Bambara’s (2006) study were apprehensive about having other adults in the classroom, expecting that they would be watched and perhaps judged. They were also concerned about interacting with other teachers in the school who were opposed to inclusion, or even particular students, and having to defend the work that they were doing. Similarly, many teachers in this study had a difference of opinion with the included student’s parents, believing that the parent underestimated the seriousness of their child’s behaviour. It is in this context that the role of the principal, or another member of the administrative team, can be invaluable in encouraging an ethos of collegiality and support, as well as providing collaboration training and helping the parties allocate time for meetings.

Josilowski and Morris (2019) explored the aspect of home and school collaboration, finding it both essential and beneficial for all players. The first main theme from the study was that when the teachers and parents collaborated, the students' academic progress improved. As part of this collaboration, Josilowski and Morris found that the principal played a key role. The principal's involvement supports teachers, parents and students, and importantly, demonstrates the value and significance of both inclusion and collaboration. Results of the study also revealed that following collaborative meetings between home and school, the students' social adjustment improved. In addition, parents were more willing to work with the teacher in implementing skill development at home.

Community Education

The 1994 conference in Salamanca, Spain, advocated inclusion as the best way to combat discrimination for students with disabilities. Konza (2008) points out that knowledge of disabilities and experience with people with disabilities are essential in changing attitudes towards people with disabilities. Within an inclusive setting, as these two essentials occur, understanding and acceptance are more likely to develop.

Ethics and Best Interests

In their research, Frick et al., (2013) investigated the tension between various ethical claims regarding trying to make decisions in the best interests of students with disabilities. On the one hand, the ethic of justice as noted by Aristotle in 334 BCE is that "justice consists of treating equals equally and unequals unequally precisely in order to be fair" (Frick et al., 2013, p. 215). On the other hand, is the ethic of care which "emphasizes the critical need for caring and committed school principals who possess at minimum a basic level of proficiency in special education leadership and who model acceptance and act as advocates for students with disabilities" (p.216). In addition, Frick et al.,(2013) note:

A model for determining the best interests of the student emerges from the Ethic of the Profession and consists of a robust focus on the essential nature of individual rights; the duty of responsibility to others for a common interest; and respect as mutual acknowledgement of the other as having personal worth, value, and dignity. (p. 218)

Conclusion

This concept of the best interests of children with disabilities, as well as the other students, the teachers and the families, needs to be aligned within a Christian worldview; a view that recognises the value of each individual. So, in regards to Sally, the teacher in the lead scenario, could her situation be transformed? The answer is a resounding yes. With preparation, knowledge and practical experience through professional development and modelling, the solution is achievable. With an informed and committed principal who: articulates a strong vision for the school, including all students; works to build a school climate of acceptance, welcome, care and collegiality; and supports the inclusion process through personal involvement, advocacy for students and provision of support, this classroom can become the dynamic, Christian community it is meant to be. If leaders and staff communicate and collaborate with parents, pray for them and their children and model Christian values and attitudes, faith and learning can indeed be holistic, natural and inclusive for those with special needs.

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