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**Early Childhood Inclusion in the Land of the Long White Cloud: A Way Forward for  
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### Abstract

To examine the current status of early childhood inclusive education in New Zealand, this article highlights the country's overall structure of inclusive education and other services for individuals with special needs. The unique features of early childhood special education services are also highlighted. Challenges to enhance the quality of education and services for young children with special needs, as well as future possibilities in New Zealand are also discussed.

*Keywords:* inclusive practices, early childhood education, special education, New Zealand

## **Early Childhood Inclusion in the Land of the Long White Cloud: A Way Forward for New Zealand**

### **Introduction**

As a developed sovereign island country in the southwestern Pacific Ocean, Aotearoa (the Māori name for New Zealand), a country known as *the land of the long white cloud*, has been ranked as having one of the top education systems in the world (e.g., Ministry of Education, 2017; 2020a; Zhang, 2018). For example, according to the report of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2019), New Zealand performs well in early childhood indicators: child-teacher ratios are amongst the lowest in the OECD countries, and participation and expenditure are in the top third of OECD (Ministry of Education, 2020a). At present, primary and secondary education is compulsory and free for children aged 6 to 16, with the majority attending from the age of 5. Today, New Zealand has an adult literacy rate of 99%, and over 51% the population aged 15 to 29 hold a tertiary qualification (Ministry of Education, 2018).

Just like many other countries in the world, New Zealand has also been influenced by the global inclusion movement and driven by concerns related to the rights and education of children with disabilities. Today, inclusion is widely regarded as a desirable goal by schools in the country.

While much of the literature on the inclusive education has been narrowly concerned with the inclusion of students with disabilities, it is important to note that marginalisation, exclusion and underachievement take many forms and affect many different kinds of children (e.g., Ainscow et al., 2006). As such, a definition of inclusion should also touch upon issues of equity, participation, community, entitlement, compassion, respect for diversity and sustainability. More specifically, in the context of early childhood care and education, inclusion embodies the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every child and

his or her family, regardless of ability, to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of families, communities, and society (Division for Early Childhood, & The National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2019).

Inclusive education stands in contrast to *special education*, where young children with special needs are educated in separate schools or classes or treated very differently in the classroom when compared to their typical peers. At this point it may be useful to make a digression to briefly define other key terms used in the article. *Young children* refers to children from three to six years old. *Special needs* refers to a specific category of exceptionality such as learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, or language difficulties requiring some modifications of standard curriculum, methods and/or equipment, as well as the emotional and social environment of the classroom and school, to obtain optimal benefit from schooling (Foreman, 2008). For the purpose of this article, the terms *special needs* and *disabilities* are used interchangeably.

Inclusive education has been widely researched internationally over the past few decades, and many countries are moving in this direction (Barnett, 2013; Zhang, 2018). There is also increasing evidence for the positive power of early interventions on child development across domains. As the early childhood is a highly sensitive, critical period for early learning and development, the experiences of these early years crucially impact long-term cognitive, language, and social outcomes (e.g., Ministry of Education, 2011b).

While research on early childhood inclusion in many developed countries has been extensive, it has received relatively little attention from New Zealand investigators. There exists a need to carefully examine and improve the quality of inclusive education in early childhood services. To describe the current status of early childhood inclusive education in New Zealand, this paper highlights the country's overall structure of early childhood care and education for children with and without special needs. The following sections will also

discuss challenges to improve access to and equity in pre-primary education in New Zealand, as well as future possibilities of early childhood inclusion.

### **Overall Structure of Inclusive Education and Services for Students with Special Needs**

Currently, schools in New Zealand are required to be inclusive under the *Education Act 1989*. This legislation guarantees equal rights for students with special needs to participate in mainstream primary and secondary education. More specifically, Section 8 of the *Education Act 1989* clearly indicates that people who have special needs (whether because of disability or otherwise) have the same rights to enrol and receive education in public schools as people who do not (New Zealand Parliament, 1989).

In addition, in *The New Zealand curriculum*, it is explicitly stated that the national curriculum applies to all learners, “irrespective of gender, ethnicity, belief, ability or disability, social or cultural background, or geographical location in New Zealand” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 8). However, the message of including those with disabilities is not evident throughout the entire document. Additionally, as early childhood education (ECE) is not compulsory in New Zealand, there is therefore no existing requirement on any ECE service to take any child, including those with special needs (Early Childhood Taskforce, 2012). Unfortunately, many parents of young children with disabilities depend on schools to provide support and services to meet their needs, but, for most, those services will not start until school age.

The right to an inclusive education is also further reinforced by other related policies such as the *New Zealand Disability Strategy* (NZDS), *NZDS Implementation Work Plan*, *Special education business plan*, *Disability Action Plan 2014-2018*, and the *Success for all*. These strategies, plans, and policies all aim to establish a fully inclusive education system in New Zealand, by providing a range of funding and support to students with special needs, including those who are at-risk or marginalized (Ministry of Education, 2010b; 2011a).

Schools were also encouraged to raise awareness of individual differences and to give students with disabilities equal opportunities to learn and develop with their typical peers.

Of note, despite the questionable the *Disability Strategy* setting a goal of fostering an aware and responsive public service (Ministry of Health, 2001), New Zealand does not yet have an integrated whole-of-government support system for young children with disabilities. For example, according to the report from the Child Poverty Action Group (2015), children with disabilities are often invisible in public consultations and discussions about policies that affect them, and decisions about the provision of services including public transport are commonly made with minimal regard to the needs of children with disabilities (Child Poverty Action Group New Zealand, 2015).

Furthermore, though the *Disability Strategy* explicitly states that the society should include people regardless of their individual differences, and involve “children with disabilities and youth in decision-making and giving them greater control over their lives” (Ministry of Health, 2001, p. 36), young children with disabilities barely rated a mention throughout the major welfare reforms that have been implemented since 2010 (Child Poverty Action Group New Zealand, 2015). In addition, one may argue that at this time many people in New Zealand still hold a negative attitude toward those with disabilities, forming strong, invisible barriers toward inclusion (e.g., Early Childhood Taskforce, 2012; Education Review Office, 2016). Coupled with the lack of incentives for improving early childhood inclusion, there are concerns about the rights and interests of young children with disabilities. The absence of sufficient support shows that the viability of inclusion and the inclusionary legislative framework should be questioned.

At present, other than the national curriculum which specifically mentions the importance of diversity, no other nationwide steps have been taken here to develop an inclusive education structure in early childhood settings (e.g., Early Childhood Taskforce,

2012; Frost, 2010; Porterfield & MacArthur, 2009). Instead, educational support for students with special needs is provided under the policy framework of *Special Education 2000*. Special education and services are provided both within mainstream schools as well as through special education schools (Ministry of Education, 2010a). Special education schools, which include day specialist schools and residential schools, are run by the government to cater to students with high needs who require a significantly adapted curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2020b). Day specialist schools not only provide specialist teaching, but also function as resource centres. According to the Ministry of Education, these special settings are not regarded as contrary to the spirit of inclusion, as many of them have satellite classes on site at mainstream schools, where children with high needs can receive intensive support services and have opportunities to integrate in a regular school environment. Some specialist schools also offer itinerant teaching services, so that children can enrol at local schools in a regular classroom but get specialist teaching and support. Residential schools provide special education services for students in years 7 to 10 who are deaf, hard of hearing, blind, have low vision, or have severe behaviour needs, or have educational, social and emotional needs together with a slow rate of learning (Ministry of Education, 2020b).

### **Unique Features of Early Childhood Inclusive Education & Service Delivery System**

The following section describes early childhood special education services for young children in New Zealand. The Ministry of Education funds a range of learning-related services for children with disabilities (Ministry of Education, 2011b). There are three layers of intervention: individual, school-based (special education grant), and specialist services to which schools can refer students. An Individual Education Plan (IEP) is often used by specialists to set out individualised goals for students with special needs and outline how they will be supported to achieve them, including teaching strategies, resources and strategies for parents to support them at home.



### *Early Intervention Education*

The Ministry of Education (2011b) provides specialist early intervention services to children from birth to school age who have significant development or learning delay, physical disability, behaviour or communication difficulty. Of the disability classifications, the two largest are learning disabilities and AD/HD, followed by autism spectrum disorders and other emotional/behavioural disorders. Early intervention teams work with families and early childhood educators, and may include a range of specialists, such as advisors for children who are deaf, early intervention teachers, kaitakawaenga (Māori cultural advisors), psychologists, and speech-language therapists. ECE providers can refer families to the service with parents' consent. Where needed, early intervention staff work with parents and the child's teachers to develop an IEP to support the child's learning and development (Ministry of Education, 2011a).

Ministry of Education also oversees two types of unique ECE services: The Correspondence School (Te Kura) and hospital-based services (Ministry of Education, 2014). The Correspondence School offers learning programmes for children aged three to five years who live too far away from ECE services, can't attend because of health reasons, or shift homes at least once a term. Teachers work with the families and children to develop a programme to help families plan activities and learning experiences, and often loan a range of resources, and organise regional events and achievement days. Hospital-based services offer young children who are hospitalized ECE programmes which are run by hospital play specialists in playrooms.

The New Zealand early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (i.e., Māori: a woven mat) has a reputation for being one of the first developed in the world—holistic in nature and with bi-cultural foundations (Ministry of Education, 1996). Furthermore, despite the fact that the New Zealand curriculum for ECE makes it clear that education in New Zealand puts all

children at the centre of teaching and learning, research indicates that many early childhood teachers in New Zealand encounter difficulties when working with children with diverse needs and backgrounds (e.g. Guo, 2005; Singh & Zhang, 2018). The education environment and negative attitudes have created tremendous obstacles for inclusion in the ECE sector.

In addition, though the early childhood curriculum asserts that all children should experience a curriculum that is forward-looking and inclusive, it provides only broad guidelines that are open to wide interpretation. For example, though ECE providers are required to show how they incorporate the general goals of the *Te Whāriki* into their programmes, there are no mandatory learning outcomes that service providers are required to plan for (Blaiklock, 2010). Similarly, there are no requirements to assess children's learning for particular outcomes. With no required learning outcomes, no required assessments, and a very open approach to planning, it can become subjective to say that one ECE programme is implementing the national curriculum and inclusion more successfully than another (Blaiklock, 2010).

In some instances, ECE teachers lack the required skills to educate children with disabilities, leaving ECE programmes in need of resources and professional support (Porterfield & MacArthur, 2009). As a result, in ECE services that do not openly support inclusion, children with special needs are either taken out of the programme and placed with specialised early intervention service providers or they are accepted in the programme but not fully included in the everyday activities (Porterfield & MacArthur, 2009). Anecdotal evidence also suggests that some ECE providers are less than welcoming of children with disabilities and actively discourage families from enrolling in their programmes (Early Childhood Taskforce, 2012), and children are excluded or denied the right to participate in ECE settings of their choice (Porterfield & MacArthur, 2009).

### ***Positive Behaviour for Learning Action Plan***

In New Zealand, non-mainstream education and services for children with special needs are delivered by a range of organizations. These services are either funded by the Ministry of Education or private organizations. One such example is the *Positive Behaviour for Learning Action Plan* (PB4L; Ministry of Education, 2013) that applies to all students across all schools. With a focus on providing early, proactive support for parents, teachers and schools, the PB4L includes a series of programs and activities that are delivered across New Zealand to address behaviour problems in schools. The PB4L has four major programme components: (a) the *Early Years* programme, also known as *Incredible Years*, targets children aged two to eight at risk for, or presenting with, behaviour problems; (b) wrap around service; (c) crisis response service, and (d) school wide PB4L.

### ***Child Development Services***

*Child Development Services* are provided by local district health boards to support children who have an intellectual, sensory or physical disability (Ministry of Education, 2011b). The child development teams involve a range of professionals and may include occupational therapists, speech language therapists, dieticians, physiotherapists, social workers, and psychologists as well as cultural support workers (Ministry of Education, 2011b). Parents can discuss accessing the service with the child's doctor, nurse or other healthcare provider (Ministry of Education, 2011b). Referrals can also be made through Needs Assessment Service Coordination providers.

### ***Other Early Intervention Education Providers***

The New Zealand government contracts a number of other providers to support families of children from disadvantaged backgrounds: *Wellington Early Intervention Trust*, *Crippled Children Society (CCS) Disability Action*, the *Strengthening Families* project, and the *Early Start* project. These services are launched in various locations to provide intensive family support for high risk families. When fully operational, these programmes aim to

improve the well-being of children in difficult circumstances by improving the co-ordination and effectiveness of a range of different services. For example, the *Early Start* project provides regular home visits, together with advice and co-ordination of community-based services such as the Plunket, general practitioners, the Children and Young Person's Service, and other agencies. Another example is the *Strengthening Families* project which is a national, intersectoral initiative involving health, education, and welfare agencies. This project pulls together support for families and often involves a case management approach together with the co-ordination of service and a comprehensive review of funding arrangements (Ministry of Education, 2011b).

While the above services exist and are active in New Zealand, there is little evidence that ECE in New Zealand is reducing the educational disadvantage associated with growing economic inequality (e.g., Blaiklock, 2010). Making evidence-based changes that could improve the wellbeing and learning of young children is paramount (Blaiklock, 2010; Zhang, 2015). This will be discussed next.

### **Disability Issues Related to Solutions to Child Poverty**

There is good evidence that New Zealand children with disabilities are at greater risk of living in low-income households (Child Poverty Action Group New Zealand, 2015). For example, back in 2013, the national Disability Survey showed that about 14% of the children with disabilities (aged 0-14 years) live in low-income, benefit-dependent households. Today, as is true in many other countries, New Zealand children with disabilities are more likely to live in poverty, and barriers to full participation and inclusion of these children remain. As a result, the issue of child poverty in New Zealand has been a topic of public discussion and debate over the last two decades.

According to Park, Turnbull, and Turnbull (2002), "It is becoming increasingly evident that poverty has a tremendous impact on the educational results of all children,

including those with disabilities. Thus, poverty is not a secondary topic in the field of special education services and disability policy anymore” (p. 152). Though different measures of poverty result in different findings about who is “poor” and who is not, poverty has been described as the extent to which an individual lacks resources (Payne, 2013), implying one can experience a variety of types of poverty—be it resource poor or educationally poor. Cauthen and Fass’s (2008) definition of poverty is also grounded in terms of adequate financial resources and income: “Families and their children experience poverty when they are unable to achieve a minimum, decent standard of living that allows them to participate fully in mainstream society” (p.1).

At present, New Zealand has no official poverty measure. Although it is not the purpose of this article to discuss the different measures of poverty, a further problem is evident around the lack of services available for poor children with disabilities. Shahtahmasebi and colleagues’ study (2011) examined the relationship between children with disabilities and poverty. The researchers found that children with disabilities are more likely to grow up in poverty—living under conditions that have been shown to impede development—than their typical peers.

While this by no means suggests a causative relationship between disability and poverty, a possible explanation for these findings is that additional, direct and indirect costs of raising a child with a disability does increase a family’s risk of descending into poverty. In fact, disabilities not only incurs costs in addition to normal household running costs, families of children with disabilities often face increased levels of stress and pressure, as compared to families with typically developing children (Perry, 2014; Shahtahmasebi et al., 2011). As a result, the cycle of low income and extra costs can make life very challenging for the families of children with disabilities. In addition, children with disabilities in low-income households are also more likely to live in socioeconomically deprived areas with limited access to social

services including early intervention services and easily accessible public transport (e.g., Perry, 2014; Shahtahmasebi et al., 2011)

On the other hand, one's lower socioeconomic position may increase incidence and prevalence of health impairments, as a result, children growing up in low-income households often face multiple health risks. Often, children living in poverty have to overcome significant challenges to achieve the human rights and freedom their typical peers enjoy (Perry, 2014; Shahtahmasebi et al., 2011). Another possibility is that this association is reflective of some unidentified, unmeasured factors that independently increase the risk of disability and poverty. In either case, it becomes important to strengthen the resources available to children with disabilities.

At present, in New Zealand there is financial support available for children with disabilities, ranging from subsidy to equipment and carer support. For example, the Ministry of Social Development provides financial support for children with disabilities and their families. Direct financial support includes the Child Disability Allowance and the Disability Allowance. The Supported Living Payment is available to adults caring for a person (who is not their partner or spouse) who needs hospital-level or residential care (Ministry of Social Development, 2020).

As mentioned earlier, research has also shown that high quality early interventions can make a lasting difference for at-risk children, advance their wellbeing, and act as a protective factor for children who are vulnerable (e.g., Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004). With prevention and early interventions being critically important for mitigating the significant personal and socioeconomic costs associated with childhood disabilities, a review of these conditions in the New Zealand context may assist the health sector and Ministry of Education to consider prevention and early intervention, as well as strategies to reduce disabilities in young children.

### **Early Childhood Inclusion in New Zealand: A Look to the Future**

Intervention services for young children with special needs in New Zealand have achieved significant development in the past few decades. However, when compared to many other developed countries in the world, New Zealand still has some way to go in its New Zealand still has some way to go in its provision of early childhood inclusion for young children with disabilities. There are many challenges, as well as opportunities, which lie ahead in terms of how the quality of early childhood care and education can be improved to better serve young children with special needs.

Today, inclusive education in New Zealand is at the intersection of a host of crossroads. The capacity for early childhood programmes to adequately support and address the learning needs of young children with disabilities is limited. Therefore, as pointed out by many international researchers (e.g., Luk, 2005; Zhang & Wu, 2016), tertiary teacher training and in-service professional development in inclusive education is essential. More specifically, teacher education in New Zealand should provide a good grounding in the core skills needed for teaching in today's diverse classrooms, including: (a) planning and teaching for inclusion and access to the curriculum, (b) behaviour management and awareness of the emotional and mental health needs of pupils, (c) assessment for learning, and (d) an understanding of where professional advice may be needed.

Many countries (e.g., England, Hong Kong, & USA) have adapted their teacher education programmes to take into account the recent emphasis on inclusive education. Teacher training providers in England and Hong Kong, for example, offer a range of courses that help prospective teachers to develop skills in the areas of the identification of learner needs and delivering and facilitating learning in a wide range of contexts (e.g., Department of Education, 2020; Education Bureau, 2020; The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, 2020). It is therefore recommended that the New Zealand Ministry of Education

implement a similar teacher training model to ensure sufficient tertiary education and professional development, and to develop a workforce that can work effectively with young children with special needs and their families.

Thirdly, as limited information exists on early childhood inclusive education in New Zealand (Frost, 2010; Guo, 2015), more empirical research is required to fully grasp teachers' current knowledge and understanding of the complexities that surround the educational needs, and the impact this has on curriculum development and inclusion practice.

Fourthly, based on the current literature (e.g., Perry, 2014; Shahtahmasebi et al., 2011), it is recommended that the government explicitly prioritise providing inclusive quality ECE for children with disabilities who are living in poverty. It is also essential that the government makes an effort to ensure that children living in poverty who are impacted by disabilities are provided opportunities that enable them to achieve their aspirations.

Last but not least, in order to improve the quality of what is being provided for young children, including those from low-income families, a clearer picture of the country's current status is needed in order to identify which areas of early childhood education in New Zealand would most benefit from change (Child Poverty Action Group New Zealand, 2015). In addition, substantial changes are needed in New Zealand's education policy and leadership, and in the organisation of ECE settings and classroom practices in order to achieve the benefits of early childhood inclusive education.



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