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What's in a name? A comparative literature review of disability within early childhood education

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ABSTRACT
Handicapped, special, or diverse? Segregated, mainstreamed, or included? The field of disability and difference within education, is vast and wide-ranging. This review of the literature highlights how, although we have come far in the last 40 years, there is still much to learn about effective inclusion of disabled children in early childhood settings. The article compares literature between two distinct decades – the 1980s and the 2010s – identifying the shifts within the field around language, social development of, and attitudes toward, disabled children in early childhood settings. Although international literature is used, the discussion focuses on the Aotearoa New Zealand context. The importance of teachers is acknowledged as a predictor of a positive and inclusive learning environment where disabled children can thrive and succeed.

KEYWORDS
Inclusion, early childhood education, Aotearoa New Zealand, teachers

Introduction

Comparative reviews of literature typically "identify what is common and what is shared across contexts" (Hammond & Wellington, 2020, p. 31). This article, however, compares literature from the 1980s (from 1980 to 1989) with literature from the 2010s (from 2010 to 2019), identifying commonalities and differences across these two distinct decades in the field of disability.

Two EBSCO Host literature searches were undertaken, using the following search criteria: "inclusion or inclusive education or mainstreaming" and "early childhood education or preschool or kindergarten". Both were limited to academic peer-reviewed journals with full text availability. The first search limited publication dates between 1980 and 1989, with the second between 2010 and 2019.

Within these two time periods, there has been a plethora of research and scholarly writing around inclusion (for example, Esposito & Peach, 1983; Iyer, 2011; Purdue et al., 2011; Ringlaben & Price, 1981). Although the language of disability has changed over time, achieving full inclusion for disabled children within education settings is still an ongoing issue. The Education Review Office (2012) conducted a review of services and how well placed they were to include "children with special needs" (2012, p. 1). The findings indicated that 56% of services were "mostly inclusive" or "somewhat inclusive" (Education Review Office, 2012, p. 11). Criteria used in their analysis included gaps in pedagogical and curriculum knowledge, needing education support worker provisions, and constraints within the environment. Forty-four percent of the 104 surveyed services were considered "very inclusive services" (Education Review Office, 2012, p. 11) as they demonstrated a collaborative approach with parents and agencies, believed all children were confident and competent, and had effective processes and supports in place. However, in contrast, Hamilton and Vermeren (2016) conducted a survey of 27 teachers, revealing concerns about a "lack of clarity" (2016, p. 119) within *Te Whāriki* that posed challenges for them. The survey, which included open-ended questions, sought to understand teachers' views on how *Te Whāriki* supports inclusive education. While all respondents acknowledged the importance of the principle of inclusion, there was less clarity on how to implement it in practice. Moffatt et al. (2016) further emphasised that teachers need to strongly advocate for disabled children in their settings. In the decades between the 1980s and 2010s, Aotearoa New Zealand had reviewed special education, introducing the government's flagship policy, Special Education 2000 (Creech, 1997), signed up to the United Nations convention on the rights of persons with disabilities (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2006), and created an inclusive and bicultural early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996).

Through an exploration of the literature from the decades of the 1980s and the 2010s around terminology, social development of, and attitudes towards disabled children, this article will demonstrate much has changed but much has stayed the same.

Terminology

In the 30 years I have been involved in the disability field, children have been described in numerous ways. Some of the descriptions used have included: "I work with special needs"; "she is Downs"; "he must be on the spectrum"; "child with a disability"; "she has special needs"; "disabled"; he is confined to a wheelchair"; "intellectual/physical/sensory disability". Lyons (2013) also found participants in her research described children in various ways such as, "blind, deaf, Down syndrome, 'dietary' disabilities, 'not developing as she should be', not normal, IHC, and autistic" (p. 246). During the 1980s children were categorised into two distinct sets and were described as either handicapped or non-handicapped (see Burstein, 1986; Esposito & Peach, 1983; Guralnick, 1980; Odom et al., 1984); handicapped or normal (Esposito & Peach, 1983); normally developing or developmentally delayed (Guralnick & Groom, 1987). In Australia, Baxter's research noted parents' use of their child as being "mentally retarded" (1989, p. 265). Even the sparse Aotearoa New Zealand literature used terms that would be frowned upon today. For example, segregated institutions for handicapped people were established in Aotearoa New Zealand to house the "idiots and imbeciles" (Mitchell, 1987, as cited in Chapman, 1988b, p. 125). Interestingly when comparing the literature from the 2010s, authors still used a variety of terms to describe the children involved in their research. For example, children with special learning needs (Shuker & Cherrington, 2015), and children with disabilities (Lyons, 2013; Purdue et al., 2011). Berryman and Woller (2010) used both special needs children and children with special educational needs when researching how effectively the Early Intervention Service supports Māori families.

Much of the research in the 1980s stems from the United States and Europe, and in its infancy Aotearoa New Zealand looked to the overseas research in setting its own policies. A transformation, however, was happening in Aotearoa New Zealand during the 1980s, and the then Prime Minister and Minister of Education, David Lange, announced a policy around early childhood education (Department of Education, 1988). This major announcement culminated from a report prepared by the Early Childhood Care and Education Working Group (1988). Heralded as a major reform, it transferred responsibility for childcare from the Department of Social Welfare to the Ministry of Education, citing that care and education for our youngest citizens could not be separated (Burns, 1989). The report recommended the establishment of an Early Childhood Development Unit with the prime focus of supporting the burgeoning early childhood sector. The report highlighted that this unit would also provide “special early childhood advisory services” (Early Childhood Care and Education Working Group, 1988, p. 57). The Before Five statement of intent outlined a special education service as part of the government’s changes to education administration (Department of Education, 1988).

The term special education for children with special needs, became the norm within Aotearoa New Zealand at that time and has continued into the 2010s. Indeed, the word special appeared 267 times within the Education Review Office (2012) report on inclusion of children with special needs in early childhood services. This term was used to refer to both children and education, that is, children with special needs, and special education. Although from a compulsory schooling focus, MacArthur and Rutherford (2016) discuss their stance on the use of the word special, reiterating that children identified as ‘special’ are viewed as “problematic, [that] require extra resources and time” (2016, p. 160). This generates deficit thinking and focuses on fitting the child into the learning environment.

By the end of the 2010s however, terminology started to change. Within the Government’s Learning Support Action Plan, 2019-2025 (Ministry of Education, 2019), the word special only appeared eight times and in all instances the word referred to special schools or special assessment conditions rather than for the labelling of children. The focus of the plan was on the learning needs of children, identifying that “one in five children and young people need some kind of extra support for their learning. This might be because of disability, learning difficulties, disadvantage, physical or mental health or behaviour issues” (2019, p. 4). The aspirations of the Government at the time focused on all children learning and achieving, regardless of their individual circumstances or needs.

This has been a significant shift in terminology and one that has been welcomed. However, using more inclusive language in a government policy document is one thing; having it enacted in practice is another. Indeed Lyons (2013) found that legislation, *Te Whāriki* and the licensing criteria, enabled teachers to use and understand the language of inclusion but putting it in practice was “problematic and confusing” (2013, p. 247). Much of the research on inclusion (see Lyons, 2013; Purdue et al., 2011; Shuker & Cherrington, 2015) highlights a need to shift the paradigm from a deficit viewpoint of focusing on the child’s impairment and how this impacts on their learning, to a socially constructed viewpoint, where the child is seen as a contributing member of their social group.

In 2017, the early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki,* was updated. According to the then Minister of Education, Hon Hekia Parata, the updated document "reflects changes in the early learning context, including the diversity of Aotearoa New Zealand society today, contemporary theories and pedagogies" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 2). To identify its effectiveness, Moffatt (2019) examined the changes between the 1996 and 2017 versions of Te Whāriki in relation to inclusive practice. She identified a significant change in terminology with the "removal of the term 'special needs' and the inclusion of the 'rights' of the child" (2019, p. 18).

What is pleasing to see within *Te Whāriki* is the stance for inclusion. For example, notes relating to diverse ways of communicating, identify that "oral language encompasses any method of communication the child uses as a first language; this includes New Zealand Sign Language and, for children who are non-verbal, alternative and augmentative communication (ACC)" and "for children who are deaf or hard of hearing, 'hearing' includes watching" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 25). This is a wider perspective and encourages teachers to understand each child's unique ways of communicating and to cater for this in their learning.

When considering social development of disabled children, it is important to define the dominant approaches within the education system. The three approaches highlighted in this article are mainstreaming, integration and inclusion. The definitions identified by Cologon (2014) are as follows:

- "Mainstreaming: The placement of children together within the same setting, but without making adjustments or adaptations to facilitate inclusion" (p. 9).
- "Integration: Involves attendance at a 'mainstream' setting … with needs-based accommodations to facilitate participation, but without change" (p. 10).
- "Inclusive education: Involves embracing human diversity and valuing and supporting belonging and full participation of all people together" (p. 11).

Social Development

Children playing with, and alongside, others in an early education setting is high on the agenda for parents and teachers alike. Parents want their children to learn how to get on with others and to have friends to play with. Teachers engage with groups of children to support their growing competence in social settings. This is no different for parents of disabled children (Baxter, 1989; Hanline & Halvorsen, 1989). They want their children included in their early childhood setting, and to have the same opportunities for learning as all children. In New Zealand, the early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017), follows a principle-based approach where teachers empower children to engage in their learning through interactions with others. Social development of all children, regardless of their ability, is the cornerstone of education.

As early as the 1970s the idea of mainstreaming was gaining popularity (Guralnick, 1978, cited in Guralnick & Groom, 1987), and as such much of the international social development research in the 1980s focused on how handicapped children could enhance social skills by being integrated into a classroom with non-handicapped children. For example, Dunlop et al. (1980) focused on the different stages of social development, identifying the time spent in “solitary activity, cooperative interaction, dominant interaction, and adult-child interaction (1980, p. 133). They found that over time (in this instance a school year), integrating both handicapped and non-handicapped preschoolers in group settings “made these handicapped children more like the non-handicapped children in their social interaction” (1980, p. 140). Guralnick (1980) researched the social interactions of children whether positive or negative, verbal or non-verbal. He found that mildly handicapped children increased their social interactions skills when integrated with non-handicapped children. He was less confident, however, to make the claim when discussing children with more severe handicaps. Jenkins et al. (1989) studied the effects of social integration on preschool children with handicaps. Non-handicapped children, one year younger than their handicapped peers, were integrated into a special class. They found that merely being present in a group with non-handicapped children, did not enhance the development of social skills in handicapped children. Interestingly, however, it also did not “detract from their education” (1985, p. 16). Guralnick and Groom’s (1987) study, however, focused more on the differences between children of the same chronological age and the same developmental age. They found that the more advanced non-handicapped children engaged effectively with the delayed children, thus enhancing their social interaction. Results from these research studies clearly identified social interaction and skills enhancement for mildly handicapped children when they were integrated into education settings with their non-handicapped peers.

In Aotearoa New Zealand during the 1980s, the focus was also on mainstreaming in early childhood education. The Draft Review of Special Education (1987, as cited in Chapman, 1988b) recommended mainstreaming as a “social justice and equity” (p. 123) issue, claiming that in order for disabled children to be involved in their communities they need to be learning alongside their non-disabled peers. Chapman, however, was concerned about how children were integrated into the mainstream setting and pointed out that if no provisions were made to support teachers and children in these settings, he believed the term should be “maindumping” (p. 131).

As previously mentioned, there was little research in the 1980s from an Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood context. Much of the literature found on the subject focused on the implications of the specific disability from a medical viewpoint, in a compulsory school setting, or an overseas context with a citation from a New Zealand journal (see Baxter, 1989; Chapman, 1988a; Higgins & Turnure, 1984). By the 2010s however, social interaction research focusing on disabled children became more prevalent. Macartney (2012), for instance, “documented the narratives of two families about their experiences of parenting and living with a young disabled child” (2012, p. 176). Her research highlighted the importance of disabled children having a sense of belonging in their early childhood setting. In her research however, she found that although one of the children was included in the setting alongside others, there was a lack of integration. When asked about the teachers’ relationship with the child, her mother indicated “they’d speak to Clare on their way past, and stuff like that, but I don’t think ... they didn’t really integrate her” (Macartney, 2012, p. 179). What was highlighted in the study as being important for Clare’s mother was that Clare should be an active member of the learning community, integrated into activities that were of interest to her, and that she learn alongside and with her peers. Her reality, however, was far from this. In contrast, McAnelly and Gaffney (2019) provide a good news story. Tama, who is described as an “autistic boy” (2019, p. 1083), is a fully participating member of his learning community. He has a strong sense of belonging in his setting, making choices, and engaging with others. Teachers have strong relationships with all children, regardless of their individual needs, and aspirations of parents are acknowledged and incorporated. It is clear that presence alone, does not enhance the social development of disabled children (Burstein, 1986; Guralnick & Groom, 1988; Jenkins et al., 1985; Macartney, 2012; McLaughlan et al., 2016). An integrated approach that includes teachers, parents and professionals is required. Teachers need to feel confident in using inclusive and positive language when engaging with disabled children in their care. Indeed, Mentis et al. (2012, as cited in Reynard, 2019) expressed the importance of an "interprofessional approach" (2019, p. 42) to support transition to school for disabled children. Their research focused on two schools where two disabled children were transitioning. Semi-structured interviews with parents, early childhood and new entrant teachers, and other professionals involved with the children were undertaken. Teachers highlighted the importance of an interprofessional approach where everyone involved with the child is included in the transition process. Reynard (2019) found that partnerships, relationships, communication, parental involvement and sharing information all led to successful transition. Supportive teachers, committed parents, and additional supports from outside agencies, contributed to the successful transition of disabled children into the social environment of the school setting. The teachers and parents who were interviewed, all believed that the focus should be on the child. The data also showed, however, there were barriers to inclusion. Teachers and parents highlighted time and funding, continuity of support from early intervention to school focus teams, and inflexibility of the school structure. In Reynard's conclusion, she expressed "inclusion emerged as the overarching theme to a successful transition" (2019, p. 49).

A truly inclusive education setting, therefore, requires dedication and commitment. It is argued attitudes play an important role.

Attitudes

The attitudes of teachers, children and parents can affect the successful inclusion of disabled children. For example, Esposito and Peach (1983), through their research, demonstrated that statistically significant attitude gains were made for both handicapped and non-handicapped preschool children when they were integrated together in the kindergarten for weekly, hourly sessions over a period of 30 weeks. Integration supported positive social interaction which in turn allowed children to display positive attitudes. The research showed that through this intervention, non-handicapped children could "form early, realistic perceptions and attitudes about handicapped people in general" (pp. 362-363). The research in the 1980s focused on the benefits, or otherwise, of integrating disabled children into mainstream classrooms. Ringlaben and Price (1981) specifically researched teacher perceptions of the effects of mainstreaming. They found the vast majority of teachers surveyed were willing to have mainstreamed children in their classrooms, which highlights positive attitudes. Indeed, nearly three-quarters of teachers highlighted either no effect or positive effects on their teaching practice and attitudes towards teaching. No or positive effects were also identified between children, that is, the effect of regular students on mainstreamed students and the effect of mainstreamed students on other students. Although not from a New Zealand context, Noggle and Stites' (2018) research found that typically developing children can, over time, build friendships with disabled peers. Observations between Billy and Michael (child with ASD) took time, had setbacks, and by the end of the school year, Billy demonstrated a positive attitude towards Michael by defending his different ways (Noggle & Stites, 2018). It can be argued, therefore, that the effect of mainstreaming is not detrimental and should be encouraged.

In her research, Baxter (1989) identified parents' perceived attitudes towards the professionals involved in their child's care. She highlighted three parameters – "a helpful attitude", "showing professional interest in their child", and "treating parents with consideration and respect" (1989, p. 261). Conversely, when the perceived attitude was negative the results identified the opposite of these three parameters (showing an unhelpful attitude, being unprofessional towards their child, and not being considerate and respectful to them). Communication was cited as a major factor for parents when determining the positive attitudes they held.

Forty years later, the discourse of rights through social justice is at the forefront of the literature (Lyons, 2014; Macartney, 2012; Macartney & Morton, 2013; McAnelly & Gaffney, 2019; Purdue et al., 2011; Shuker & Cherrington, 2015). For example, Lyons (2014) interviewed managers and teachers to discover their views on inclusion. All participants, bar one, supported the idea of inclusion, believing all children have a right to participate in their early childhood setting. She argued, however, that there was a disconnect between the positive attitudes of teachers, and the actual practice of inclusion, citing a "yes/but discourse" (2014, p. 6). Teachers agree in principle that inclusion is the right thing to do, but there are concerns around additional support children may need, for example, extra resources required and supervision concerns.

Gordon-Burns, Purdue, et al. (2012) discuss how attitudes arise depending on people's discourse of disability. For example, if someone sees disability as a deficit in the child, their attitude would be one of "fixing or treating the impairment" (2012, p. 158). Conversely, disabilities can be considered as being in the environment rather than residing in the child. Attitudes in this sense, see disabled children as "competent and confident" (2012, p. 160) with the same rights as all children, regardless of disability. The attitudes of parents of preschool children hold power within early childhood centres and can be a predictor of whether the centre is inclusionary or exclusionary. For example, Stark et al. (2011) re-examined data from Purdue's 2004 doctoral dissertation to identify "how parents of non-disabled children responded to the attendance and participation of children with disabilities in early childhood settings" (2011, p. 5). The data showed that some parents demonstrated inclusionary attitudes, for example, a parent indicated that a particular child starting was like any other new child starting and didn't think twice about that fact that he had Down Syndrome, this was a new child and a new parent that had the same rights as any other family to belong in this setting. Many parents, however, demonstrated exclusionary attitudes. Exclusionary attitudes expressed by parents of non-disabled children included the view that disabled children were a product of their disability and thus education is not warranted, and concern over the time taken away from their own children as teachers work with disabled children.

As the literature demonstrates, the main difference between the two decades is time. The time in regular classrooms for handicapped children in the 1980s is limited to short weekly sessions (Esposito & Peach, 1983; for example Guralnick & Groom, 1988; Odom et al., 1984), whereas in the 2010s it is common practice for disabled children to attend their local early childhood setting alongside non-disabled children (Berryman & Woller, 2010; Macartney & Morton, 2013; McAnelly & Gaffney, 2019; Moffatt et al., 2016; Reynard, 2019).

Attitude shifts across time, including the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2006), have empowered families to strive for inclusion for their disabled children. Exclusionary attitudes, however, still exist. It is argued that the power to include or exclude resides in the community. Communities with positive attitudes towards including all, come with a mindset of 'let's work together to ensure everyone, regardless of disability, belong in our community'. Barriers to inclusion occur when disabled people are considered inferior to the rest of the community. According to Gordon-Burns, Gunn, et al. (2012, p. 176), "values, attitudes, language and practices act as enablers for or barriers to learning and participation". They also assert that these can change over time.

Where to from here?

As we move into the 2020s we need to remember what has gone before in order to truly see how far we have come. From the 1980s, children were regularly segregated from others, but as the literature demonstrates, research into the benefits of including disabled children in mainstream classes highlighted successes. Successes, however, were considered fleeting as children remained in special classes with only part time integration (for example, Dunlop et al., 1980; Esposito & Peach, 1983; Guralnick, 1980). By the 2010s, success stories from the literature provide hope for a truly inclusive early childhood education system.

From the beginning of the 2010s decade, to the end, we can see a definite difference between the stories of Clare (Macartney, 2012) and Tama (McAnelly & Gaffney, 2019). Although Clare's experience of early childhood (Macartney, 2012) was superficial, this was her only early childhood centre as she was not enrolled in a special setting as well. In contrast, Tama's experience of ECE was one of belonging and acceptance. He was seen as a competent and confident learner (Ministry of Education, 2017), taking risks, leading and working alongside others.

How can early childhood teachers enable a truly inclusive setting? From the literature we can see that children who feel a sense of belonging in their setting are much more likely to experience success (see McAnelly & Gaffney, 2019). That sense of belonging occurs when children can see themselves reflected in the setting, and that they are accepted for who they are. Rietveld (2010), for example, espoused that having dolls, puppets, books etc. showing disabilities in positive ways can enhance inclusion. It is important, however, that teachers promote the positive view of disability through intentional teaching strategies. For example, teachers can play alongside children in the family area with dolls depicting disabilities. As Rietveld suggests "the doll with DS [Down Syndrome] still needs to be cuddled, bathed and fed" (2010, p. 26). Furthermore, the relationships that teachers develop are also considered a predictor of successful inclusion. Through relationships, teachers learn about the children in their care, regardless of whether they are disabled or not. Knowing the child involves working in partnership with whānau (Moffatt et al., 2016) and creating a learning environment that meets the individual needs of each child.

The goal of all early childhood services should be one of inclusion. That is, ensuring all children have the same experiences as Tama has within his setting. Through positive attitudes and focusing on social justice rights of all children, inclusion can be fully realised.

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AUTHOR PROFILE

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Debbie Rickard has been the Regional Education Leader for Te Rito Maioha in the Palmerston North area since 2006. She has been involved in teaching and education for over 30 years, at ECE, primary and tertiary levels. Her passion is for inclusive education, believing that everyone can succeed in a diverse world. This has led to her presenting at numerous disability and inclusion related conferences. Debbie believes in life-long learning and encourages this by supporting people of all ages and backgrounds in the learning environment.

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