Cultures of inclusion in the early years: mapping the territories

An overview

There is a quite particular argument at the centre of this book, and this argument informs its whole organisation. The argument is quite simple: while their form may derive from specific and common policies, every early years setting represents a *culture* which is created by children, practitioners, parents and others. This is, of course, not startling but we think it has important implications for how settings might be understood, developed and researched: much of the work which we report in this book is based on our systematic attempts as teachers and researchers to understand the meanings and stories at work in the lives of settings, their children, practitioners and parents. We believe that the book will not only add to the research community’s understanding of early years policies and processes, but – and more importantly – help practitioners themselves to locate, reflect on and hence develop their own meanings and practices.

The book examines inclusion in its broadest sense (that is, concerning *all* children, parents and practitioners in *each and every* early years community) and seeks to demonstrate how inclusive processes can be embedded within early years curriculum, pedagogy
and services which are designed to help all children, reach their potential and achieve all that is possible for them.

One of the challenges in developing an inclusive agenda is finding a way to marry such with the agenda of raising achievement. Both are important: inclusion is an essential plank in the broad platform of social justice and raising achievement is a goal which most educators hold for their pupils. Raising achievement has been presented within policy documents in terms of more narrowly-defined attainment and establishing standards and targets for all pupils, from around five years old. Implicit within this normalising discourse is the categorising of individual children, whose (lower) attainment is attributed to factors such as ethnicity, gender, special educational needs, family background or economic status.

Inclusion is a political and social struggle which foregrounds difference and identity and which involves whole-setting and practitioner reform. It has moved from being specifically related to children with SEN to being a central part of the current governmental agenda for broader society. While special educators have come to understand inclusion as both increasing participation and removing exclusionary pressures, social inclusion as it is framed within policy documents problematises the social exclusion of disenfranchised groups and their disengagement from society (Sparkes, 1999). Social exclusion theories and policies are intended to avoid deficit models and pathologies (Leney, 1999), but they may contribute to the generation of a core of excluded groups and individuals.

The competing demands upon the wide range of early years practitioners in training, arising from the contrasting discourses and practices of raising achievement on the one hand and inclusion on the other, need to be reconciled in order to make it possible for the development of inclusive practices to be successful and for all children to reach their potential. Early childhood educators in training are expected to show some basic competencies in responding to young children’s differential abilities – whatever they might be. However, students’ concerns about working with young children are often more focused on their own practice rather than children’s enhanced achievement or inclusion. Thus early childhood educators in training may pathologise and problematise difference within their settings, especially with regard to young children’s behaviour, in order to demonstrate their own competence in fulfilling the role for which they are training.

The individual child is constructed within the discourse of raising achievement and promoting inclusion in two polarised ways: either in relation to the norms of standards and targets or as outsiders ‘in a society
whose structural inequalities remain largely uninterrogated’ (Levitas, 1998: 7).

The individual practitioner is posited either as a technician within the raising achievement discourse – carrying out a series of steps in order to bring about particularly defined learning in the children they work with – or, in the context of inclusion, as undertaking institutional practices – following rules, procedures and routines for example – which may present barriers to inclusion.

This book draws on reported research and presents findings from a recent study to describe attitudes and practices which can successfully bring together the need to address young children’s learning needs in the context of inclusive early years cultures. So, what, in this book, do we mean when we speak of inclusion? It is important to generate here a definition of inclusion which works – which works throughout policies, practices and early years settings.

An operational definition of inclusion

The term ‘inclusion’ has been variously defined by many different writers and commentators but for the purposes of this book inclusion may be seen as the drive towards maximal participation in and minimal exclusion from early years settings, from schools and from society. While there may appear to be some heterogeneity in the use of the term within governmental policy documents, any analysis must acknowledge a heterogeneity of meanings which reflect the development of inclusive early years and educational practices. Indeed, given that in practice ‘inclusion’ can only have an operational rather than conceptual meaning, it is clear that there are as many ‘versions’ of inclusion as there are early years settings – or, indeed, the individuals who make up those particular cultures of living and learning.

Social exclusion is an equally contestable and heterogeneous, but broader, construct concerned with non-participation in the economic, civic and social norms of society and Sparkes (1999) identifies exclusion from school as among a number of factors which may contribute to lower educational attainment. For some parents of young children, their own social exclusion is manifest in such experiences as poor or temporary housing, unemployment, poverty, ill-health, lack of access to services, low levels of literacy and so on. Levitas (1997) has identified three separate discourses of social exclusion. These are:
INCLUSION IN THE EARLY YEARS

- a retributionist discourse, which is concerned with poverty;
- moral underclass discourse, which is centred on the moral and behavioural delinquency of the excluded; and
- a social integrationist discourse which focuses on paid work.

These discourses differ markedly on how they specify boundaries, define people as insiders or outsiders and indicate how inclusion can be achieved. Levitas argues that social exclusion lacks analytical clarity, but its flexibility makes it a very powerful construct, while Barry (1998) suggests that the equally politically attractive term, social inclusion, diverts away from radical change and encourages compliance with the status quo.

However these states of living are constructed or theorised, for many families, social exclusion means struggling in their lives within the range of difficulties outlined above and many young children are excluded – in one way or another – for a variety of reasons. For these reasons this book does not adopt a simplistic, homogenous definition of inclusion/exclusion – rather we take a more complex view of inclusive issues which is broadly comprehensive. Additionally, we are concerned at the risk of problematising difference by specifying potential groups ‘at risk’ of exclusion and, in identifying particular foci of inclusion and exclusion, throughout the book we do so in order to illustrate the breadth of the territories of inclusion rather than to narrow down such territories to those we describe. Nevertheless we are interested in similarities and differences in strategies for developing inclusive practices and eliminating exclusive tendencies. Throughout the book we examine examples of inclusion and/or exclusion which highlight, for example, ‘race’ and gender as well as disability or learning difficulty and inter disciplinary analyses across types of settings have enabled us to identify research studies and practices where new and radical approaches to inclusion are being developed.

So, in mapping the terrains of inclusion we are clear that potential arenas of inclusion and exclusion are extensive and far-reaching, affecting the lives of many children and their families. Some such arenas are listed in Box 1.1.

Understanding difference and how children think about difference is an important aspect of developing inclusive practices and policies and we should not forget how, at a very young age, children can develop political, social and cultural preferences which could – ultimately – lead to the generation of exclusionary values and behaviours.
Several studies have explored issues of gender in children’s play in the early years (Davies, 1989; Tarullo, 1994; MacNaughton, 1999), and gender identity is a strong feature in young children’s lives (Connolly, 2005). Much has been written about ‘sexual equality’ and gender divides in society and interest in the implications and effects of gender on young children’s learning and experiences is rooted in a tradition of studies which have sought to understand, and later challenge, stereotypes and limited opportunities.

Tarullo (1994) suggested that girls and boys speak with ‘different voices’ in their experiences of the world and there is broad agreement in the literature that boys and girls show different kinds of behaviour and preferences in their play (Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974; Paley, 1984). Where girls and boys do share the same play area they have often been found to use it differently, for example:

The play area of playhouse is a largely female domain and children often assume stereotypical roles on entering it. Girls are pleased to act
out stories and situations. However, boys seem unhappy in deferring to the girls in the context and I have often observed boys changing roles to become animals, introducing elements of aggression, noise and disruption to the situation. (D’Arcy, 1990: 84)

Clear preferences are often exhibited, perhaps because this is one way in which children create and begin to identify with their own gender. As MacNaughton suggests:

Children’s pretend play is rich in information about how they understand gender relations. As children play at ‘having babies’, ‘being monsters’, or ‘making a hospital’, children show others what they think girls and women can and should do, and what they think boys and men can and should do. (MacNaughton, 1999: 81)

Derman-Sparkes and Taus (1989) suggest that:

Between the ages of two and five years old, children are forming self-identities and building social interaction skills. At the same time, they are becoming aware of and curious about gender, race, ethnicity and disabilities. Gradually young children begin to figure out how they are alike and how they are different from other people, and how they feel about those differences (p. 43)

Difference is of interest to children, and the recognition of difference as positive rather than negative is an important aim for early childhood professionals.

In a large-scale survey of a representative sample of 352 children aged 3 to 6 drawn from across Northern Ireland, Connolly, Smith and Kelly (2002) identified the detail of cultural and political awareness of young children. Four main levels of awareness were identified among the children:

1. Preference for particular cultural events and symbols.
2. Awareness of particular cultural events and symbols.
3. Tendency to identify with a particular community.
4. Tendency to make sectarian statements.

The authors consider the influences on young children’s attitudes towards particular symbols of community and faith and identified three influential factors: family, local community and school. Of these, the nature of segregated schooling is a key influence in accounting for children’s attitudes towards difference with the majority
(96 per cent) of children attending Protestant or Catholic schools. Connolly et al (2002) note:

For any child, entering school for the first time represents a significant milestone in their lives. It is likely to be the first time that many will begin to interact with much larger numbers of other children and also to come under the influence of their older peers. When such environments are overwhelmingly Catholic or Protestant in their ethos, then it is not surprising to find that they can represent a fertile learning ground within which children’s awareness about cultural and political events and symbols as well as the attitudes and prejudices that often accompany these increase rapidly.

They identify the following implications for community relations work with young children which would promote more inclusive attitudes:

1. Children, from the age of three, should be encouraged to explore and experience a range of different cultural practices, events and symbols and to appreciate and respect difference and cultural diversity.
2. From about the age of five onwards, children should be encouraged to understand the negative effects of sectarian stereotypes and prejudices and to be able to identify them in their own attitudes, where appropriate.
3. For such strategies to be successful, nurseries and schools need to find ways of engaging and working closely with parents and the local community and, where appropriate, connecting with community relations and cultural diversity initiatives in the wider community.

Though Connolly et al (2002) were working within a quite particular set of social, educational and political circumstances, they reached the conclusion that close working with parents and the local community and connecting with community relations and cultural diversity is an important maxim for all settings wherever they are located.

In the early years three overarching factors can be seen to be of particular importance:

- issues of ‘rights’;
- curriculum, play and developmentally appropriate practice;
- assessment.

We want to devote the remainder of this chapter to a discussion of these and so provide an underpinning for the book as a whole.
Children's rights and human rights

Issues of ‘rights’ are often central to discussion of the education and care of young children with learning difficulties. However, decisions as to which rights best apply and in whose interest can often be complex. *Children’s rights* and *human rights* have, for some time, been entangled and that entanglement has led to confusion about the role of both the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNESCO, 1992) and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) (1994). In 1997, the intention of the UK government to incorporate the ECHR into UK domestic law was greeted with warnings that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child should not be overshadowed by the move on human rights in general. Lansdown (1996) saw the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights as

a step in the right direction. But for children, it is not enough. We must therefore welcome this commitment on the part of the government as progress towards the ultimate goal of societal recognition of children as holders of human rights. But we must also continue to argue for a commitment to full implementation of all the principles of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, in law, in policy and in practice. (p. 21)

As Phillips (2001) notes, practitioners in Reggio Emilia have ceased to talk of special educational needs but have, instead, chosen to include discussion of special educational rights in their dialogue about meeting young children’s needs and access to curriculum. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is an important touchstone for early childhood practitioners. For example, Hyder’s (2004) work with young refugee children is set in the context of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and she argues that play is a healing experience for young children affected by war and conflict. Hyder (2004) explores the importance of play for young refugee children’s development. She considers the implications of war and conflict on young children and notes how opportunities for play are often denied them.
Curriculum, play and developmentally appropriate practice

As we have said, it has been argued that early education, at its best, is inclusive education (Nutbrown, 1998), though the important phrase here is ‘at its best’. The best of early education can include: developmentally appropriate practice, observation-based pedagogy and assessment; close parental involvement; equality of access to a differentiated curriculum; and a multi-professional, cross-agency approach to provision. If we take England as an example, this may well have been an expected state of affairs during the 1970s and 1980s; however, inclusive education in England came under threat during the 1990s when schools and other settings faced: inadequate funding; increasingly centralised control of the curriculum; negative attitudes across society towards disability; a lack of action on human rights in general and, more specifically, on children’s rights; and a lack of appropriate and funded professional development for teachers and other early years professionals (Nutbrown, 1998).

It was these factors in general but, more specifically, the increasing control over the curriculum in the early years which threatened inclusive curricular practices which were supportive of all children’s learning needs and which in the process created difficulty with learning for some children. This is because, as soon as Desirable Outcomes of Nursery Education (SCAA, 1996) was published, there were inevitably children who did not reach those targets, and as soon as individual targets for achievement at four years old were prescribed (SCAA, 1997) there were inevitably children who did not reach those targets by the prescribed age. Such children were ‘below the norm’, a case of ‘targets’ creating learning difficulties and identifying some children as ‘different’. However, the subsequent curriculum guidance in England, the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000), took an inclusive stance, defining inclusion in a broad sense and stating that the guidance was:

... intended to help practitioners plan to meet the diverse needs of all children so that most will achieve and some, where appropriate, will go beyond the early learning goals by the end of the foundation stage. (QCA, 2000: 5)
INCLUSION IN THE EARLY YEARS

The guidance was based on several principles, including that

... no child should be excluded or disadvantaged because of ethnicity, culture or religion, home language, family background, special educational needs, disability, gender or ability. (QCA, 2000: 11)

With regard to ‘children with special educational needs and disabilities’ (p.18) the Curriculum Guidance for England encourages multi-agency and multi-professional working and the close involvement of parents so that learning needs are identified early and inclusive practices developed:

Practitioners will need to plan for each child’s individual learning requirements, including those children who need additional support or have particular needs or disabilities. The focus should be on removing barriers for children where these already exist and on preventing learning difficulties from developing. Early years practitioners have a key role to play in working with parents to identify learning needs and respond quickly to any area of particular difficulty, and to develop an effective strategy to meet these needs, making good use of individual educational plans, so that later difficulties can be avoided. (QCA, 2000: 18)

Attention to targets and individual achievement through a government prescribed and adult-dominated curriculum is not, however, the experience of all countries. Experiences from Denmark, with its minimally prescribed curriculum, New Zealand’s Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education 1996) and Steiner-Waldorf education with its emphasis on holistic education, for example, demonstrate that alternatives are possible and can be effective.

What could help to further inclusivity in the early years is a rubric of developmentally appropriate, respectful curricula and pedagogical practices where children learn together in diverse and challenging social situations, experience difference and learn negotiation and respect. At the core of these values of curriculum and pedagogy is play.

Play in early childhood education and care is a central component of children’s experiences and, for them, a fundamental way of learning. The word ‘play’ is used liberally and with the assumption that its meaning is understood, though it can be seen to mean different things to different people and the use of play in national policy documents in the UK may not match its use by, for example, Steiner-Waldorf teachers. Many famous pioneers of early childhood education – Montessori, Steiner, Froebel, Isaacs, the MacMillan sisters – saw play as central to their work in developing nursery and kindergarten
curricula. Play has, in turn, been heralded as the essential means through which children learn, and castigated and sidelined in favour of ensuring that young children should ‘work’ in school. The demise of play has also led to concerns over children’s health and fitness, with physical and creative activity being replaced by overuse of technological toys and games (Alliance for Childhood, 2004). In their seminal work, Manning and Sharp (1997) explain the purpose of their ‘Play’ project:

The idea of the project first arose because of the difficulties which many teachers were experiencing in using play in the classroom. Although accepting that children learn and develop through play and that play is a motivating force for children’s learning, many teachers are pressurised by the very full first school curriculum and large classes to neglect play as a means of teaching. They leave children to play on their own. In addition, many parents’ expectations are that children will ‘work’ when they come to school, not ‘play’. (p. 7)

Some thirty years later many early years teachers continue to struggle to ‘fit’ play into their pedagogic repertoire and, though play is now reinstated in terms of the early years, some practitioners still lack the necessary skills and confidence to support children’s play. The British Educational Research Association (BERA) reviewed research on early years pedagogy, curriculum and adult roles (and, perhaps significantly, found few examples of recent studies). Of play the review stated:

Several key studies have provided an evidence base on the quality of play, its educational benefits, and the pedagogy of play, in the contexts of preschool and school settings … Most of these studies did not focus specifically on play, but on broader curriculum and pedagogical processes, of which play was an integral part. Their findings were critical of the quality of play, the dislocation between rhetoric and reality of play; the extent to which play and learning were linked; the role of the adults in children’s play and how play was utilised towards educational outcomes. The consistent picture to emerge from these studies is that play in practice has been limited in frequency, duration and quality, with teachers and other adults too often adopting a reactive ‘watching and waiting’ approach. (BERA EYSIG, 2003: 14)

The propensity of children the world over to play and the perceived benefits of play to children’s holistic development provide a strong case for the professional exploration of the role of play in supporting children’s well-being, development and learning.
In recent years more attention has been paid to children from birth to three and their play, too, is an issue for many practitioners. Manning-Morton and Thorp (2004) examine the importance of play for children under three years of age and identify a crucial role for adults in supporting and developing such play experiences. Play is seen in relation to all aspects of a child’s day, integral to and part of an holistic approach to early education and care for very young children. Questions about the efficacy of play as a pedagogical tool remain and successive governments have shown varying degrees of commitment to early years and school curriculum in relation to play. In the light of limited support for play in official policy documents, Christmas (2005) asked the teachers and other staff in her small village school for their views on play. She found that while people generally thought it was ‘OK to play’, worries over the play/work balance for young children still remained.

Though not universally followed in the US, Bredekamp’s (1991) advocacy of a developmentally appropriate approach to an early years curriculum sets out the following twelve key principles of child development and learning that inform developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programmes serving children from birth to eight years:

1. Domains of children’s development – physical, social, emotional, and cognitive – are closely related. Development in one domain influences and is influenced by development in other domains.
2. Development occurs in a relatively orderly sequence, with later abilities, skills, and knowledge building on those already acquired.
3. Development proceeds at varying rates from child to child as well as unevenly within different areas of each child’s functioning.
4. Early experiences have both cumulative and delayed effects on individual children’s development; optimal periods exist for certain types of development and learning.
5. Development proceeds in predictable directions toward greater complexity, organization, and internalization.
6. Development and learning occur in and are influenced by multiple social and cultural contexts.
7. Children are active learners, drawing on direct physical and social experience as well as culturally transmitted knowledge to construct their own understandings of the world around them.
8. Development and learning result from interaction of biological maturation and the environment, which includes both the physical and social worlds that children live in.

9. Play is an important vehicle for children’s social, emotional, and cognitive development, as well as a reflection of their development.

10. Development advances when children have opportunities to practice newly acquired skills as well as when they experience a challenge just beyond the level of their present mastery.

11. Children demonstrate different modes of knowing and learning and different ways of representing what they know.

12. Children develop and learn best in the context of a community where they are safe and valued, their physical needs are met, and they feel psychologically secure.

(NAEYC, 1996)

In America the National Association for the Education for the Young Child (NAEYC) defined ‘developmentally appropriate practice’ thus:

... teachers integrate the many dimensions of their knowledge base. They must know about child development and the implication of this knowledge for how to teach, the content of the curriculum – what to teach and when – how to assess what children have learned, and how to adapt curriculum and instruction to children's individual strengths, needs and interests. (NAEYC, 1996)

Such practice taken to its ultimate – where practice is routinely adapted to ‘children’s individual strengths, needs and interests’ – negates the need for discussion of ‘additional needs’ – and even the idea of special educational needs.

Katz suggests that in developmentally appropriate approaches to the curriculum decisions

about what should be learned and how it would best be learned depend on what we know of the learner’s developmental status and our understanding of the relationships between early experience and subsequent development. (1995: 109)

Of course, views of development and what constitutes appropriate development are always contestable. However, taken together with Vygotsky’s notion of the zone of proximal development it is possible
to identify ways in which supporting children’s learning can be informed and appropriate to their stage of learning.

Such questions have underpinned many studies which have sought to inform curriculum and programme development, for example: Athey’s (1990) work on schematic development; Nutbrown’s (1999) study of curriculum development based on schematic theory; Reggio Emilia preschools’ development of communities of learning through multiple modes of expression (Malaguzzi, 1996; Abbott and Nutbrown, 2001; Edwards et al., 2001); and the curriculum ‘Te Whāriki’ developed in New Zealand – a policy which promotes equality of opportunity in contexts of diversity (Ministry of Education, New Zealand, 1995). Such studies and policy developments are evidence of the continuing quest for ways of creating curriculum which satisfactorily meets the developmental needs of all young children – internationally – and such approaches can be equally fitting in the education and care of young children with learning difficulties.

Assessment

Assessment of children’s progress and learning is part of any educator’s role and those who work with young children assess – in some way – their learning and development. The pioneers of early education carried out assessments in order to understand what children were doing and thinking. Susan Isaacs, for example, used detailed observations of children’s play to further her understanding of children’s knowledge and understanding (Isaacs, 1930) and prompted views of children as capable and powerful learners. The term ‘assessment’ is used in multiple contexts and carries many meanings of both purpose and practice. However, there remains the assumption that everyone understands what ‘assessment’ means while confusion over terminology continues throughout various policy developments in early years assessment. Nutbrown (1999) has suggested three different purposes for assessment in the early years, arguing that different tools are needed for different purposes: assessment for teaching and learning; assessment for management and accountability; and assessment for research. Assessment for teaching and learning is that which is most obviously useful in supporting young children’s learning and development: the process of identifying the level of children’s knowledge, skills and understanding in order to build a detailed picture of
the child’s development and subsequent learning needs. Nutbrown argues that several aspects need to be addressed by practitioners if assessment is to work for children (Box 1.2).

**BOX 1.2**

**Issues in assessment**

- **Clarity of purpose** – why are children being assessed?
- **Fitness for purpose** – is the assessment instrument or process appropriate?
- **Authenticity** – do the assessment tasks reflect processes of children’s learning and their interests?
- **Informed practitioners** – are practitioners appropriately trained and supported?
- **Child involvement** – how can children be fittingly involved in assessment of their learning?
- **Respectful assessment** – are assessments fair and honest with appropriate concern for children’s well-being and involvement?
- **Parental involvement** – do parents contribute to their child’s assessment?

(Adapted from Nutbrown, 2005: 14.)

The assessment of young children raises a number of concerns in relation to their well-being and self-esteem. Roberts writes:

Assessment and recording arrangements carry a world of hidden messages for children and parents. Is a positive model used, one which identifies children’s special strengths as well as areas for support? Is there accurate and detailed information about children? Do adults make sure that children share their successes, both with their parents and with each other?

These questions raise some of the issues which have a direct bearing on how children learn to see themselves. Attention to these sorts of details may have a profound effect on children’s approach to learning. Our attention to them is surely the entitlement of every child. (Roberts, 1995: 115)
Conclusion

The issues which we have identified in this chapter will be revisited throughout the book as we consider aspects of inclusion from various viewpoints and policy perspectives.

WORKSHOP 1  Mapping your territories of inclusion and exclusion

In Box 1.1 (on page 5) we listed some 18 examples of arenas for inclusion/exclusion. Think of a particular early years setting, or families using early years education and care services. In what ways do any of these apply to the families and children you know? How, for example, has the age of a child or a parent led to some form of isolation or exclusion? Have you been aware of the home language of a family restricting their inclusion in the culture of your early years setting? Does parental employment make a difference to their inclusion in the life and culture of the provision?

Reflect on questions such as these which might be prompted by the list in Box 1.1 and discuss your thoughts with colleagues. Consider how exclusive tendencies might be reduced or eliminated in order to create a more inclusive culture in your setting.

Keep your notes from this workshop – they may be useful as you work through other workshops at the end of each chapter.