

# PROMOTING SOCIAL INCLUSION

# INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON INCLUSIVE  
EDUCATION VOLUME 13

**PROMOTING SOCIAL  
INCLUSION: CO-CREATING  
ENVIRONMENTS THAT  
FOSTER EQUITY AND  
BELONGING**

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# FOREWORD

The adoption internationally of inclusive practice as the most equitable and all-encompassing approach to education and its relation to compliance with various international declarations and conventions underpins the importance of this series for people working at all levels of education and schooling in both developed and less-developed countries. There is little doubt that inclusive education is complex and diverse and that there are enormous disparities in understanding and application at both inter- and intra-country levels. A broad perspective on inclusive education throughout this series is taken, encompassing a wide range of contemporary viewpoints, ideas and research for enabling the development of more inclusive schools, education systems and communities.

Volumes in this series on *International Perspectives on Inclusive Education* contribute to the academic and professional discourse by providing a collection of philosophies and practices that can be reviewed considering local contextual and cultural situations in order to assist governments, educators, peripatetic staffs and other professionals to provide the best education for all children. Each volume in the series focuses on a key aspect of inclusive education and provides critical chapters by contributing leaders in the field who discuss theoretical positions, quality research and impacts on school and classroom practice. Different volumes address issues relating to the diversity of student need within heterogeneous classrooms and the preparation of teachers and other staffs to work in inclusive schools. Systemic changes and practice in schools encompass a wide perspective of learners to provide ideas on reframing education to ensure that it is inclusive of all. Evidence-based research practices underpin a plethora of suggestions for decision-makers and practitioners, incorporating current ways of thinking about and implementing inclusive education.

While many barriers have been identified that may potentially inhibit the implementation of effective inclusive practices, this series aims to identify such key concerns and offer practical and best practice approaches to overcome them. Adopting a thematic approach for each volume, readers will be able to quickly locate a collection of research and practice related to a topic of interest. By transforming schools into inclusive communities of practice, all children can have the opportunity to access and participate in quality and equitable education to enable them to obtain the skills to become contributory global citizens. This series, therefore, is highly recommended to support education decision-makers, practitioners, researchers and academics who have a professional interest in the inclusion of children and youth who are marginalized in inclusive schools and classrooms.

Volume 13 in this series focuses on the key importance of social inclusion. While substantial research has underpinned the need for modifications or differentiation of the curriculum and pedagogy to enable all learners to be included, there has been considerably less emphasis on the necessity to ensure all children and their families are socially included. As affirmed throughout this book, social inclusion does not simply happen by placing students with diverse needs into regular classes. Indeed, this integrated approach to inclusion has been proven to be ineffective and unsustainable. Yet, in many schools, teachers are uncertain as to the best approach to take to ensure all students are fully included socially and have a strong sense of belonging within a caring and accepting community. This is highlighted in the book as particularly problematic when students present with social, emotional or behavioural issues that teachers find challenging to deal with, and many best practice approaches are provided for supporting them. It is evident from the stories that are told by parents throughout the book that aligned with this is the challenge to work with families to support them and their children to be accepted, valued members of a school community where no one is alienated or marginalized because of their difference.

This latest volume is, therefore, a critical addition to the series. The volume is divided into four sections to provide an emphasis for the reader on different aspects of social inclusion. The first section provides a strong foundation for the need for structured social inclusion based upon a rights and choice background. A variety of social inclusion programmes and practices across the age groups are proffered in the next section. Good practices to promote dignity and to give voice to people with disabilities are then included. Finally, the importance of social inclusion within the school years is reviewed as essential for preparing students for transition into higher education and the workforce. Preparing students for work and careers and to live harmoniously within an inclusive social community is explored through a series of authentic case studies. Throughout the volume, the authors take the opportunity to give voice to teachers, families and self-advocates, which provides a very deep and meaningful approach where social inclusion and belonging are viewed through an authentic lens. This book is an essential reference guide for all involved with ensuring that inclusive education is grounded upon opportunities to establish a strong sense of identity and belonging within a well-structured socially supportive environment. I strongly recommend it to you.

Chris Forlin  
*Series Editor*

**SECTION 1**  
**SOCIAL INCLUSION: AFFIRMING**  
**VALUE, RIGHTS AND CHOICE**

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# SOCIAL INCLUSION AND BELONGING: AFFIRMING VALIDATION, AGENCY AND VOICE

Kate Scorgie and Chris Forlin

## ABSTRACT

*Social inclusion incorporates attitudes, expectations and perceptions about what it means to belong to a group. Belonging is embedded in personal beliefs and social structures that set forth criteria that determine how individuals and groups are accorded value and esteem. This chapter explores the constructs of social inclusion, exclusion and belonging with regard to persons in general and more specifically children with disability. It examines the importance of belonging and social inclusion to academic and psychosocial well-being and the effects of stigmatization and exclusion on self-perception, agency and voice. The chapter concludes with a number of evidence-based strategies for creating classrooms, schools and communities in which all are valued, welcomed and belong.*

**Keywords:** Social inclusion; belonging; agency; social exclusion; stigma; disability; social structures

## INTRODUCTION

Invite a group of children to imagine that in a week's time they will be moving to a new community and going to a new school. When asked what they need most on that first day of school, the answers are not surprising: someone to sit with at lunch, someone to say 'hi', to be invited to join a group, a smile of welcome – signs that this will be a place where they will 'fit in', be valued and included. And when asked to imagine what they would most want the students in the new school to know about them, responses might include 'that I'm nice', 'that I'm fun', 'that I'd be a good friend', 'that I'm worth getting to know' – comments supporting one's dignity and value.

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School is a social environment and when children feel rejected or are treated as outsiders – that is, when they question whether they are valued and belong – classroom participation and academic functioning can be affected, as well as their emotional well-being (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006). Social inclusion is essential in school, as it is in life. This chapter will explore the constructs of social inclusion, exclusion and belonging with regard to persons in general and more specifically children with disability. Evidence-based strategies to foster social inclusion and belonging will be reviewed with the goal of creating education and community environments where all are valued, welcomed and belong.

## **SOCIAL INCLUSION: A BASIC RIGHT AND PROVISION OF OPPORTUNITY**

Inclusion is often focused on presence, such as placement in a general education classroom, attendance at a club, organizational or recreational event, or being in the workplace. Merely being present, though, does not guarantee social inclusion. It is highly possible to be situated in a classroom, workplace or community and still feel isolated, overlooked, marginalized or alone – that is, feeling as if perceived as ‘other’. Although present, there is no social inclusion.

Baumgartner and Burns (2014) point to a lack of consistency in the literature regarding the definition and components of social inclusion. This, they maintain, may be due to various conceptualizations of the construct. To illustrate, they present Huxley and colleagues’ two main ‘schools of thought’ regarding social inclusion. The ‘rights-based’ approach focuses on ways in which social exclusion deprives individuals with disability of their rights as full members of society. Social inclusion, thus, is deemed a basic right of all individuals. A second approach centres on the requisite development and provision of opportunities for persons with disabilities to access and engage in community and society, which Baumgartner and Burns (2014) suggest includes individual agency, control and choice regarding where, when and how to participate. Affirming social inclusion as both a basic right and a provision of opportunity for children with disabilities is clearly stipulated in Article 23.3 of the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which states that accessible and affordable protocols should be established and provided:

[...] to ensure that the disabled child has effective access to and receives education, training, healthcare services, rehabilitation services, preparation for employment and recreation opportunities in a manner conducive to the child’s achieving the fullest possible social integration and individual development [...]. (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989)

The fundamental desire of individuals with disability is to achieve a sense of belonging within their communities (Hall, 2010). To belong, Hall suggests, ‘[...] is to feel attached, to feel valued, and to have a sense of insidership and proximity [...]’(p. 56). For this reason, she has suggested replacing the term inclusion with belonging. Within the literature, however, the terms social inclusion and belonging often appear to be used interchangeably; that is, social inclusion typically incorporates belonging, and the criteria for belonging often overlap with

those suggested for social inclusion. What seems to be foundational in the literature is the essential role that both social inclusion and belonging play in personal well-being.

## **BELONGING: A UNIVERSAL HUMAN NEED**

According to [Baumeister and Leary \(1995\)](#), '[...] the need to belong is a powerful, fundamental, and extremely pervasive motivation' (p. 497). Psychologists and sociologists have long agreed that the tendency to form and identify with social groups is an innate human trait, found across cultures and people groups, though differentiated by individual and cultural variations and expressions ([Baumeister & Leary, 1995](#); [Bennett, 2014](#)). [Baumeister and Leary's \(1995\)](#) 'belongingness hypothesis' is situated in studies examining a number of universal components of human interaction patterns, including the following: (1) the natural propensity to form social bonds and groupings that promote identity and affiliation, (2) the predisposition to preserve, or resist dissolution of, meaningful social bonds, (3) the tendency to engage in ongoing and at times considerable cognitive processing to understand and make sense of interpersonal relationships and interactions, (4) the expression of strong emotions, both positive and negative, associated with belonging and inclusion and (5) the negative effects experienced when group belonging or affiliation is absent, dissipates or is lost. These components were further explored in the study by [Gere and MacDonald's \(2010\)](#) more recent examination of research in support of belongingness theory, leading them to conclude ' [...] the need to belong has strong effects on people's cognitions, emotions, and behaviors, and a chronically unmet need has many negative consequences that can profoundly affect an individual's life' (p. 110).

Belonging involves moving beyond stereotypes and societal narratives about disability to being accepted for who one is. Having to change, that is, to become someone or something else, in order to be included is not belonging ([Scorgie & Sobsey, 2017](#)). Rather belonging implies acceptance without judgement, being treated equally and having voice ([Hall, 2009](#)). It emphasizes a focus on an individual's interests, strengths and abilities rather than on deficiencies. It also suggests the right of persons to craft and own their unique identity and that others view them as they wish to be viewed or as they view themselves. For example, in a study with teens with disability, [Robinson and colleagues \(2018\)](#) concluded:

when young people felt there was congruence between how they saw themselves and the way that other people related to them, they felt valued and understood – known in a positive way. (p. 8)

This implies being regarded holistically as a unique person, rather than labelled by perceived shortcomings or deficiencies. Since belonging is so essential to well-being, it is important to examine how social inclusion and belonging might be fostered in school and community settings.

## SOCIAL INCLUSION: INTERPERSONAL, SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY STRUCTURES

In her research with families, [Boss \(2006, 2007\)](#) suggested family membership incorporates two components – physical, that is those who are members by birth or marriage, and psychological, that is those members who are valued, wanted and celebrated. Boss suggested that to be a nominal member of a family, yet marginalized, devalued or treated as if unwanted produces ‘membership ambiguity’, that is, the perception of who is considered ‘in’ and who is ‘out’, which can initiate and perpetuate personal and family stress. Boss’ concept has been widened to incorporate various types of groups or communities, including the experiences of individuals with disability and their family members, extending an understanding of the key role of the psychological component of group membership and inclusion.

[Baumgartner and Burns \(2014\)](#) suggest that social inclusion occurs when an individual ‘[...] feels and experiences a sense of belonging to, identification with and acceptance by’ their community and society as well as the opportunity to choose the groups or communities with which one desires affiliation and to function within them as one determines (p. 362). Research offers a number of key components of belonging and social inclusion when considering children, youth and young adults with disability.

School inclusion occurs when ‘[...] all students, including students with disabilities, are full members of the school community and entitled to equal access to social and academic opportunities’ ([McMahon, Keys, Berardi, Crouch, & Coker, 2016](#), p. 657). Inclusion, therefore, accords each child value and worth. Through their research on social inclusion of students with disability, based on a study of 11 schools in urban areas with diverse populations in the USA, [McMahon and colleagues \(2016\)](#) found that social inclusion, or the opportunity to connect with peers both inside and outside of the classroom, was associated with greater academic achievement and school belonging (i.e. perceptions of acceptance, valuing and connection). Similarly, in a study of youth with intellectual disability in three small town communities in Australia, [Robinson and colleagues \(2018\)](#) observed that being ‘recognized, valued and welcome’ were reported by the participants as central to feelings of belonging (p. 8).

Belonging and acceptance also incorporate relationships that are reciprocal, through interactions that involve both giving and receiving, with each person viewed as having something to contribute that is valued by others or a role to play that enriches all ([Ferguson, 2010; Hall, 2009](#)). Belonging, therefore, requires environments and interactions situated in safety and trust, where all children are supported, can be authentic, explore possibilities, learn, grow and become ([Robinson, Fisher, Hill, & Graham, 2018; Shogren et al., 2015](#)).

Belonging further implies agency and choice regarding inclusion in the groups or communities that are most relevant and meaningful to them. For some individuals, this includes the choice, or self-selection, to engage with peers with disability ([Salmon, 2013](#)). The rationale underlying agency and choice may be important considerations here. For example, [Robinson et al. \(2018\)](#) indicated

that some young people with disabilities in their study decided to self-exclude due to feeling uncomfortable, fearful or uncertainty of how to act in certain settings, or to avoid being hurt (p. 15). Salmon (2013) also suggested that the experience of labelling, stereotyping, separation and status loss caused some students with disability to seek friendship with similar others through self-exclusion. These two examples present a type of exclusion that was imposed, based on inability to access or lack of welcome into a particular group. However, Salmon also described teens who ‘[...] felt a greater sense of belonging when with peers who shared the disability experience (cf. Marcus, 2005), thus self-exclusion was a viable strategy for creating sustaining friendships in the context of stigma’ (p. 254). In other words, disability created a bond of understanding or ‘kinship’ (p. 353). The justifications underlying personal choice of community, according to Salmon, are key when considering self-exclusion; self-selection involves personal agency and choice, while being segregated by others is discriminatory.

Students with disabilities who feel a sense of social inclusion and belonging within the school environment demonstrate higher academic achievement and more positive perceptions of school (McMahon et al., 2016). They also generally value being in classrooms with their peers and desire to build friendships (Shogren et al., 2015).

Though social inclusion has been viewed as essential to well-being and achievement, research suggests that both adults and children with disabilities report experiences of exclusion that have caused them to wonder whether they ‘belong’ (Hall, 2009; Mathias, Kermode, San Sebastian, Koschorke, & Goicolea, 2015; Salmon, 2013). Since the experience of social exclusion has been demonstrated to have negative consequences, it is essential to recognize, understand and address social exclusion, and the processes that may lead to it.

## SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND DISABILITY

From a very early age, humans are ‘highly sensitive to exclusion’ (Bennett, 2014, p.183). Studies have demonstrated both emotional and behavioural responses to the experience of exclusion. For example, Gere and MacDonald (2010) report that individuals who have experienced exclusion have displayed emotional responses of anger, sadness, shame and embarrassment. Reactions to exclusion may include increased use of connection seeking behaviours to form new relationships or, alternately, actions that further reduce the probability of connection, such as retaliation or attributing negative intent to those who have engaged in excluding.

Killen, Mulvey, and Hitti (2013) have explored the experience of social exclusion in children, examining research focused on both interpersonal rejection and intergroup exclusion. Interpersonal rejection is typically centred in individual differences, behaviours or traits that are used to justify the exclusion of another, such as children who appear vulnerable or are aggressive. Rationale for rejection is attributed to intra-personal attributes or a perceived deficit in the child. Intergroup exclusion is centred on ‘prejudicial attitudes’ towards those representative of a group identifier, such as race, gender, nationality or ethnicity

(p. 772). When rationale for exclusion is based on criteria over which an individual or group has limited or no control, such as disability, this can result in perceptions that one may have limited agency or opportunity to belong (Baglieri, Bejoian, Broderick, Conner, & Valle, 2011; Bennett, 2014). Since research suggests children begin to form group identities and affiliations in early childhood, in-group biases, attributions and ways of perceiving others can lead to distancing and exclusion with long-term implications for social belonging (Buhs et al., 2006; Killen et al., 2013).

Four interrelated components that result in stigma and that may contribute to or be used to justify exclusion have been identified by Link and Phelan (2001). The first component involves labelling the other as 'different' based on criteria or categories that are deemed salient to the individual or group. The second component, stereotyping, involves attributing a negative association or tag to the attribute or characteristic that denotes difference. In the third component, the negative characterization is utilized to justified separation – conceptualizing 'us' and 'them'. Depersonalization can occur when the individual or group is identified by or described using the label. Finally, status loss and discrimination result when individuals or group members are allocated a lower place within a social hierarchy, which is then used to create assumptions and expectations that affect opportunity to access services such as education, employment, housing and health care.

The experience of labelling can also have psychological and emotional implications if the negative associations, attitudes and expectations are internalized, resulting in lower self-understanding, self-esteem and self-efficacy and in self-blame (Link & Phelan, 2001; Watermeyer & Swartz, 2016). In addition, the denial of the rights and opportunities accorded to others can trigger feelings of emotional 'trauma' which can produce ongoing psychological pain (Watermeyer & Swartz, 2016, p. 270). Link and Phelan (2001) highlight the 'power dimension' of the stigma process, for it is those who possess social, economic, cultural or political power who are able to ascribe stigma to others (p. 375) that can propagate inequality and limit access, opportunity and belonging.

Stigma can also be a key driver of social exclusion for persons with disability. In a study examining social exclusion of 13 people with mental disorders and eight caregivers in two rural communities in northern India, Mathias et al. (2015) found that experiences with stigmatism often included feelings of distancing, being disregarded, loss of agency and valuing, encountering negative perceptions of ability, and feelings of unworthiness.

Social exclusion of children with disabilities often incorporates the components of stigma described by Link and Phelan (2001). For example, Nowicki, Brown, and Stepien (2014) investigated the issues relating to social exclusion of students with intellectual or learning disabilities in inclusive classrooms (Grades 5 and 6) across five schools in Ontario, Canada. The overarching theme regarding exclusion was 'difference', described as 'negative perceptions of physical characteristics, behaviours, learning abilities and resource allocation' (p. 355). Not all justifications for exclusion, however, were based on stigma; some