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To cite this article: Bernadette Christine Macartney (2012) Teaching through an ethics of belonging, care and obligation as a critical approach to transforming education, International Journal of Inclusive Education, 16:2, 171-183, DOI: [10.1080/13603111003686218](https://doi.org/10.1080/13603111003686218)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603111003686218>



Published online: 16 May 2011.



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Teaching through an ethics of belonging, care and obligation as a critical approach to transforming education

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(Received 12 October 2009; final version received 4 February 2010)

This paper considers the experiences of a New Zealand family and their ‘disabled’ daughter Clare’s ‘inclusion’ and ‘exclusion’ in her early childhood centre and the implications of these experiences for shifting from a discourse of ‘inclusion’ to ‘belonging’ based on ‘an ethics of care and obligation to others’. I argue that the meanings and understandings of ‘inclusion’ for disabled children in education are variable and that they often default to dominant deficit discourses whilst believing themselves to be ‘inclusive’. I also argue that we must consciously develop a critical awareness of how exclusionary power operates in society and in our own settings. In this paper, I present ideas drawn from a ‘pedagogy of listening’ and Te Whaariki – The New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum to critically reflect on some of the early childhood education experiences of Clare and her family. I suggest that teachers’ use of critical reflective ‘child’s questions’ can be used as tools for educational transformation towards the full and meaningful participation of disabled children in education.

Keywords: assessment; curriculum and instruction; disability; inclusive pedagogy; ethics and politics of education

Introduction

This paper begins with the description and discussion of a ‘pedagogy of listening’ as an inclusive, ethical and political approach to teaching and learning. A pedagogy of listening is presented as a transformative alternative to traditional western approaches to education which, it is argued, are based on narrow, individualised and normative images of children and lead to the marginalisation of children and families who do not fit those norms. Drawing from research and literature from New Zealand (Carr 1998, 2001; Carr, May, and Podmore 2001; MOE 1996) and overseas (Dahlberg and Moss 2005; MacNaughton 2005; Rinaldi 2006; Rogoff 2003), I discuss the importance of relationships, meaningful participation and radical dialogue within a socio-cultural and ethics-based approach to education, and the implications of this for pedagogy. I then briefly introduce Te Whaariki – The New Zealand Curriculum (MOE 1996) and the Learning and Teaching Story Framework (Carr, May, and Podmore 2001), which was developed through observing and reflecting on Te Whaariki ‘in action’ within New Zealand early childhood centres. I discuss how this Framework could provide a starting place for transforming educational pedagogy in ways that increase the learning,

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involvement and participation of disabled children and their families in education. I interpret and critique the early childhood centre experiences of Clare, a disabled child, and her mother Fran, using the concept of ‘belonging’ which, according to a ‘pedagogy of listening’ and Te Whaariki, is central to experiencing and creating an inclusive learning environment. I argue that noticing exclusion and consequently removing barriers to inclusion requires conscious, ongoing and critical reflection on the part of teachers and others involved in education. In reflecting on Fran and Clare’s experiences, I give and discuss some examples of how and why exclusion is maintained even when teachers appear to be operating from a belief that their practices are inclusive and consider how listening-oriented pedagogies might support us to transform our practices and settings in ways that encourage inclusion and belonging.

A pedagogy of listening: an ethical and political approach to education

Dahlberg and Moss (2005) argue that, consistent with a socio-cultural approach to learning and teaching, ethics and education should be understood as localised, shifting and changing in response to and in relationship with particular groups of people in time, space and place. They suggest that pre-schools as social and cultural institutions: ‘can be understood, first and foremost as forums, spaces or sites for ethical and political practice – as “loci of ethical practices” and “minor politics”’ (Dahlberg and Moss 2005, 2). This view acknowledges that power relations exist and are played out within educational settings. Furthermore, the workings of power are influential in terms of their effects on children’s learning, participation and inclusion. Rather than believing that educational settings function in a ‘neutral’ fashion, it is suggested that they operate in ways that reproduce and/or resist inequality and exclusion (Macartney 2008; MacNaughton 2005; Moss and Petrie 2002; Rinaldi 2006). Practices underpinned by a belief in the ‘neutrality’ of education do nothing to challenge unequal power relations and thus reproduce exclusion. Dominant power relations marginalise minoritised groups in society through viewing and positioning them as ‘other’ in relation to expectations of acceptable behaviour, beliefs, appearance and indicators or markers of what is ‘normal’ (Bishop, Mazawi, and Shields 2005). The ‘other’ is expected to conform to the dominant group’s set of universal ethics, rules, norms, values, codes and dominant understandings whilst the dominant group continue to benefit from society operating according to their ways of thinking and being.

Underpinning a ‘pedagogy of listening’ is an ethical and moral commitment to every child’s right to be valued, accepted, exercise agency, contribute, learn, fully participate and belong (Dahlberg and Moss 2005; MOE 1996). A pedagogy of listening argues that teachers must consciously work from an ethics of care and obligation to ‘others’, rather than unconsciously supporting and reinforcing practices that privilege the status quo and place anything that does not fit at the margins. Dahlberg and Moss (in Rinaldi 2006, 15) suggest that an approach to teaching and learning based on a ‘pedagogy of listening’ creates a space where:

Politics and ethics come together in an approach to education which rejects the regulatory bonds of developmental classifications and education as transmission and normative outcomes, and which emphasises the importance of otherness and difference, connectedness and relationships.

Central to a pedagogy of listening is the active rejection of universal, normative, developmental images of ‘the child’ and education, in preference for a socio-cultural

view of education that recognises and is comfortable with the complexity, diversity and uncertainties within social systems as they are lived out and experienced on a local level, in particular contexts.

Rather than ignoring and marginalising difference, viewing ethics and politics/power as central to education involves recognising and responding to the diversity and complexities that exist within education and society (Robinson and Jones Diaz 1999). A pedagogy of listening involves an orientation to teaching and learning that expects, encourages, invites and embraces diversity, difference, ambiguity and uncertainty. Recognising and valuing diversity contrasts with deficit pedagogies that are based on a predetermined, universal body of knowledge that privileges one way of being and enshrines it as the 'norm' (Macartney 2008). Rinaldi (2006, 70) describes 'listening' as a social and relational process in which the expectations and behaviours of teachers towards children are 'orientative' and responsive, rather than predetermined and prescriptive. In order to orient themselves through their teaching, Rinaldi (2006) suggests that teachers analyse and interpret children's lived experiences from an open, curious and questioning stance. This orientation is in contrast to teachers perceiving themselves to be the experts and knowers in regards to children's learning, aspirations and participation.

Teaching through a pedagogy of listening involves being alert to voices, perspectives and ways of being that are outside of our usual and taken-for-granted ways of being in, understanding and experiencing the world. Dahlberg and Moss (2005) suggest that, although we cannot grasp or know others in the same ways that we know and experience ourselves and those similar to us, we have an ethical obligation to recognise, respect, engage with and learn from difference and diversity in our work and lives. Respectful engagement involves acknowledging the limits of our ability to fully understand the other, at the same time as fulfilling our obligations to listen and respond in ways that do not ignore and override the experiences, rights and needs of people who we perceive to be different from ourselves. Practice based on an ethics of care and obligation to the other includes actively resisting exclusion and dismantling barriers to others' learning, participation and inclusion as a central role of teachers (Dahlberg and Moss 2005; MacNaughton 2005; Robinson and Jones Diaz 1999).

Both Margaret Carr (2001), a New Zealand curriculum and assessment researcher and one of the key authors of *Te Whaariki – The New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum* (MOE 1996), and Carlina Rinaldi (2006), an early childhood theorist and practitioner from Italy, emphasise the transformative nature and potential of education and learning within socio-cultural contexts. Drawing primarily from Barbara Rogoff's (2003) argument that learning and development are relational processes of cultural co-construction, Carr (2001) and Rogoff (2003) describe learning and development as the 'transformation of participation'. Learning as the transformation of participation involves a view of learning (and teaching) as being produced and constructed by children and adults engaged within a community of learners. This contrasts with traditional western views of the content and process of learning as universal, predictable and received by passive individuals and teaching as the transmission of skills and knowledge by more able and expert others. Within traditional views, the lived, relational context is of secondary importance to the emphasis on fixed, predetermined expectations of learners as individuals (Carr 2001). In contrast to universal and individualising views of learning and development, Rogoff (2003, 52) argues that:

Rather than individual development being influenced by (and influencing) culture ... people develop as they participate in and contribute to cultural activities that themselves develop with the involvement of people in successive generations ... As people develop through their shared use of cultural tools and practices, they simultaneously contribute to the transformation of cultural tools, practices and institutions.

Carr (2001) argues that an implication for teachers of a socio-cultural approach to learning and assessment is that learning is understood and interpreted through teachers noticing, recognising and responding to children's (and teachers) active participation, their 'learning in action' within their particular relational and cultural educational setting (Carr, May, and Podmore 2001).

Rinaldi (2006) also speaks to the importance of transforming participation as learning when she emphasises the role of dialogue and interdependence in her view of learning and education as processes of social co-construction. Her explanation of 'dialogue' includes:

Having a capacity for transformation ... It is an idea of dialogue not as an exchange but as a process of transformation where you lose absolutely the possibility of controlling the final result. (Rinaldi 2006, 184)

Therefore, learning and the construction of knowledge are viewed as being embedded within an interrelational context that has the potential to transform meaning and action (Carr 2001; MOE 1996; Rinaldi 2006).

Dahlberg and Moss (2005, 101) discuss a pedagogy of listening in relation to its overt commitment to opening up a 'radical dialogue' amongst adults and children who are connected through a shared learning space and community. They suggest that what is radical about the dialogue that occurs within a context of a pedagogy of listening is the absence of the teacher as the expert knower:

In radical dialogue, based on listening, as a teacher you have to participate together with the child, entering a space together where both teacher and child are actively listening and trying to construct meaning out of the situation. (Dahlberg and Moss 2005, 101)

When suspending and/or bringing our preconceived understandings of learning, knowledge and participation into question, we can act and respond towards others in less predetermined and restrictive ways (MacNaughton 2005). Our responses towards others should include noticing and valuing our differences and consciously identifying, challenging and removing barriers to children's learning, contributions and participation. An approach to understanding and responding to learning as the transformation of participation 'in action' and the opportunities this presents for recognising diversity and empowering children and their families come from New Zealand research and writing based on *Te Whaariki – The New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum* (Carr 1998, 2001; Carr, May, and Podmore 2001; MOE 1996).

A pedagogy of listening and *Te Whaariki – The New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum*

Te Whaariki – The New Zealand Curriculum

The New Zealand National Early Childhood Curriculum (MOE 1996) was developed and written over the early to mid-1990s through wide and ongoing

consultation with New Zealand early childhood practitioners, researchers and the diverse range of services and organisations that make up early childhood education in Aotearoa – New Zealand (Carr and May 2000). A central aim of the curriculum writing project was for the curriculum document to retain, recognise and celebrate the diverse approaches and philosophies of early childhood services and the communities that they serve (Carr and May 2000). The non-prescriptive nature of Te Whaariki and its attempt to incorporate and combine diverse, and sometimes incompatible, theories of learning and development have been both praised and criticised within the field of early childhood education (Cullen 2003; Flear 2003). Of particular note and importance was the development of Te Whaariki as a bi-cultural and bilingual document that would reflect the dual cultural heritage of our nation and seek to acknowledge and uphold the culture and particular status of Māori as the indigenous people of our nation. Growing from the early partnership and collaboration between the Māori and Pakeha (New Zealanders of European descent) writers and extensive consultation within and between these cultural communities, the document was written and published in English and te reo Māori (Māori language). The document communicates and is based on key cultural concepts and norms from each culture. In this regard, the English and te reo Māori texts, which are contained within the one document, are not direct translations of each other, but rather, they represent the two different cultural world views (Carr and May 2000; Reedy 2003). For example, the principles and strands that underpin the curriculum are written in both English and te reo Māori in the document with the intention of reflecting and respecting the cultural aspirations, meanings and values of each culture, whilst also requiring the mainstream or Pakeha culture to engage with and uphold Māori cultural values, self-determination and aspirations through the early childhood curriculum (Ritchie 2003).

The principles and strands of Te Whaariki

The principles and strands of Te Whaariki (MOE 1996) communicate the ethical obligations of early childhood educators towards the young people and families we are working with in early childhood education settings. In particular, the curriculum principles require teachers to: recognise and foster the empowerment of young children as they learn and grow; practise in ways that reflect a holistic understanding of children's learning; acknowledge the integral place of the wider world, community and family in children's learning and participation in early childhood education; and view learning as an intersubjective process where children: 'learn through responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places and things' (MOE 1996, 14). The curriculum strands represent broad goals focusing on infants, toddlers and young children experiencing a sense of belonging and well-being, as being engaged in active exploration, as having and developing diverse ways to communicate and express themselves, and as having their contributions valued and developing a sense of responsibility towards others.

Te Whaariki as a framework for understanding and responding to learning and participation

After observing, talking with and listening to the narratives of children, families and teachers engaged with Te Whaariki – The New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum

in action across a variety of early childhood education settings, Margaret Carr identified five ‘features of participation’ (2001, 176) that she suggested could be used as a lens for understanding, interpreting and responding to children’s learning and participation in New Zealand early childhood education settings. These features of participation, or ‘learning dispositions’, focus on infants, toddlers and young children: ‘taking an interest’, ‘being involved’, ‘persisting with difficulty’, ‘communicating with others’ and ‘taking responsibility’ within their early childhood setting (Carr 1998, 2001, 176). Building on these key features of children’s participation and ‘learning in action’, Carr, May, and Podmore (2001, 3) further developed a Te Whaariki-based ‘Learning and Teaching Story Framework’ for teacher reflection, assessment and planning in New Zealand early childhood education services. Underpinned by the curriculum principles, and starting with the strands, the Framework summarises the broad aims for children and what these might look like ‘in action’ in the form of learning dispositions or ‘features of participation’. Alongside each strand and disposition are starting places for teachers to critically engage with the curriculum in the form of a series of reflective questions. The reflective questions were designed as a tool to help attune teachers to the voices, experiences and perspectives of children and families. A particular feature of each question is that they are posed from the perspective of the child. The curriculum writers and researchers suggested that the Framework, including the child’s questions, could be useful as a starting place for assessing children’s learning and participation and evaluating teacher’s practices and the environment (Carr 2001; Carr, May, and Podmore 2001). Each ‘child’s question’ has a long and short form. I believe that this work and the features of participation that were observed in a range of early childhood settings provide a possible lens for teachers to use when listening and responding to children’s learning, participation and their experiences of inclusion and exclusion. What is significant about this work is that it provides a possible starting place and impetus for transforming pedagogy from a developmental and universalised view of learning and teaching to an acknowledgement of the possibilities for radical dialogue, transformation and recognition of diversity within specific contexts. The Learning and Teaching Story Framework is presented in Table 1.

A brief background to the research

The data discussed in the next section come from my PhD research which sought and documented the narratives of two families about their experiences of parenting and living with a young disabled child. Each family engaged in a series of semi-structured interviews over a one-year period. In the remainder of this paper, I present excerpts of data related to one of the families. The focus is on Fran her ‘disabled’ daughter Clare and their experiences in an early childhood education centre. I use the Learning and Teaching Story Framework, in particular, the ‘Belonging – Mana Whenua’ strand, the associated ‘child’s question – Do you know me?’ – and a listening orientation of openness and sensitivity towards the other, as critical lenses for interpreting the social construction of Clare’s learning and participation in her educational setting. My purpose is to uncover and make problematic the effects of deficit pedagogical practices and understandings which marginalise and ignore the experiences and voices of particular groups of children, in this instance, a child who is constructed as being ‘disabled’, and therefore, ‘Other’ (MOE 1996).

Table 1. The Learning and Teaching Story Framework.

Curriculum strand		Features of participation	Long question	Short question
<i>Belonging – Mana Whenua</i>	Children and their families feel a sense of belonging	Taking an interest	Do you appreciate and understand my interests and abilities and those of my family?	Do you know me?
<i>Well-being – Mana Atua</i>	The health and well-being of the child are protected and nurtured	Being involved	Do you meet my daily needs with care and sensitive consideration?	Can I trust you?
<i>Exploration – Mana Aotuiroa</i>	The child learns through active exploration of the environment	Persisting with difficulty, challenge and uncertainty	Do you engage my mind, offer challenges and extend my world?	Do you let me fly?
<i>Communication – Mana Reo</i>	The language and symbols of their own and other cultures are promoted and protected	Expressing a point of view or feeling	Do you invite me to communicate and respond to my own particular efforts?	Do you hear me?
<i>Contribution – Mana Tangata</i>	Opportunities for learning are equitable, and each child's contribution is valued	Empathising with others Taking responsibility	Do you encourage and facilitate my endeavours to be part of the wider group?	Is this place fair? Is there a place for me here?

Source: Carr, May, and Podmore (2001).

'If you don't know her, she can't talk ...': Fran and Clare's experiences in early childhood education

The quotation I have used from Fran about Clare – 'If you don't know her, she can't talk' – in the heading to this section is particularly relevant to this discussion because it addresses the issue of what 'knowing' is and why 'knowing' a child is so important for their learning, sense of belonging and participation. Below is an explanation from my interviews with Fran of the story behind the quotation.

During our first interview, Fran told me a story about a professional (midwife) that had made incorrect assumptions about Clare's ability to communicate based on her informal observations of Clare during a meeting with Fran. Fran met with the midwife to ask her to support her wish to have specialist input for her pregnancy with her next child. She needed the midwife to refer her to a specialist. The midwife wrote in her report to the specialist that Clare was not able to talk or communicate verbally. Fran disagreed with the midwife's assessment saying that during the visit Clare was busy observing and taking in the new environment. Fran believed that Clare did not talk during the visit because she did not have a relationship with the midwife and the setting was unfamiliar. Fran's comment in response to the midwife's assumption that Clare could not talk was:

If you don't know her (Clare), she can't talk.

To me, this statement is powerful because it suggests, as does Te Whaariki and a pedagogy of listening, that learning and behaviour are interactive and social, not isolated and individual processes of performance. It also indicates the power that adults have and use in relation to children and the responsibility we need to take for checking out our assumptions and engaging in more meaningful and radical dialogue regarding our perceptions of children's learning and participation.

Crossroads Childcare Centre

When she was two years old, Clare began attending Crossroads Childcare Centre (this is a pseudonym) one morning a week. An education support worker (ESW) was employed by Clare's Early Intervention Service (EIS) for the time Clare was in the centre. However, the EIS did not employ the ESW during the school holidays and the centre would not accept Clare attending without an additional adult, so Fran would accompany Clare to the centre during the school holidays and stay with her during the time she was booked in for. Although the centre would not allow Clare to attend without an additional adult, they expected Fran to pay for Clare's space when the ESW was not employed during the school holidays.

In reference to Clare starting to attend Crossroads Childcare Centre Fran said:

And when she first started there she didn't even know that other children existed, really. She was none the wiser to what was going on around her; she just sat, really ... They had their mat time, as most places do, I suppose, and they had songs, morning tea and – play lunch, but it was all free play, there was nothing structured about it, and she learnt – she actually ... she was like a little flower, I suppose. She sort of opened up a little bit and realized there was other children around her, from there. That was good.

Fran saw lots of value in Clare spending time with and around other children, although she would have preferred for the centre to have more 'structure'. Fran was perhaps indicating that the 'free play' approach used by the centre did not respond as well to Clare's learning and participation as it may have for other children in the setting. However, Fran noticed and was excited by Clare's interest in other children and in what was going on 'around' her.

Individual Education Planning (IEP) meetings were held regularly to discuss Clare's learning and participation at Crossroads Childcare Centre. These meetings were arranged, facilitated and hosted by the EIS at their workplace rather than at the childcare centre. In reference to the Head Teacher from Crossroads being involved in IEP for Clare, Fran said:

The Head Teacher used to have to come to our IEP meetings in her lunch hour. She'd sit and eat her lunch and she'd come and that was great, but the teachers never actually took Clare off the teacher aide.

Fran was troubled by the lack of interest from the centre teaching staff in spending any time with Clare without the presence of the ESW or herself. When Fran attended the centre with Clare during the school holidays, her experience was that:

I used to end up sitting, like on a wet day I'd be sitting in the corner with Clare and five other children. And the teachers who were going past would say: 'Oh, you're great! You should come every week!' But they never thought to take Clare off me.

I asked Fran if she felt that the centre staff and teachers had developed meaningful relationships with Clare. Fran responded:

Not really. I mean, they were all great, and said: 'Hello'. Yeah and they'd speak to Clare on their way past, and stuff like that, but I don't think ... they didn't really integrate her ... you know, it never crossed their mind – I suppose it could have been my fault, but then I'm quite a naive, new mother, but then it never crossed their mind to take her off the teacher aide, never.

I asked Fran what the Head Teacher from the pre-school and the early intervention staff talked about at the IEP meetings. In reference to the teacher Fran said she talked about:

What the other children were doing around her (Clare), and Clare becoming more part of the centre.

Do you know me? Relationships as fundamental to teaching and learning

The longer version of the reflective question, 'Do you know me?', is 'Do you appreciate and understand my interests and abilities and those of my family?' (Carr, May, and Podmore 2001). This question is associated with the strand and experience of 'Belonging'. It is assumed that a foundation of learning is for children to feel that they belong in the centre and that the adults in the setting must know, understand and appreciate the child and their family for a sense of belonging to grow. Carr (2001) suggests that a child experiencing a sense of belonging and well-being is reflected in their taking an interest in the people, places and things in their environment and becoming involved in the relationships, happenings and life of the centre. Fran had indicated that Clare was very interested in what was happening in the centre, particularly in the existence and activity of the children around her. However, the teacher's behaviour towards Clare in the centre did not indicate an awareness that they had a responsibility or obligation to get to know her or her family or to support interactions between Clare and her peers.

Clare's ability to develop a sense of belonging in the centre was also influenced by her attendance for only half-a-day each week. Fran based her 'choice' about the number of hours that Clare was enrolled for on the recommendation and funding that had been provided by the EIS for an ESW for Clare. Had Fran not spent the mornings during school holidays at the centre with Clare, the number of hours Clare attended would have been even less. The teacher's actions, and Fran's description of what was happening, indicated that the teachers saw Clare as being the responsibility of someone else – her ESW and her parent when the ESW was not present. In this way, Clare's perceived differences, her 'otherness', became a reason for teachers not to get to know her or to see it as their role to include her, even partially, in the key relationships and life of the centre. This is particularly troubling in relation to the importance that Fran placed on Clare's need to know someone before she is willing, ready and able to communicate to the best of her ability with them and the emphasis that the curriculum places on reciprocal relationships. What appears to have been absent in this situation was an awareness, and therefore consideration, of the connections between the teachers' beliefs about disability and difference, their practices and the exclusionary impacts that these had on Clare and Fran's participation and belonging within the centre. Without a 'listening orientation' based on a sense of obligation to and ethical

responsibility for ‘the other’ any consideration of how power was operating in exclusionary ways was missing and obscured by an unquestioned adherence to deficit views of difference.

The ability to develop and experience a sense of belonging relies on the nurturing of meaningful connections and relationships within the setting and on opportunities being available for the child to contribute to, interact with and influence their environment (MOE 1996). It is interesting to note that Clare’s isolation from others was allowed to occur and continue even when a focus or goal discussed at IEP meetings was for her to become more part of the centre. It seems that Fran and Clare’s voices and experiences were not sought, noticed or heard in these planning discussions and in the reflection of adults on their teaching and environment.

Given that the staff did not make an effort to get to know or include Clare in the life of the centre, in addition to the question, ‘Do you know me?’ – I would ask further questions to explore the dynamics of this situation and its implications for Clare’s learning and participation. For example, given that the teachers *did not* seem to know Clare, I would ask: ‘Do you *want* to know me?’, ‘Why don’t you want to know me?’ and ‘Why do you say you want to know me and for me to be part of the centre, and then do nothing different to encourage my participation and connections with others?’

Without responsive, reciprocal relationships between a child and her family, her teachers and her peers, the possibilities for positive learning and participation within a context are greatly diminished. In the absence of teachers taking responsibility for developing a relationship with a child, the answers to the questions – Do you know me?, Can I trust you?, Do you let me fly?, Do you hear me?, Is there a place for me here? – must be no.

Being positioned as Other: barriers to inclusion and belonging

Te Whaariki (MOE 1996), a pedagogy of listening (Dahlberg and Moss 2005; Rinaldi 2006), and laws and policies governing education (New Zealand Government 1989) and human rights (Minister for Disability Issues 2001; New Zealand Government 1993) in New Zealand assert the right of *every* child to be valued, participate, learn with and alongside others and to experience belonging in their educational settings and society. However, the existence and dissemination of laws, official documents, policies and pedagogies that support inclusive and human rights responses to disability and education do not guarantee the radical transformation of practices and settings that are called for and, in many cases, required. There are a number of beliefs and assumptions consistent with deficit views of disability and difference that may have acted as barriers to the teachers viewing Clare as a full member of the centre community and in fulfilling their responsibility and obligation to get to know Clare and plan for her meaningful involvement and learning.

It is likely that Clare’s exclusion and marginalisation within her early childhood centre was underpinned by a belief that children fit into the categories of ‘normal’ or ‘abnormal’, coupled with the assumption that being abnormal or ‘other’ is a ‘problem’, and a belief that ‘abnormal’ children require the ‘expert’ intervention of special educationalists to help ‘fix’ their ‘problems’ (Oliver 1996). Within a deficit view, ‘disability’ is interpreted as an individual issue, and, therefore, it is easy to assume that it is a child’s deviation or ‘problem’ that limits their participation rather considering the disabling influences within their physical, cultural and social environment (Hehir 2002). In terms of what ‘knowing’ the child involves, it can be argued that often it is

a child's disability that is assumed to be their most important and defining characteristic (Barnes, Mercer, and Shakespeare 1999; Fulcher 1989). When teachers believe that a child's defining characteristic is their deviation from a narrowly constructed ideal of what is 'normal' and desirable in a learner, they will invariably treat the child and interpret the child's behaviour in terms of their differences and 'deficits'. When there is an adherence to and privileging of the 'norm', teachers may believe that the skills and knowledge required to teach and respond to 'special' children are different from the skills and knowledge that they possess as a 'general' teacher (Macartney 2007, 2008). In this situation, teachers may abdicate their primary responsibility for developing a relationship with and responding to the learning of a disabled child to others who they view and position as 'experts' in what is perceived and constructed as 'special education' (MacArthur, Dight, and Purdue 2000). The conceptual and practical separation of 'normal'/'not special' and 'not normal'/'special' children casts disabled children as 'other' and leads to exclusion such as that experienced by Clare and Fran in their early childhood centre.

It appears that in this setting, the early intervention and teaching staff saw Clare's 'inclusion' and 'participation' as being fulfilled through her part-time physical presence in the centre and that they felt unable or unwilling to respond to her learning and participation beyond this limited view of 'inclusion' as equating with physical presence. Furthermore, a working definition of inclusion as mere physical presence also included the expectation that Clare would 'fit in to existing arrangements'. However, the 'existing arrangements' that Clare was expected to fit into were based on a 'free play' approach to curriculum and an image of the child as an independent explorer. These arrangements may have worked better for Clare if she was physically able to move independently around the centre, which she was not.

Conclusion

Assuming that all children experience an 'inclusive' curriculum because we believe that we value all children, without acknowledging exclusionary power relations and critically listening to diverse and contradictory voices, closes us to the perspectives and information we need to critique and question our practices, attitudes, knowledge and beliefs. The potential disjuncture between our espoused philosophies and beliefs and some of the assumptions that actually guide our practice should be of serious concern and interest to us as teachers, parents and a society. Teacher reflection and radical dialogue such as that encouraged by using reflective questioning and a listening-oriented pedagogy may provide a pathway for teachers to recognise and work within the space between the teacher and the other. A listening orientation involving curiosity, openness and sensitivity to difference, diversity and the unexpected could support teachers to view and consider children's experiences from the child's position and perspective. Thus, teachers would be in a better position to recognise and respond to what is happening within their context in ways that include and encourage belonging rather than continuing to operate according to assumptions and beliefs that serve to exclude and marginalise particular groups of children.

Notes on contributor

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