

Early Childhood Australia Conference 2008

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WHAT NEXT?

The purpose of this workshop is to examine the findings identified in current research in relation to inclusion and quality care.

These findings will be explored in the context of the legal and ethical framework within which Australian children's services operate. Both research and the operational and philosophical framework will form the lens through which stories will be given describing practical examples of what inclusion and high quality care looks like for children and early childhood professionals.

The workshop will give participants the opportunity to make links between research, legal and ethical obligations and high quality, inclusive practice.

If children's services are already meeting all the requirements for provision of early childhood care and education, then what comes next?

Introduction

Picture this scenario...

Looking through the lens of what we know as the framework for children's services in Australia, we meet a local children's centre...

This is a children's service which strives to meet all its legal obligations in relation to the care of the children and operation of a service. Their philosophy and policy relating to inclusion maintain that all children are welcome and treated equally and with respect. They participate in NCAC Quality Assurance with plans to continually improve the quality of care offered and are meeting quality indicators at a spot check visit. The staff are all individual members of ECA and reflect deeply on their work, using the Code of Ethics as a framework and professional guide for their understanding and actions. The children's service recently worked together with their local Inclusion Support Facilitator to prepare an AIR (Assisted Inclusion Readiness) Plan.

Children at the service have been observed engaging with the program, and staff and families share their joy in the children's growth and development. Children at the centre are regularly heard talking about "my centre" and families often get together on weekends. There is a sense of belonging amongst the children's service community.

Yet, recently there have been a few challenges for this children's centre...

A new child was recently enrolled in the preschool room. He seems interested in toy cars, the sandpit, light switches and doors! However, most of the other children in the room spend a great deal of time in group play, chatting and interacting though pretend play and negotiating roles and responsibilities.

Also, the children's service is located in an area with quite a diverse community – there is a large indigenous population in their town, and increasingly, there are many newly arrived refugee families.

This community diversity is not reflected in their own children's service community.

They know that inclusion means more than access. A sense of belonging and opportunity for participation is also vital.

What next for this children's service which cherishes their children?

What is the context for children's services in Australia and what comes next?

1. Recap the context for children's services in Australia

Children's Services in Australia operate currently within a legislative and ethical framework with the aim of ensuring the well-being of children and working towards program quality.

As will be outlined soon, research is clear that high quality programs are the vital basis for inclusion.

Legislation such as the Children's Services Act and Regulations (Victoria) expresses the expectation that children's programs will meet individual developmental and cultural needs and be responsive to individual differences – and that children's safety, security and hygiene needs are catered for. The Health Act, the Occupational Health and Safety Act, the Disability Discrimination Act and other legislation impact on the operation of children's services.

COAG (the Council of Australian Governments) has in August this year released the discussion paper "A national framework for early childhood and care", working towards a national approach aiming to enhance the learning and developmental outcomes for all children prior to school.

Australia is a signatory to both the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (the latter ratified by Australia July 08).

The Victorian Government has recently (2007) adopted the Victorian Charter of Human Rights.

Early Childhood Australia's revised Code of Ethics is an aspirational document, guiding early childhood professionals towards continual learning, and reflective and responsive approaches demonstrating best practice with children and their families.

The National Child Care Accreditation Council supports children's services to work towards continual quality improvement. Australia is the only country in the world where, although

voluntary, the Government links participation in quality assurance with the receipt of Child Care Benefit.

The Commonwealth Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) funds the Inclusion and Professional Support Program.

FaHCSIA has outlined key characteristics of inclusive child care settings for children, including:

- Partnerships with families and extended networks
- Building on the strengths of the child care community (children, families, staff and community)
- Flexible programming approaches responsive to individual needs
- Respecting and responding to families' cultural values, needs and circumstances
- Providing welcoming, engaging environments responsive to all children and families
- Creating links through networking with other relevant services and supports

What does research say and

what comes next?

2. What does research say about inclusion?

National Professional Development Center on Inclusion (2007)

- A single definition of inclusion does not exist
- Children in inclusive programs generally do at least as well as children in specialized programs
- Inclusion can benefit children with and without disabilities, particularly with respect to their social development
- A variety of factors such as policies, resources and beliefs influence acceptance and implementation of inclusion
- Specialized instruction is an important component of inclusion and a factor affecting child outcomes
- Collaboration among parents, staff and specialists is a cornerstone of high quality inclusion
- Families of children with disabilities generally view inclusion favourably, although some families express concern about the quality of programs and services
- Quality of early childhood programs that enrol young children with disabilities is as good as, or slightly better than the quality of programs that do not enrol these children

Odom (Ed.)(2002)

- Inclusion is about belonging and participating in a diverse society
- Stakeholders, parents, teachers, therapists and administrators define inclusion differently
- Beliefs about inclusion influence its implementation
- Programs, not children have to be “ready” for inclusion
- Collaboration is the cornerstone of effective inclusive programs
- Specialized instruction is an important component of inclusion
- Adequate support is necessary to make inclusive environments work
- inclusion can benefit children with and without disabilities

Recent research findings:

Partnerships for Inclusion, Nova Scotia, (2008)

- “the factors that enabled and limited positive changes in program quality, inclusion quality and inclusion capacity reflected both sides of the same underlying aspects within centres”
- Positive/negative influences included:
 - Leadership support for quality and inclusion
 - Attitudes of staff and receptiveness to change
 - Knowledge, skills and understanding of staff and how these apply to curriculum development, activity planning and interactions with children
- Operational/systemic factors – staff turnover, funding, resources

Noah’s Ark projects learnings, 2007-2008

- we are often so busy “doing” that we don’t take time to reflect deeply on our practice and identify areas where we need to develop further understanding or provide further support, based on research findings and our own experiences in our own setting
- Noah’s Ark projects are providing us with an opportunity to do this action research and reflection
- Findings to date:
 - Barriers and challenges to inclusion included attitudes (of families and of early childhood professionals), lack of effective teamwork and operational/systemic challenges, such as staffing, funding and resources
 - Facilitators of inclusion included positive, celebratory attitudes towards diversity and inclusion, programming based on strengths of both individuals and the families and communities in which children grow and develop, effective collaboration between families, staff teams and specialists, and support for services, both through capacity-building, strength-based approach by supports such as Inclusion Support Facilitators and Inclusion and Professional Support Program, and through operational/systemic support

3.

Participants in the workshop will have the opportunity to discuss and document their responses to the earlier story about a local children's centre with regard to potential barriers or challenges to inclusion and facilitators of inclusion.

Together, participants will explore their responses through the lens of what research says about how we may address barriers and meet the challenges, and what inclusion may look like in practice.

How do we meet these challenges?

Meeting the challenges will be considered through two different perspectives – looking at approaches to programming and collaboration.

Programming approaches:

- attitudes, beliefs and expectations upon which programming is based
 - o it is important to reflect honestly and deeply on beliefs and expectations and commit towards respect for diversity and valuing the uniqueness and strengths of each person
 - o we may need to question if the child or the staff is seen as the barrier
 - o we need to honour the rights of each child
- skills are needed in embedding effective approaches towards meeting individual needs and social outcomes for children into group context of routines and play experiences
 - o planning flexibly to build on the strengths and interests of individuals within the group context through responding to careful observations and documentation of children's natural play and interests(Odom,etal, 2004, Dekleyn & Odom,, 1989, Guralnick, 1988, 2001)
- actively support full participation of children with disabilities
 - o "celebration of our differences and recognition of the common ground that binds us together as human beings can be used to teach the value of social inclusion" (Gordon, 2005)
 - o role-modelling, prompting and acknowledgement are often effective approaches to increasing peer interactions and social inclusion (Center on the social and emotional foundations of early learning, USA,2005)
- support teamwork approach rather than reliance on an additional staff member hovering over a child – this teamwork approach is necessary for effective social inclusion

- “a teamwork approach impacts positively on the inclusion of a child with high ongoing support needs, creating benefits for all of the children and staff at the service”
- “all staff have a responsibility to become familiar with each child involved in the service, getting to know and provide for their individual interests, abilities and needs. All staff have a responsibility to develop a nurturing, caring relationship with each child, supporting children’s development and creating an environment where the active participation of all children is possible “(Brien, 2008)
- demonstrate celebratory attitudes towards creatively building on the interests and strengths of all children

Collaboration

- collaboration between families, early childhood professionals and specialist staff is vital for inclusion
- the concept of family centred practice is strongly embedded in the framework of ethical standards within which Australian children’s services operate
 - ECA Code of Ethics identifies the need for developing partnerships with families and engaging in shared decision-making about their children.
- valuing families as decision-makers about their child’s development and well-being is a key characteristic of effective collaboration
- there needs to be strong and consistent cooperation and collaboration between early childhood professionals and specialist staff, aimed at supporting the well-being of children with disabilities within the context of their families and communities
 - this involves respect for the contribution, strengths and understandings of each person, time made for communication and sharing (Odom et al, 2002 & 2004)

Conclusion

Implications for practice:

- Australian early childhood services operate within the framework of legislative and ethical standards as they work towards the provision of high quality care which supports children’s well-being within early childhood services and their community
- Effective practice needs to be both informed by current research and reflective of the legal and ethical framework within which Australian professionals in children’s service operate.

- Skills are needed in embedding effective approaches towards meeting individual needs and social outcomes for children into the group context of routines and play experiences.
- Programming approaches which actively support the full participation of children with disabilities, and which demonstrate positive, celebratory attitudes towards creatively building on the interests and strengths of all children may be indicators of effective inclusion and high quality care.
- The need is clearly identified for developing partnerships with families and engaging in shared decision-making about their children – valuing families as decision-makers about their child’s development and well-being is a key characteristic of effective collaboration.
- There needs to be strong and consistent cooperation and collaboration between early childhood professionals and specialist staff, aimed at supporting the well-being of children with disabilities within the context of their families and communities.

Looking at inclusion through the lens of stories, research and the current legal and ethical framework in which Australian children’s services operate, highlights that inclusive practice is high quality practice. “High quality and inclusive practice go hand in hand” (Voogt, 2008).

However, both quality and inclusion are not finite concepts. Inclusion is not just a set of “inclusive practices” or a particular “inclusive philosophy”. Rather, inclusion is a process, a way of being...

“Inclusion will always be “unfinished business” because it is about the responsiveness of the setting to the inevitable and valuable diversity of the community” (Corbett & Slee, 2000).

“What next?”

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Useful resources:

Quality Assurance www.ncac.gov.au

Noah's Ark www.noahsarkinc.org.au

Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs www.facs.gov.au

Early Childhood Australia www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child www.unicef.org/crc

United Nation Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
www.un.org/disabilities