The Fight for the Human Right to Inclusive Education: Conceptualisation of Inclusion, Implementation Challenges and the Journey from Theory to Practice

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Introduction

Inclusive, good quality education is a foundation for dynamic and equitable societies.

Desmond Tutu.

Inclusion as a global concern

The need to embrace human diversity and develop inclusive societies is a widely supported aspiration of governments and citizens around the world, especially in the face of increasing recognition of the adverse impacts of entrenched structural inequities that undermine social cohesion and the enjoyment of human rights and freedoms.

For example, considerable research has identified a relationship between social exclusion and discrimination and poor health outcomes, [1] including life expectancy [2]. Similarly, there is increasing recognition of the financial cost of exclusion and the connection between exclusion and economic prosperity, particularly in education and employment. These concerns are reflected in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals adopted at the United Nations Summit in September 2015 with the pledge to "Leave No One Behind".

While there is no settled definition of "social inclusion", it is broadly recognised that participation, equity and human rights are at the core of the concept and must form

the backbone of efforts to develop inclusive societies.

For example, UNESCO's definition of an "inclusive society" is as follows:

Inclusive society is defined as a society for all, in which every individual has an active role to play. Such a society is based on fundamental values of equity, equality, social justice, and human rights and freedoms, as well as on the principles of tolerance and embracing diversity [3].

Exclusion of people with disabilities

Around the world and across cultures and societies, 1.3 billion people with disabilities remain among the most marginalised. This is true for people with disabilities in both developing and developed countries and explains the particular significance of the concept of "inclusion" in the global movement for the rights of people with disabilities.

In Australia for example, the employment rate of people with disabilities is approximately half the rate for non-disabled people [4], and against the OECD average for employment of people with disabilities, Australia ranked 21 out of 29 [5]. Australia also ranked last out of 27 OECD countries regarding poverty rates among people with disabilities, with approximately 45% of Australians with disabilities living in or near poverty, against the OECD average of 22% [6].

However, while social exclusion tends to be experienced across a range of dimensions, people with disabilities continue to face significant barriers in all areas of life, too often resulting in segregation and exclusion "from cradle to grave".

As Malaquias wrote in her article "He Ain't Special He's My Brother – Time to Ditch The Phrase 'Special Needs'", [7] commenting on the use of "special" as a euphemism for the segregation of people with disabilities:

"Although human diversity, the social model of disability and inclusion as human rights framework concepts are developing traction, for much of society the 'special story' still goes like this:

A child with 'special needs' catches the 'special bus' to receive 'special assistance' in a 'special school' from 'special education teachers' to prepare them for a 'special' future living in a 'special home' and working in a 'special workshop'.

Does that sound 'special' to you?"

While there is no "silver bullet" to address these issues, it is increasingly recognised that inclusive education, now also adopted in Sustainable Development Goal 4, is not only a tool for ensuring social inclusion but that an inclusive society must begin with ensuring an inclusive education system.

Inclusive education is the pathway to social inclusion

The relationship between inclusive education and social inclusion has been corroborated by considerable research evidence. A 2018 comprehensive methodological review titled "Evidence of the Link Between Inclusive Education and Social Inclusion", and released by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education [8] (**EASNIE**), considered findings from over 200 papers from a range of countries (including the United Kingdom, USA, Australia and continental Europe) and concluded that "there is a link between inclusive education and social inclusion".

Specifically, the review found that inclusive education:

a. increases the opportunities for peer connection and friendships between students with and without

disabilities;

b. results in better social and academic outcomes for students with disabilities;

c. increases the opportunities for students with disabilities to participate in leisure activities; and

d. increases the likelihood of students with

disabilities after graduating from secondary education: enrolling

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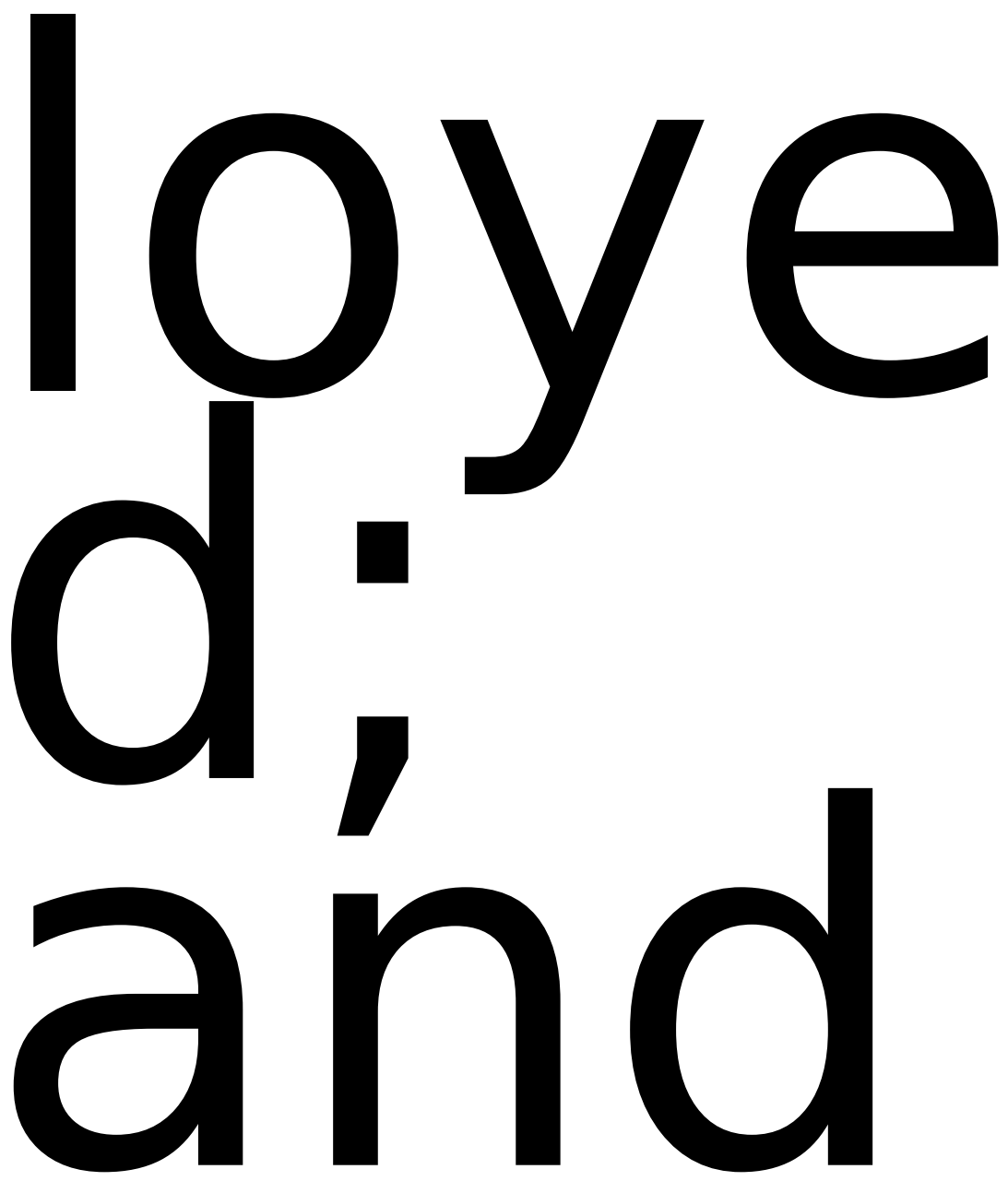
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education;

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The review also found that inclusive settings increase opportunities for participation whereas segregated settings limit the potential for students with disabilities to be socially included:

"The research evidence presented in this review suggests that attending segregated [educational] settings minimises the opportunities for social inclusion both in the short term (while children with disabilities are at school) and the long term (after graduation from secondary education). Attending a special setting is correlated with poor academic and vocational qualifications, employment in sheltered workshops, financial dependence, fewer opportunities to live independently, and poor social networks after graduation." [9]

It is worth noting that findings about social and academic outcomes for students with disabilities reflect a body of relevant research over the last 40 years, establishing that inclusive education produces superior social and academic outcomes for students with disabilities.

As Jackson concluded in his 2008 review of comparative research [10] "[n]o review could be found comparing segregation and inclusion that came out in favour of segregation in over forty years of research."

A 2016 comprehensive review of the international research by Hehir et al [11] concluded that there is "clear and consistent evidence that inclusive educational settings can confer substantial short and long-term benefits for students with and without disabilities" and that students with disabilities educated in general education classrooms outperform their peers who have been educated in

segregated settings, develop stronger skills in reading and mathematics, have higher rates of attendance, are less likely to have behavioural problems, and are more likely to complete secondary school than students who have not been included.

That review also found that:

a. academic and social outcomes for students in general education settings are without exception better than for students in segregated or partially segregated environments (e.g. part attendance in segregated units or

classrooms, often within mainstream schools);

b. as adults, students with disabilities who have been included are more likely to be enrolled in post-secondary education, and to be employed or living independently; and

c. including students with disabilities in regular education

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classes does not harm non-disabled students and may even confer some academic and social benefits [12].

Relevantly, both the 2016 Hehir review and the 2018 EASNIE review adopted the definition of “inclusive education” provided by the United Nations treaty body charged with overseeing the implementation of United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities (**CRPD**), the Committee on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities (**CRPD Committee**), in its General Comment No.4 (The Right to Inclusive Education). This General Comment document, which explains the scope and meaning of Article 24 of the CRPD, provides guidance to the 177 State Parties that have ratified the CRPD and are legally bound under international law to implement its terms.

Broadly, General Comments are instruments that analyse, interpret and clarify specific aspects of a human rights treaty and provide implementation guidance to State Parties.

Unfortunately, too many law-makers and policy-makers, educators and families, as well as academics and researchers in the fields of education or disability, are unaware of General Comment No.4 and continue to conceptualise “inclusive education” in ways that are inconsistent with human rights obligations and that also undermine the realisation of the right to education of people with disabilities through “misdefinitional noise”.

As such, the adoption of the human rights framework for the implementation of inclusive education within schools and across school systems, is critical to ensuring that education is an enabler, and not a barrier, to the broader inclusion of people with disabilities in all areas of life.

The human rights framework for inclusive education

The CRPD (and its Optional Protocol) was adopted on 13 December 2006 at the United Nations in New York, and it entered into force on 3 May 2008, following decades of advocacy by people with disabilities and their representative organisations around the world. It was developed with their significant input under the motto of “Nothing About Us Without Us” [13] and is considered to be the most authoritative statement on the human rights of people with disabilities. In fact, the drafting of the CRPD involved the highest level of participation by representatives of civil society of any human rights convention, or indeed any other United Nations process, in history.

Critically, the CRPD rejected “medical model” thinking and affirmed, against much of society’s understanding of disability as an individual “deficit” and a societal “burden”, the inherent value, dignity and human rights and freedoms of people with disabilities.

This “deficit” thinking, which stubbornly endures today in disability policy, including in education, was perhaps at its most confronting in the eugenics movement that emerged in the early 20th Century and which inspired the policies at the centre of Nazi atrocities committed at the start of and during the Second World War. Under the little-known “Aktion 4” or “T4” program – a systematic involuntary euthanasia program of people with disabilities deemed “unworthy”, the Nazi regime murdered around 300,000 people in what was a precursor to the broader holocaust that was to come. Today, those victims have been finally remembered in Berlin’s T4 – Memorial and Information Centre for the Victims of the Nazi Euthanasia Programme opened in 2014, well after memorials for the Jewish, gay and Roma communities.

The CRPD also recognised, informed by the “social model” of disability, the “disabling” effect that physical and societal systemic environments and cultural attitudes can have on people with disabilities, and adopted an explicit social development dimension with “inclusion” at its core.

Paragraph (e) of the Preamble to the CRPD describes “disability” as resulting from:

“[…] the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”

Article 3 then adopts the following as the principles of the CRPD:

a. *Respect for inherent dignity, individual autonomy including the freedom to make one’s own choices, and independence of persons;*
b. *Non-discrimination;*
c. *Full and effective participation and inclusion in society;*

d. *Respect for difference and acceptance of persons with disabilities as part of human diversity and humanity;*
e. *Equality of opportunity;*
f. *Accessibility;*
g. *Equality between men and women;*
h. *Respect for the evolving capacities of children with disabilities and*

respect for the right of children with disabilities to preserve their identities.

Most relevant for present purposes, the CRPD was the first legally binding international treaty to explicitly recognise inclusive education as a human rights concern.

While the earlier human rights instruments recognised general rights to free and compulsory education for all children – they did not result in immediate change for many children with disabilities. In countries like Australia, children with complex disabilities – particularly intellectual disability – were excluded from public education well into the 1970s and where education was provided to students with disabilities, it generally followed the segregated model of institutions, with inclusion in regular schools being the exception.

The following haunting passage, contained in Burton Blatt's 1966 photographic essay entitled "Christmas in Purgatory", which exposed the treatment of people with disabilities in eastern American institutions, captures that dark history and helped to build momentum against segregation and institutionalisation:

The infant dormitories depressed us the most. … Very young children, one and two years of age, were lying in cribs, without interaction with any adult, without playthings, without any apparent stimulation. In one dormitory that had over a 100 infants and was connected to 9 other dormitories that totalled 1000 infants, we experienced a heartbreaking encounter. As we entered, we heard a muffled sound …. A young child seemed to be calling, 'Come. Come play with me. Touch me.' We walked to the door. On the other side were 40 or more unkempt infants crawling

around on a bare floor in a bare room. One of the children had managed to squeeze his hand under the doorway and push his face through the side of a latched door. His moan was the clearest representation we had ever heard of the lonely, hopeless man.

…

The 'Special Education' we observed in the dormitories for young children was certainly not education. But it was special. It was among the most especially frightening and depressing encounters with human beings we have ever experienced.

By 1990, the *World Declaration on Education for All* stated a commitment to "education for all" with express reference to people with disabilities, and the Salamanca Statement, [14] which was produced at the *World Conference on Special Needs Education* 4 years later, specifically supported the education of students with disabilities in regular schools, paving the way for the endorsement of inclusive education in the CRPD 12 years later.

Article 24 of the CRPD not only recognised the rights of people with disabilities to education, "without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity", it also imposed on State Parties an obligation to "ensure an inclusive education system".

Article 24.1 of the CRPD provides:

"State Parties recognise the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, State Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels ...."

Article 24.2 provides:

"In realizing this right, State Parties shall ensure that:

a. *Persons with*

disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability, ...;

b. *Persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live;*

c. *Reasonable accommodation of the individual's requirements is provided;*

d. *Persons with disabilities receive the support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education;*

e. *Effective individualised support measures*

are provided in environments that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion.”

Unfortunately, what Article 24 did not do, from a legal perspective, was to define “inclusive education” and its implementation over the next decade has been left wanting, to put it mildly.

Article 24 CRPD – Implementation difficulties

Despite the recognition of inclusive education under international human rights law and a clear evidence-based case, the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education remains hard-fought by many students and families, frequently contested [15] and often misunderstood – or worse, deliberately misappropriated.

In fact, to date, Italy is the only country that has effectively ended, since 1978 and prior to the CRPD, segregated education of students with disabilities [16], although the Canadian province of New Brunswick has more recently prohibited segregated education of students with disabilities through its 2013 international award-winning [17] legally-binding Policy 322, in an effort to implement an inclusive education system [18]. While there are also excellent examples of fully inclusive schools

around the world, whole-of-system implementation remains a significant challenge.

As the then Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Nils Muižnieks, noted in his position paper “Fighting School Segregation in Europe through Inclusive Education” [19] issued in September 2017:

“Separate schooling of children with disabilities is a widespread practice across Europe notwithstanding the fact that Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) imposes on states a duty to ensure that children with disability can access ‘an inclusive, quality … education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live.’”

In comments that prefaced the release of the above position paper, the Commissioner also highlighted the propensity for governments to “tinker” with their education systems rather than to “change” them:

“… [A]fter five years of examining these questions on the ground, I am convinced that many Council of Europe member states are still a long way from internalising the paradigm shift they endorsed by ratifying the CRPD. On the whole …their priority has been on adjusting existing systems which are fundamentally non-compliant with the CRPD rather than reforming those systems from the ground up. Our societies still seem to consider that some people … are simply too impaired to … benefit from a decent education alongside their non-disabled peers. It is this attitude that we need to overcome to bring about the necessary transformation.” [20]

Further, the Commissioner criticised the practice of “rebranding” segregated education in lieu of genuine reform:

“[C]ountries appear to be willing to settle for some form of segregation and rename segregated forms of education under a more acceptable brand (such as ‘appropriate education’ in the Netherlands) or even as inclusive education (for instance ‘inclusive education centres’ in Romania) [21].”

These comments could apply equally to efforts to implement inclusive education in Australia. For example, a 2017 survey carried out by Down Syndrome Australia, suggests that more than half of all children with Down syndrome currently attend some form of segregated educational setting [22]. Even more troubling are indicators pointing to an actual increase in segregation of Australian students with

disabilities in the last 10 years or so [23].

It was concern about the lack of progress by governments towards achieving inclusive education stemming from the CRPD Committee's "review of the national reports submitted since the beginning of its work and the information pertaining to the implementation of the right to education for persons with disabilities contained in those reports" that finally led the CRPD Committee, in the Concluding Comments to its twelfth session in September 2014, to call for specific action in relation to Article 24 and the right to education, initiating the process to develop a General Comment:

"The exclusion in education on the basis of disability experienced by children and adults with disabilities not only constitutes discrimination, but also hinders their meaningful participation on an equal basis with others in all spheres of life." [24]

Meaning and scope of the human right to inclusive education

On 26 August 2016, following a near two-year international consultation process with government representatives, disabled person's organisations, education experts and civil society, including a Day of General Discussion in 2015, General Comment No. 4 to Article 24 – entitled *The Right to Inclusive Education*, was adopted and issued by the CRPD Committee.

General Comment No.4 on Article 24 of the CRPD is, at 24 pages, the most detailed and important international instrument on the right to inclusive education, providing key definitions, essential concepts and core features of inclusive education systems. In particular, Article 24 and General Comment No.4 make clear that inclusive education is the means by which students with disabilities realise their universal human right to education. In other words, the denial of inclusive education to students with disabilities amounts to a violation of their fundamental human right to education.

While it is beyond the scope of this article to analyse General Comment No.4 in detail, the following aspects should be noted.

Definition of inclusive education

Perhaps the most important clarification made by General Comment No.4 are the definitions that it provides in paragraph 11, where it seeks to define inclusive

education and to distinguish it from the concepts of “exclusion”, “segregation” and “integration”:

a. *“Exclusion occurs when students are directly or indirectly prevented from or denied access to education in any form.”*

b. *“Segregation occurs when the education of students with disabilities is provided in separate*

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environments designed or used to respond to a particular or various impairments, in isolation from students without disabilities."

c. *"Integration is a process of placing persons with disabilities in existing mainstream educational institutions, as long*

as the former can adjust to the standardized requirements of such institutions."

d. *"Inclusion involves a process of systemic reform embodying changes and modifications in content, teaching methods, approaches, structures and strategies in education to*

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overcome barriers with a vision serving to provide all students of the relevant age range with an equitable and participatory learning experience and environment that best corresponds to their requirements and preferences.

Paragraph 11 also makes it clear that placing students with disabilities in regular classes without appropriate structural changes to, for example, organisation, curriculum and teaching and learning strategies does not constitute inclusion.”

In Australia at least, many State government policies purporting to support inclusive education for students with disabilities have, deliberately or by omission, failed to articulate clear and appropriate definitions of “inclusive education” and, frequently, the terms “inclusive” or “inclusion” are used as euphemisms for something that is implemented specifically for students with disabilities, including segregating measures.

It is hoped that the provision of General Comment No.4 to State Parties will put an end to confusion and misuse of these terms and it is interesting to note that the definition of “segregation”, as well as other key definitions and concepts outlined in General Comment No.4, are now part of the new “Inclusive Education Policy” released by the government of the Australian State of Queensland in 2018 [25]. While this does not, in and of itself, guarantee the effective implementation of the policy, it does provide a necessary first step in the right direction.

Segregated education for students with disabilities and denial of “reasonable accommodation are forms of discrimination

It is clear from General Comment No.4 that educational segregation of students with disabilities is not compatible with “inclusive education” within the meaning of Article 24.

However, General Comment No.4, and now the more recent General Comment No.6 issued in relation to Article 5 (Equality and Non-Discrimination) of the CRPD, go further to make it clear that the segregation of students with disabilities is in fact a form of discrimination against them and is not a legitimate modality for delivery of education to students with disabilities.

Paragraph 13 of General Comment No.4 states that “the right to non-discrimination includes the right not to be segregated and to be provided with reasonable accommodation”. General Comment No.6 similarly states, at paragraph 64, that “segregated models of education, which exclude students with disabilities from mainstream and inclusive education on the basis of disability, contravene articles 5(2) and 24(1)(a)”.

General Comment No.4 also makes it clear in paragraph 30 that the denial of “reasonable accommodation” to students with disabilities constitutes discrimination and the duty to provide reasonable accommodation is an immediately applicable obligation of State Parties.

Further, General Comment No.4 at paragraph 33 also emphasises that any support measures provided to students with disabilities "must be compliant with the goal of inclusion". This means that they must be designed to strengthen opportunities for students with disabilities to participate alongside their peers, rather than to stigmatise and marginalise them.

The right to inclusive education is a right of the child – not the parents

Another key clarification in paragraph 10 of General Comment No.4 is that inclusive education is the right of the child, not their parents. Inclusive education is expressed to be a fundamental human right of *all* learners – notably, education is stated to be the right of the individual learner and parental responsibilities in regard to the education of a child are expressly noted to be subordinate to the rights of the child:

"[E]ducation is the right of the individual learner, and not, in the case of children, the right of a parent or caregiver. Parental responsibilities in this regard are subordinate to the rights of the child].

In essence, this recognises parents as trustees of the right of their child to receive an inclusive education, not as primary holders of those rights. In countries like Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom, the "parental choice" mantra is frequently advanced by governments as a justification for the maintenance of segregated education on the basis that parents have a right to choose segregated schools over regular schools for their child [26]. In reality, as research shows, parents have very little "choice" in a system where access to general education is still subject to widespread "gatekeeping" [27]. Further, one has to question whether a decision that is not made on a free and fully informed basis as to the human rights and evidence-based case for inclusive education, which are rarely provided to parents – and which decision is often subconsciously further infected by socio-cultural ableist assumptions – can in any event be properly characterised as free and informed "choice".

Whole-of-system transformation and core features of inclusive systems

General Comment No.4 makes it clear that Article 24 does not call for *de minimis* efforts to make general education a little more accessible for some students with disabilities; it calls for "a transformation in culture, policy and practice in all educational environments to accommodate the differing requirements and

identities of individual students, together with a commitment to remove the barriers that impede that possibility".

It urges State Parties at paragraph 12 to embark on whole-of-system transformation from the ground up, to make general education fully accessible and inclusive of all students, and it seeks to provide a roadmap for implementing an inclusive education system, including by outlining the "core features" of inclusion education:

a. a whole systems approach, requiring education ministries to ensure that all resources are invested toward advancing inclusive education, and toward introducing and embedding the necessary changes

in institutional culture, policies and practices;

b. a whole education environment, requiring the committed leadership of educational institutions to embed the culture, policies and practices to achieve inclusive education at all levels;

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c. a whole person approach, underpinned by recognition of the capacity of every person to learn, the establishment of high expectations for all learners and the provision of flexible curricula and teaching and learning methods adapted to different strengths, requirements and

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learning styles;
d. supported teachers, ensuring that teachers and other staff in learning environments are provided with education and training as to core values and competencies to accommodate inclusive learning environments;
e. respect for and value of diversity,

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by ensuring that all students feel valued, respected, included and listened to and establishing effective measures to prevent abuse and bullying;

f. learning-friendly environment, in a positive school community where everyone feels safe, supported, stimulated and able

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to express themselves;

g. effective transitions, to ensure that learners with disabilities receive the support to ensure the effective transition from learning at school to vocational and tertiary education, and finally to work;

n. recognition of partnerships, through the

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involvement of parents/caregivers and the broader community and recognition of the resources and strengths they contribute;

i. monitoring, on a continuing and regular basis to ensure that segregation or integration is not happening in effect.

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Transfer of resources out of segregated systems

Finally, paragraph 39 of General Comment No.4 also makes it clear that the full realisation of Article 24 “is not compatible with sustaining two systems of education: mainstream and special/segregated education systems” and calls at paragraph 68 for “a transfer of resources from segregated to inclusive environments”.

This last point is key.

Not only has the CRPD Committee stated that segregated education is a form of discrimination, it has also highlighted the structural barrier inherent in maintaining a parallel segregated system that will soak up scarce resources needed by the general system to deliver quality inclusive education and which, by its mere continued existence, will shield the general system from the practical need to transition to inclusive education by acting as the “release valve” to pressure for change – through the systemic “diversion” of students and families “damaged” by a general system resistant to their inclusion being dressed as “parent-driven demand” for the more “accommodating” segregated system.

Parental “demand” for segregated education is rarely true demand – it is more often the forced consequence of an unaccommodating and culturally resistant general education system.

Only when the diversionary valve of segregation is progressively closed (at school level, district level and national level), can the general education system progressively develop into a genuinely universally accessible and inclusive system.

Thuringowa State High School: Taking the human rights framework for inclusive education from theory to practice

So how does the theoretical framework for inclusive education, as outlined in General Comment No.4, translate into day to day practice?

While there are examples of practical inclusion all over the world, the recent journey at Thuringowa State High School in Queensland, Australia (**Thuringowa**), presents a worthwhile case study, for several reasons.

The first is that Thuringowa’s journey, which led to the closure of its segregated “special” unit co-located within the grounds of the school, reflects the challenges of

systemic transition, from a “dual” system of segregated and general education, to a single unified, universally accessible and fully inclusive education system where students with and without disabilities learn together.

In addition, Thuringowa presents a successful case study for the implementation of inclusive education in a high school, despite common assertions by parents, educators and policy makers, that while inclusive education may be able to be implemented at primary school level, it does not succeed at high school level. Through a range of strategies, including analysis of staffing and support needs, appropriate timetabling and reorganising of staff and other resources, developing differentiation practices and other capabilities based on research evidence, including co-teaching, Thuringowa worked to ensure real access, learning and participation for every student.

Further, Thuringowa is a government high school that caters for a diverse student population where 63% come from homes that sit in the bottom quarter of the socio-economic scale. In 2018, Thuringowa’s 750 students were identified as 43% Indigenous, 25% having a disability and 9% having a language background other than English. Despite the frequent claims that inclusive education is dependent on governments making more funding available, Thuringowa was able to transition by redeploying its existing funding. In effect, it implemented the CRPD Committee’s call to “transfer” resources from its segregated to its general education setting.

Thuringowa planned, designed and implemented a 3-year process to close down its segregated unit for students with disabilities and establish a fully inclusive school, guided by the CRPD and the principles outlined in General Comment No. 4. This included stakeholder consultation and management, including with students and parents, capacity building, a staged transition, and analysis of data to establish and evolve inclusive practices. The following excerpt [28] outlines Thuringowa’s journey and the strategies and processes it adopted.

“Throughout 2015, Thuringowa SHS implemented a deliberate and gradual roll out of their Inclusive Schooling model. To begin with, they invested heavily in developing staff capacity in Years 7 and 8, and with pre-existing Special Education staff. They engaged in an action research project focused on Co-teaching and Differentiation which saw the development of a weekly Professional Learning Community to build capability. They engaged in regular cycles of inquiry, tracking data, and ironing out problems of practice as they arose. They sought feedback from parents, students, staff, and broader Department representatives and

continued to evolve their practice.

Over the course of 2016 Thuringowa SHS scaled their capacity, and utilised their lessons learnt to impact classroom practices across all year levels and to develop and implement further operational policies and procedures. This resulted in the eradication of the temporary integration responses, and greater emphasis on not only access and participation, but on social and curriculum outcomes as well. The former Special Education Program/Unit was entirely disbanded.

In 2017 the model reached its intended representation.

- *All students are welcomed at enrolment, and parents and students are supported to engage with and undertake enrolment procedures. Students are timetabled into heterogeneous classes, and students with a disability are proportionally placed across all classes in the Year level.*
- *Students are provided access to year level curriculum that is supported by quality, differentiated teaching and learning processes. Students requiring access to alternate year level junctures do so with the support of a unique curriculum alignment process which sees the variation in complexity of content descriptors and achievement standards being matched to regular, year level units of work – resulting in rigorous, full participation and engagement with age appropriate contexts within the general education classroom 100% of the time.*
- *Explicit Instruction, cooperative learning, peer tutoring, and station teaching methods are regular pedagogical approaches. Learning environments are organised and managed to be accessible by all, and teachers adopt a variety of strategies to support attention and sensory regulation. Positive Behaviour for Learning is implemented school-wide.*
- *Teachers and students are supported through the appointment of authentic Co-teaching partnerships that result in two teachers being assigned to one, regular sized class, with both having complete parity over the educational experiences of all students in the room. Teacher aide appointments from various allocations are pooled, and disseminated to support the classroom teacher and the whole class; not individual or marginal groups of students.*
- *Students are seated sporadically within classes and not clustered together based on ability. Labels are not used to describe students, and students no longer receive ongoing, Special Education Case Management. Classroom teachers are the experts on student performance in their particular contexts; and in collaboration with support staff and parents they identify what supports and strategies work best and modify these through ongoing, real-time analysis*

of student response and performance.

- *Blanket strategies that are based on perception and past performance are no* longer *supported. The micromanagement of a student's every move is non-existent, adult proximity has been removed, and Special Education staff are no longer the gate keepers of information, communication, or intervention.*
- *Investment in maintaining inclusive culture and its shared beliefs and understandings occurs through regular professional development, and through regular highlighting and sharing of best practice by members of staff. Staff capacity is supported through the application of Instructional Coaching – a job-embedded, highly responsive form of professional learning that focuses on building quality teaching and learning through the application of inclusive principles and practices."*

The impact of inclusive school reform at Thuringowa has been transformational for students with disabilities. They are not only excelling academically, but are also valued and contributing members of sporting teams, extra-curricular events and activities. Many students in their senior phase of learning are engaged in school-based traineeships and have secured part-time employment; all have aspirations of further study and employment beyond school.

However, the transformational impact has not stopped there, it has had far reaching effects across the entire school community. As a whole, the school has seen significant improvement in senior school attainment percentages, with 100% of students completing their high school studies with senior school certificates for the past 3 years, an increase from a previous average of 60%. Annual School Opinion Survey data indicates increased satisfaction of staff, parents and students in relation to meeting the educational needs of all students, and the nurturing of a culture that reflects high expectations and rigorous learning for all. Student attendance and retention continues to improve, and the development of community partnerships and innovative programs has resulted in student outcomes matching and exceeding those in many schools from more affluent and advantaged circumstances.

Conclusion

The challenges to implementing inclusive education systems persist and there is still a great deal to do to achieve equality of opportunity and inclusion of people with disabilities.

The social wrongs perpetrated and still being perpetuated against people with disabilities by reason in large part to their long history of exclusion, segregation and dehumanisation, can only be arrested and overcome through conscious efforts by broader society, but such efforts must begin with a genuine commitment to the education of all children and young people with disabilities together with their similar-aged non-disabled peers in inclusive classrooms, and the adoption a strong human rights framework for the implementation of inclusive education.

The recent guidance provided by the CRPD Committee and the growing examples of whole-of-system, as well as school-wide, implementation of inclusive education, provide a pathway – with a robust evidence-base and lit by our spirit of humanity – for stakeholders to ensure that all children and young people, with and without disabilities, can access a quality and inclusive education in realisation of their human rights.

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