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Addressing ableism in education

Inclusive education is about everyone learning, growing and flourishing – **together** – in all our diversity. Inclusive education recognises **the right of every child and young person** – without exception – to be included in general education settings. It involves adapting the environment and teaching approaches to ensure genuine and valued full participation of all children and young people. It embraces human diversity and welcomes all as **equal** members of an educational community.



Ableism is a term increasingly used to describe the process by which people are excluded, viewed and treated as ‘not one of us’. Ableism is used in the same way as ‘racism’ and ‘sexism’ to describe the process of negatively stereotyping individuals or groups on the basis of a perceived ‘difference’ and, often, discriminating based on such stereotypes at individual and systemic levels.

Barriers to inclusive education prevent children and young people who experience disability from learning and participating fully, with far-reaching and lifelong implications. Major barriers include negative attitudes and stigma around ‘difference’ and ‘disability’, inadequate education and professional development for teachers and specialist support staff, and systemic barriers, such as inadequate funding and support from education authorities. Underpinning these barriers is ongoing ableism.

Overcoming ableist attitudes

There continues to be considerable discussion of the potential of education to bring about social change, with emphasis placed on the importance of working with children, from an early age onwards, to break the cycle of entrenched ableism. However, if adults have not examined their own attitudes and practices, they are likely to perpetuate that cycle and ultimately prevent inclusive education being realised.

Children and young people’s attitudes and choices are shaped significantly by the attitudes of their family and community. There is also a growing body of research demonstrating **the importance of teacher attitudes**. Research finds that positive teacher attitudes are a key to inclusive practice, creating the necessary conditions for engaging in inclusive education.

Many teachers express considerable anxiety about inclusive education but confidence grows with experience of inclusion. To bring about inclusive education, we must make critical disability studies and inclusion an essential part of teacher education and ongoing professional development. **Educating all teachers to be inclusive teachers is an essential undertaking.**

The culture of a school or educational setting influences peer interactions and the way teachers interact with children and young people who experience disability. School principals, directors and other educational leaders play a key role in creating this culture. Unfortunately, evidence shows underlying ableist practices prevalent in education in Australia. While there are some promising developments towards inclusion, negative attitudes and a lack of motivation from education departments and providers to do all that is necessary to facilitate inclusive education are ongoing concerns. Addressing attitudes towards inclusive education **at all levels** and within all processes is a major component of working towards inclusion.

Breaking down the barriers to inclusion

Responses needed to tackle ableism include:

- ongoing consultation with people who experience disability
- including all children from a very young age to break the cycle of entrenched ableism
- community advocacy about language use and representations of disability within media and popular culture
- engaging with critical disability studies and efforts to remove ableist policies and practices at all levels of the education system
- redistributing current funding based on *need* rather than on categories and labels of 'disability' or on school setting type (e.g. addressing the inequitable funding for specialist and general schools)
- sufficient compulsory pre-service teacher education in inclusive education and critical disability studies and ongoing professional development in these areas
- support for all teachers to teach all children and young people, not 'special' teachers for 'special' students.



This fact sheet is drawn from the 2019 report *Towards inclusive education: a necessary process of transformation*. It was written by Dr Kathy Cologon, Department of Educational Studies, Macquarie University for Children and Young People with Disability Australia.

For more information and to read the full report, visit www.cyda.org.au