

Competing interests and the inclusion of children with complex needs

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Lutheran schools and early childhood services in Australia are increasingly catering to students with diverse needs. This is reflective of our Australian society, with each school reflecting to some extent the diversity of their local community.¹ The very nature of the Lutheran school population has changed over time, however despite this, one thing remains constant—what we believe about the nature of our learners.

The inherent beliefs of the Lutheran schooling system in Australia are based on the underlying premise of the theology of the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand, and these theological understandings underpin the decision-making principles of our schools including those regarding the inclusion of all learners. We need policies such as enrolment, inclusion and behaviour management to manage the day-to-day running of the school and meet the requirements of legislation and governing bodies. Our policies and practices rely on our theology to stand firm on biblical principles, with many schools adopting scriptural passages to support their policy documents. They reflect our understanding and beliefs about learners based on how God sees them. We view our learners through the eyes of Christ. Key systemic Lutheran Education documents such as *Growing deep*,² *A vision for learners and learning in Lutheran schools: A framework for Lutheran schools*³ and the *Christian Studies Curriculum Framework*⁴ outline our beliefs, values and actions. We are part of 'God's continuing creation therefore...every individual life has meaning and purpose.'⁵ Scripture emphasises that as humans, we are God's special creation and therefore we need to value every learner as God sees them, as a great masterpiece of creation and therefore deeply loved. Because we believe that 'each person is a unique creation of God and a person loved by God', we value 'the uniqueness and worth of each person' and therefore in our schools we see 'each member of our school community as

1 Mark McCrindle, 'Welcome to Australia Street: population trends and demographic snapshot of Australia,' McCrindle Research 2013, accessed 20 January 2021, <https://mccrindle.com.au/insights/blogarchive/welcome-to-australia-street-population-trends-and-demographic-snapshot-of-australia-infographic/>; Lani Florian, 'Teacher education for the changing demographics of schooling: inclusive education for each and every learner,' in *Teacher Education for the Changing Demographics of Schooling: Issues for Research and Practice, Vol. 2: Inclusive Learning and Educational Equity*, ed. N. Pantić and L. Florian (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 9–20.

2 Lutheran Education Australia, *Growing deep: Leadership and formation framework* (Adelaide, SA: Lutheran Education Australia, 2016), <http://growingdeep.lutheran.edu.au/>.

3 Lutheran Education Australia, *A vision for learners and learning in Lutheran schools* (Adelaide, SA: Lutheran Education Australia, 2013), www.lutheran.edu.au/teaching-and-learning/a-vision-for-learners-and-learning.

4 Lutheran Education Australia, *Christian Studies Curriculum Framework* (Adelaide, SA: Lutheran Education Australia, 2015), <https://www.lutheran.edu.au/download/cscf-2015/>.

5 Malcolm Bartsch, *A God Who Speaks and Acts: Theology for Teachers in Lutheran Schools* (Adelaide, SA: Open Book Howden, 2012), 52.

someone in relation to God' and help them to develop in all aspects of living this out in our community.⁶

These key Lutheran Education documents also advocate that our schools provide a safe and supportive learning environment in which learners are actively engaged. With this in mind, we are faced daily with living out our theology in practice in a Lutheran school. As we value each individual, we aim to provide an environment in which all learners can thrive and provide opportunities for them to be included in all aspects of education.

Inclusion

Inclusion is a term which is increasingly used internationally in a broad sense, more than simply referring to the inclusion of people with a disability.⁷ In this way, it is reflective of Lutheran theology in which each learner is valued for who they are as their 'worth is not diminished by illness, handicap, age, or failure of any kind, nor does it have anything to do with race, colour, gender, distinctive characteristics and abilities, or anything else that distinguishes one human being from another.'⁸ If we consider it in terms of education, inclusion in a broad sense does not merely focus on the excluded; instead it considers the education of all learners together.⁹

Inclusive education is defined by Rayner as 'as set of values and processes which nurture all students' sense of belonging and connection to place, people and purpose.'¹⁰ It is more than just access to education; it requires an inclusive ethos which provides flexible curriculum and classroom management underpinned by empowerment, equity and emancipation.¹¹ Inclusive education is complex, intricate and multi-faceted, requiring unwavering courage and conviction¹² and involves responding to diversity in positive ways.¹³ The ultimate goal is a shared understanding and commitment to inclusion within all schools, system wide, with learners, school staff and community working together.¹⁴

6 LEA, *A vision for learners and learning*, 4.

7 Lynn Richards, 'Power, inclusion and diversity,' in *Contemporary Issues in Childhood: A Bio-ecological Approach*, The Routledge Education Studies Series, ed. Zeta Brown and Stephen Ward (London/New York: Routledge, 2017), 117–126.

8 Bartsch, *A God Who Speaks and Acts*, 62.

9 Florian, 'Teacher education for the changing demographics of schooling.'

10 Christopher Rayner, 'Inclusive education: What does it mean for Christian learning communities into the future?', *The Christian Teachers Journal* 26, no. 1 (2018): 19.

11 Vassilios Argyropoulos and Santoshi Halder, 'Introductory chapter: Disability within contemporary inclusion dynamics: a global point of view,' in *Inclusion, Equity and Access for Individuals with Disabilities*, ed. V. Argyropoulos and S. Halder (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 2.

12 Gordon Porter and Deidre Smith, 'Challenges and barriers to inclusion,' in *Exploring Inclusive Educational Practices Through Professional Inquiry*, ed. G. L. Porter and D. Smith (Boston: Sense Publishers, 2011), 141–172.

13 Vicky Plows and Alison Baker, 'On the edge? Counter-practice in flexible learning programs,' in *Inclusive Education: Making Sense of Everyday Practice, Innovations and Controversies: Interrogating Educational Change*, ed. V. Plows and B. Whitburn (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2017), 77–94.

14 Porter and Smith, 'Challenges and barriers to inclusion.'

Parents of children with complex needs choose a Christian school for many reasons, including the caring environment, Christ-centred education, acceptance and love of the child for who they are or to foster social inclusion.¹⁵ However, at times we see barriers to the inclusion of some learners, and we must consider what this means for all learners. Additionally, the definition of 'complex needs' is varied, however Tuersley-Dixon and Frederickson suggest it refers to individuals who have both 'a depth and also a breadth of need...including intellectual or physical disabilities where there are additional difficulties, for example, with daily living skills'.¹⁶ The consideration of these complex needs adds further complexity to the issue of inclusion.

Barriers to inclusion

There are many different barriers to inclusion with the impact on individuals occurring to varying degrees. Some of the wider systemic barriers encountered include varying attitudes towards difference, systemic policies and support, lack of training for staff, and the curriculum itself. Within each school, barriers encountered may include personal attitudes (of the learner, peers, staff, parents, school community); physical barriers (for physical needs); inaccessibility to an appropriate curriculum, and possibly unrealistic expectations of the school and families. There may also be concerns around funding and support available both in the classroom and for families. Teacher attitudes may stem from a lack of specific training or having little confidence in managing complex needs, and despite inclusion policies and practices, negative attitudes are a major barrier to social inclusion.¹⁷ Further complications in the classroom may include disruption to class routine and learning, time needed to manage complex needs, misinformation around needs, and managing difficult behaviours.

In 2020 the Coronavirus pandemic raised issues and challenges for inclusion as schools continued to offer on-campus learning for those who could not learn at home, yet at the same time created an environment which engaged learners from home. According to Rayner, for some learners during this time, social distancing and remote learning provided flexibility and had indeed been liberating. Yet for others, limited digital access, lack of school routine or meaningful support, were barriers to learning.¹⁸ In our Lutheran schools, we saw school communities in partnership with parents, work towards creating an environment which was inclusive and reflective of our Christian education.

15 Judy Chesson, 'What's special about special education in Christian schools?' *The Christian Teachers Journal* 26, no. 1 (2018): 24–27.

16 Louise Tuersley-Dixon and Norah Frederickson, 'Social inclusion of children with complex needs in mainstream: Does visibility and severity of disability matter?' *International Journal of Developmental Disabilities* 62, no. 2 (2016): 89.

17 Boon Siong Tan, Erin Wilson, Robert Campain, Kevin Murfitt and Nick Hagiliassis, 'Understanding negative attitudes toward disability to foster social inclusion: an Australian case study,' in *Inclusion, Equity and Access for Individuals with Disabilities*, ed. V. Argyropoulos and S. Halder (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 41–65.

18 Christopher Rayner, 'Inclusive education: Opportunities for a new normal,' *The Christian Teachers Journal* 28, no. 3 (2020), 4–7.

Exclusion and tough decisions

While inclusion of all learners is our aim, there are times when some learners may be excluded from education. Exclusion may be defined differently in different contexts, such as exclusion through suspension, inability to access programs or facilities, or merely removal from the classroom.¹⁹ Although there are differing circumstances and a range of types of exclusion, they all affect the learner. A recent South Australian report on the impacts of exclusion claims: every child has a right to an education; managing behaviours needs to be restorative rather than punitive with exclusions causing harm with possible long-term negative effects; and that disconnected students are likely to experience exclusion. School culture and environment significantly influence the practices of the school.²⁰ The report's exclusion rates and case studies can paint a dismal picture of what we might see in many Australian schools. Similarly, Plows and Baker note that there is often an intersection of social, economic and educational disadvantage in disengaged youth undertaking a flexible learning program within or outside of a mainstream school.²¹ Social inclusion is often difficult when challenging behaviours affect the safety of the learner or others around them. These challenging behaviours not only affect the child, but the families and school community members as well.

Although the South Australian statistics are not for Lutheran schools, we must still ask ourselves to what extent these statistics are reflected in our schools. We may not face exactly the same difficulties, yet as a Lutheran school there may be times we have to ask the difficult question '*At what point do we decide a student needs to be excluded?*' While the focus of schools is to include all learners and to provide a valuable and rich education for all, there are competing interests within the classroom from various stakeholders. Availability of resources or facilities, levels of staffing and specific training are just some of the issues we seek to understand. The needs of all concerned (the learner, the family, staff and the other learners) are important elements in the conversation. These competing interests need to be thoroughly considered and at times tough decisions must be made in order to seek a solution. There may be times where all options have been explored, solutions exhausted, and mutual agreement reached that we may not be able to meet all of their needs or expectations. All efforts must be undertaken first however, to overcome the barriers to inclusion.

Overcoming barriers

Rayner raises three important points to consider: being inclusive is integral to Christian Education; teaching all learners can benefit others; inclusion is part of a broader educational reform.²² Keeping these three points in mind can inspire us to find the best possible

19 Helen Connolly, Commissioner for Children and Young People SA, 'The blame game—the perspectives from South Australian children and young people on the causes and impacts of education exclusion and why we need to stop blaming children for system failure' (October 2020), <https://www.cyp.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Screen-The-Blame-Game-Report-Low.pdf>.

20 Connolly, 'The blame game.'

21 Plows and Baker, 'On the edge?'

22 Rayner, 'Inclusive education: What does it mean for Christian learning communities into the future?'

solution for each learner and work towards overcoming barriers to inclusion. If we consider inclusion as integral to Christian Education, it will be forefront in all we do and is indeed reflected in our beliefs about learners. While teachers may work to overcome barriers within their classroom, a collective approach from the whole school community can work together to address systemic barriers. A considered and collective approach from school communities, teachers, leaders and systemic leaders can contribute to broader change.

The suggestions from young people in the South Australian report are worthy of consideration when aiming for inclusion in our schools. The report highlights what young people regard as important in education. They value relationships; behaviour management; training for teachers to assist them to be proactive when something is wrong. They further suggest a supportive school environment that can support difficult home environments is desirable alongside actions that do not humiliate and isolate. Mental health support and support for general learning and well-being were also valued. Furthermore, they suggest ways for overcoming the barriers to inclusion as understanding the challenges in learners' lives; providing support for learning and wellbeing; offering relevant and flexible education options; offering inclusive and comfortable learning environments.²³ Each of these considerations warrants further discussion beyond their mere introduction in this paper. These deeper conversations need to engage key stakeholders and investigate site-specific options to explore how to meet the needs of the whole school community in a relevant way.

Inclusion aims to overcome barriers and equip students with skills they can use both inside and outside of school. Inclusion allows all students, with or without disabilities, to learn together through differentiated instruction.²⁴ Porter and Smith suggest that removing barriers to inclusion 'requires collaboration, mutual understanding and respect.'²⁵ Understanding the needs and experiences of learners can inform our attitudes and shape how we view our students, leading to ways of effectively addressing issues. According to Murphy, we can target specific opportunities for developing relationships to improve social inclusion.²⁶ Plows and Baker also suggest celebrating the 'little victories' can make learners feel valued, and a focus on strengths and achievements allows all learners to reframe their thinking and empower them as they make choices.²⁷

A combination of inclusive education, appropriate training for teachers, and student awareness programs that are well resourced and sustained, are effective in changing attitudes.²⁸ Deppeler emphasises the importance of teacher education on best-practice teaching for students with disability, as beneficial for all students.²⁹ This is also reflected

23 Connolly, 'The blame game.'

24 Argyropoulos and Halder, 'Introductory chapter: Disability within contemporary inclusion dynamics.'

25 Porter and Smith, 'Challenges and barriers to inclusion,' 141; Richards, 'Power, inclusion and diversity.'

26 Glynis Murphy, 'Challenging behavior: a barrier to inclusion?,' *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities* 6, no. 2 (2009): 89–90.

27 Plows and Baker, 'On the edge?,' 84.

28 Tan et al, 'Understanding negative attitudes toward disability to foster social inclusion.'

29 Joanne Deppeler, 'Navigating the boundaries of difference: using collaboration in inquiry to develop

in the recommendations of the 2016 Commonwealth of Australia report into access to real learning.³⁰ Networking, teacher dialogue, celebrating success, feedback and critical discussion are important for sharing knowledge, along with humility in knowing that we do not have all of the answers, yet are willing to seek help and build partnerships.³¹ Villegas, Ciotoli and Lucas offer a framework of six interrelated characteristics of inclusive teachers which serve as a guide for developing inclusive classrooms. The characteristics of the inclusive teacher are:

1. Sociocultural consciousness
2. Affirming views about diversity and students from diverse backgrounds
3. Commitment to acting as change agents in schools and advocates for students
4. Understanding how learners construct knowledge
5. Knowing about students' lives
6. Using insights into students' lives to help them build bridges to learning³²

These six characteristics include both an orientation towards diversity, and pedagogical practices and perspectives, which are a necessary element of teacher education.

Inclusive curriculum and pedagogy aim to provide rich learning opportunities for all, making provision for most learners, yet offering something additional or different for some learners identified as having particular needs.³³ In order to be an inclusive school, we need to get to the heart of the matter. Getting to the root of the barriers may lead to greater success in finding a resolution. We need to know our students as individuals, building relationships as we try to understand their unique needs and work towards providing the best possible outcome for them. We must love the learner as a child of God.

Loving the learners: theology in action

While we work within the regulations and decision-making processes of policies and procedures, we do so in love. We can also learn from the research—a supportive school environment goes beyond the mere provision of access to education. It supports, nurtures, engages, provides alternatives, and values the individual learner. How we see our learners

teaching and progress student learning,' in *Teacher Education for the Changing Demographics of Schooling: Issues for Research and Practice, Vol. 2: Inclusive Learning and Educational Equity*, ed. N. Pantić and L. Florian (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 149–165.

30 Senate Education and Employment References Committee, 'Access to real learning: the impact of policy, funding and culture on students with disability' (Canberra, ACT: Commonwealth of Australia, 2016).

31 Chesson, 'What's special about special education in Christian schools?'; Deppeler, 'Navigating the boundaries of difference.'

32 Ana Maria Villegas, Francesca Ciotoli and Tamara Lucas, 'A framework for preparing teachers for classrooms that are inclusive of all students,' in *Teacher Education for the Changing Demographics of Schooling: Issues for Research and Practice, Vol. 2: Inclusive Learning and Educational Equity*, ed. N. Pantić and L. Florian (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2017): 136.

33 Kristine Black-Hawkins, 'Understanding inclusive pedagogy,' in *Inclusive Education: Making Sense of Everyday Practice, Innovations and Controversies: Interrogating Educational Change*, ed. V. Plows and B. Whitburn (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2017), 13–28.

shapes what we do for them. Plows and Baker found a common experience for young people with complex needs was being known for their problems or having a ‘bad history’.³⁴ To change this perception they need to be empowered to reimagine their story or recast themselves, allowing for new relationships to develop and a new self-identity to emerge. At times learners with complex needs come to our schools to make a fresh start. When we see them through the eyes of God and love them as He does, we allow them to create a new identity in Christ.

Fostering meaningful relationships is fundamental to inclusion. Knowing our learners and their families helps us to understand their individual circumstances. Valuing all people for their uniqueness and individual worth provides a basis for developing caring relationships to support the individual’s needs.³⁵ We listen to their stories with heartfelt empathy—stories of each school, of each class, of each family, of each learner. All are unique; all have their own intricacies; and each is important. When we view ‘difference’ as something that relates to all learners, rather than some as having different needs; it changes our approach. When we value each learner as an individual and see each of them as a unique creation of God, we are living out our theology and working towards education for all, not just modification for some. It sees our human diversity in a new light.³⁶ Our common aim as Lutheran schools is to minister in the most effective way possible, working in partnership to achieve the best possible outcome for all. Building and maintaining relationships is important. Working together is important. Our theology in action is important. Above all, when we value the richness each individual brings to our community and love them as God loves them, we live out our theology in action.

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34 Plows and Baker, ‘On the edge?’, 83.

35 Bartsch, *A God Who Speaks and Acts*, 51–64.

36 Florian, ‘Teacher education for the changing demographics of schooling.’