Can disabilities influence a child's ability to thrive in a diverse society?

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT

The report identifies what inclusion is in an early years context with an emphasis on inclusion of children with disabilities. Furthermore, the report will attempt to show how current legislation has defined disabilities as well as the possible barriers to inclusion it may have formed. Moreover, the extent to which disabilities can impact school readiness will be investigated and as a result, how appropriate education for children with disabilities can be conducted will be analysed.

INTRODUCTION

This report will attempt to investigate whether legislation has captured the need for the voice of children with disabilities to be heard. Moreover, through the analysis of the impact of disabilities on development and learning, the importance of placing an emphasis on the goals of an anti-bias approach will be evaluated with reference to possible limitations of this practice. In conclusion, theory will be used to determine if the impact of adverse events is dependent on an individual's perception and whether a lack of adverse events in life actually results in optimal living or whether experiencing adversity, such as discrimination, can still lead to wellbeing.

WHAT IS DIVERSITY

A diverse environment within an early years settings encompasses, but is not limited to, differences in demographic aspects for example gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status and/or the differences in the individual's experiences, orientations and interests and ways of thinking as well as developmental differences (Petriwskyj, 2010; Moloney and McCarthy, 2014; Bouillet and Miškeljin, 2017). Arguably, a diverse environment can help to create meaningful moments for children where their learning can be enhanced and where children can learn to negotiate and to take other people's perspectives (Broadbent, 2015). However, even in diverse environments, an emphasis may be placed on a

particular value or ability that places others with differing beliefs or abilities in a minority and thus possibly at risk of facing adverse experiences (McFeeters, 2014). Therefore, in diverse environments it is important to embrace different families and children (Navarro-Cruz and Luschei, 2018).

WHAT IS INCLUSION

Within an Early Years context it is where a child's identity and characteristics are celebrated, allowing them to have a sense of belonging within the setting (Crawford, 2015). Importantly, according to Crawford (2015, p.346) inclusion "will always be in a state of becoming". This emphasizes the need to continuously review the meaning of inclusion. England is heavily diverse and is experiencing various changes that are making the values of mutual respect and tolerance increasingly important (Maddock, 2017).

WHAT IS A DISABILITY

Under the *Equality Act* (2010, Section 6), a disability exists if "the person has a physical or mental impairment and the impairment has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on the person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities." It may be argued that defining disability by reference to a person's inability to "carry out normal day-to-day activities", the *Equality Act* (2010) suggests bias towards people with disabilities being viewed as heavily dependent on others. Additionally, the use of the word "normal" in this context perpetuates the prejudiced stereotype of disabled people being inferior to others (Lanci, 2018). This could lead to social exclusion (Nowicki, Brown and Stepien, 2014). This may in turn have a detrimental impact on the child's wellbeing since the feeling of being understood and connected to others can help a child's emotional development (Golding *et al.,* 2013).

An alternative perspective is offered by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) which stresses that disability is caused by an interaction of the person's impairment as well as attitudinal and environmental barriers that in turn impact the person's ability to participate within society like others. The person's disability is less of an attribute. By doing so disability is seen more through the lens of a social model (World Health Organisation, 2011; Dirth and Branscombe, 2017). Within a social model, disability is socially constructed where people with disabilities need to overcome barriers of the unaccommodating environment, in other words, society disables impaired people (Burke, 2015).

INCLUSION WITH REGARDS TO DISABILITIES

With children who have disabilities, it is more than just allowing children who may have a life long impairment to join a setting, it is about allowing these children to holistically develop and contribute within the setting without being stigmatized (Blamires and Estrada, 2013). An inclusive education is where the system adapts to the needs of the children with an impairment rather than vice versa (Alliance for Inclusive Education, 2018). This is where children have the ability to participate within education systems and have their voice heard (Moloney and McCarthy, 2014; Kilinc *et al.*, 2017). However, the degree to which someone is included may be difficult to measure; environments that attempt to be inclusive may still cause an individual to feel socially excluded (Galley, 2015).

SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Social exclusion is not defined in a rigid way where combinations of factors determine the way people are excluded (Abello *et al.,* 2016). However, discriminatory behaviour, which can cause exclusion, originates in childhood (Rutland and Killen, 2015). This emphasizes the importance of early years education that helps children develop moral principles as well as enabling

children to learn to know how to apply these principles such as equality to actual situations (Fitzhenry and Trudi, 2017).

LEGISLATION ON CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Social understanding about inclusive practice as well as early years provision has been shaped by legislation (Mathieson, 2015). In particular, legislation has established an obligation for practitioners to conduct inclusive practice and that children have the right to receive appropriate education (Marshall and Goodall, 2015; Collett, 2017).

For example, The Warnock Report revolutionized educational provision by introducing new terminology such as 'learning difficulties' that reduced stigmatization (HMSO, 1978). The report (1978, cited in Shaw, 2017) also advocated the integration of children with special educational needs in mainstream education.

The integration of children with disabilities has been enhanced through the need to make reasonable adjustments to provide opportunities for children with disabilities to thrive (DfE, 2014). Reasonable adjustments under the *Equality Act* (2010) are required to prevent individuals with disabilities to being placed at possible risk of a disadvantage. This emphasizes the distinction between disability and the other protected characteristics where achieving equal opportunities for individuals with disabilities is more likely to be achieved if treated more favourably than those without disabilities (Parliament. House of Lords, 2016). In fact, equal treatment might potentially be indirectly discriminating since it would not provide individuals with the same opportunities (Office for Disability Issues, 2011). Therefore, the aim is for treatment of individuals with disabilities to receive fair treatment, which can then lead to equality (Government Equalities Office, 2010). At policy level, the approach has increasingly been to follow a social model of disability (Collett, 2017).

Moreover, the *Equality Act* (2010) states that there is behaviour that is unlawful, which means that measures have to be taken to alleviate disadvantage that individuals with disabilities might experience. On the other hand, it is argued that the fact that the *Equality Act* (2010) covers the provisions that were in the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) means that the protection for disabled people has weakened (Parliament. House of Lords, 2016). This is because, it is believed disability has lost its prevalence now that it is together with the other protected characteristics that the *Equality Act* (2010, cited in Lee, 2010) covers.

However, arguably the rights of individuals with disabilities have been strengthened through the *Children and Families Act* (2014). This can be because the legislation underpinned the statutory guidance, the SEND Code of Practice: 0- 25 years (DfE, 2015). The reason for this is that the code (2015) and legislation (*Children and Families Act*, 2014) emphasizes the personalization of provision and importance of children's voices as well as empowering parents through the emphasis that they engage in decision-making (Hellawell, 2017; Palikara *et al.*, 2018). Conversely, there has been research that indicated that the code (2015) has not enriched educational provision (Lehane, 2017). For example, with regards to special educational needs, a study conducted by The National Autistic Society (2016) found that one in twenty children had been permanently excluded from school and only 50% of parents were satisfied with their child's SEND provision.

IMPACT OF DISABILITY ON LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Children who learn more effectively, are active and collaborate in class as well as have a positive attitude towards learning (Rosello *et al.,* 2018). This could be due to a strong profile of executive functioning which aids in being more goal-directed (Rosello *et al.,* 2018). Children with multiple disabilities may be more withdrawn and have difficulty to engage with their environment in a meaningful way; in turn this may cause developmental delays (Kumar, 2013). Also, children with disabilities are at risk of being stigmatized and isolated which can affect their

academic development (Marks, 2017). This could restrict their participation in daily tasks (Kang *et al.,* 2017). Arguably, this could impact the child's school readiness and academic success as well as the child's ability to engage in social interactions.

Children with disabilities' needs differ and may need more support in different areas (Papadopoulou *et al.,* 2017). In particular, children who are diagnosed with a disability along with, for example, problems in maintaining attention or conduct have a greater risk of poor academic achievement (Jena, 2013). However, in recent years, attitudes towards disabilities are becoming more humane and conversations are more easily conducted regarding the topic (Avagyan, Baghdasaryan and Sargsyan, 2016).

However, the challenges a disability may pose are not necessarily insurmountable (Kumar, 2013). This is especially true if the child feels that they have meaningful relationships with their parents and feel confident and competent, which in turn can help them thrive (Weiss and Riosa, 2015). This emphasizes how an unsupportive environment could have a greater impact on limiting the child's participation (Albrecht and Khetani, 2017; Kang *et al.,* 2017). Environmental factors that surround the child are defined by the International Classification of Functioning Health and Disability (ICF) (WHO, 2001) and these factors can act as barriers or facilitators to the child's functioning (WHO, 2001). The ICF (WHO, 2001) recognizes that educational services are an environmental factor that can be designed to meet the needs of the individual. This highlights how there are other factors that impact the child's ability to thrive amongst their disability.

Moreover, other external factors such as having a higher family income level as well as the educational level of the parents may enable a family to be more empowered to face the possible situations that may arise when dealing with disability (Wakimizu *et al.,* 2018).

WHAT IS BEST PRACTICE?

Best practice involves empowering children by allowing them to be in charge of their actions (Nyquist, Moser and Jahnsen, 2016). With reference to Sturrock and Else's Play Cycle (1998), this could be done by being sensitive to a child's cues. This exemplifies the importance of early years education and care, where high quality early years education can help children gain independence and enhance school readiness (Keith, 2017). Especially with regards to children with disabilities, implementing interventions that recognise and accommodate the child's needs are crucial to ensure the quality of the early years education (Tsao and Sung, 2014). As mentioned previously, educational services can act as facilitators or barriers (WHO, 2001). However, one of the barriers to achieving best practice is that practitioners may not have what Bandura (1997, cited in Baloun *et al.*, 2016) recognizes as self-efficacy and thus their lack of trust in their competencies may cause them to not believe that an inclusive education is possible.

However, an inclusive education can be achieved through an anti-bias approach. An anti-bias approach places at the centre of the functioning of the organization the core principles of diversity and equity (Derman-Sparks, Leekeenan and Nimmo, 2015). This approach could be achieved by teaching children about the possible differences that children might have. This is important since perception of disability can begin to occur as early as age 2 (Divrengi and Aktan, 2010). Therefore, developmentally appropriate conversations should occur. This could be done through circle time where open-ended questions provide children with the opportunity to explore their own feelings and to express these in a group (Divrengi and Aktan, 2010). Visuals in the classroom may also aid since how children interpret illustrations may give insight to practitioners on the possible interpretations children have on for example disabilities (Divrengi and Aktan, 2010). As a result children who experience disabilities and can witness them on

a daily basis are more sensitive through this frequent contact (Kwon, Hong and Jeon, 2017).

Reasonable adjustments can also aid the inclusion of children. Schools have the duty to make reasonable adjustments to prevent children with disabilities from experiencing unlawful behaviour such as discrimination and to "alleviate any substantial disadvantage" they might face when compared to non-disabled pupils (DfE, 2014, p.26)

Parent and teacher partnerships are also crucial (DfE, 2017a). In particular the parent –teacher relationship is particularly important when addressing the needs of children with disabilities (Coleman, 2013; DfE, 2017b). Bronfenbrenner's model highlights this where the meso-system emphasizes the quality of the linkage between the child and the microsystem (1996, cited in Conkbayier and Pascal, 2015). Arguably, this can help with ensuring there is early intervention. This is because atypical development such as a language delay, as the child grows can increasingly impact the child if not tackled (Sebastian, Chengappa and Ballraj, 2012).

IMPLICATIONS

However, an anti-bias approach may be difficult. This is because, early years practitioners may find it hard to address topics such as disabilities (Sutterby, 2015). Furthermore, children may preform behaviour that can hurt other children but research by (Sims-Schouten, 2015, p.242) has found that practitioners may struggle to respond to such behaviour since they believe children "don't understand", thus the child cannot be held accountable. Moreover, it is important that continuously practitioners reflect on how their own biases could impact their practice (Mann, 2010 cited in Spencer and Pisha, 2015).

THRIVING

According to Hill's ABC-X model (1958, cited in Pickard and Ingersoll, 2017) a family's perception of a stressful event is one of the factors that impacts whether the family experiences a crisis. Therefore, if a family does not perceive a stressor negatively, it may not cause a crisis (Weber, 2010). Therefore, arguably if a family does not perceive disability as a stressor it may have less potential to negatively impact development. This is especially true, based on Hill's research (1949, cited in McCubbin *et al.,*1980), if the family has the resources to respond to the possible negative behaviour, possibly discrimination, the child is exposed to.

Furthermore, research conducted by Weingarten and Worthen (2017) has shown that children who have disabilities can still thrive and be integrated within the community in a purposeful and fulfilling life. In particular, facing moderate amount of adversity can increase coping with other challenges posed during lifetime (Seery *et al.,* 2013).

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it is clear that the need to listen to the voices of children, particularly that of children with disabilities, has increasingly become recognized, where now legislation as well as practice can aid in the development of an inclusive practice. As a result, this highlights how a personalization of the educational program to meet the needs of every child is essential since adopting a one-size-fits-all approach might lead to not meeting the unique characteristics of each child. This makes the pivotal importance of the environment increasingly evident, where the environment needs to accommodate to the needs of children to help them thrive as individuals. However, children with disabilities can still flourish and lead satisfying and meaningful lives.

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