

Running Head: IMPORTANCE OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD
SETTINGS

Importance Of Inclusive Education

In Early Childhood Settings

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The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states in Article 23 “a mentally or physically disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community” (1989). The key words - full and decent life, dignity, self-reliance and active participation should be evidenced in everyone’s life, regardless of their abilities. By creating an inclusive classroom, these standards are all addressed.

As an educator and a mentor, teachers have a responsibility to demonstrate fairness in their dealings with all students and reinforce the belief that prejudices and ignorance towards others will never be tolerated. Approximately 60 babies are born with Down’s Syndrome in Victoria annually. Children who have mild to moderate Down’s Syndrome may be independent enough to be enrolled as a student at an early childhood setting.

Early Childhood educators should encourage their students to ask questions and challenge their beliefs. One way to address difficult and sometimes sensitive questions regarding children with disabilities is to use a picture book as a starting point for discussion. Some picture books are written specifically with pre-schoolers in mind, so their language and level of complexity suit the audience.

At the Seaside by Diane Church is a non-fiction picture book that tells the story of a boy named Christopher’s trip to the beach. This book is an excellent example of tool teachers could utilize to help explain specific information about children with Down’s Syndrome. Although this book is very informative and realistic with photos as illustrations, the factual information is inappropriate for an early childhood setting.

Church dealt with this topic in a unique way, creating a simple story about a child's experience at the beach, but with some unsuitable language and confronting fact boxes. The fact boxes contain a relatable fact to the storyline. However, this does not excuse some of the language and that way some facts were described. An example of this is "Chris gets excited and sometimes doesn't understand what people want him to do, so he does the wrong things" (Church, 2000). This could portray a confusing image; does that mean the child in our class who has Down's Syndrome is allowed to do things that are "wrong"? Or is it an excuse to reassure the children if he does something unusual? Either way, in an early childhood setting, this could be perceived in the wrong light.

The text is to the point and encourages the listeners to empathize with Christopher's life. The book concludes with a glossary, facts about people with learning difficulties and tips on how to be helpful. This closing information would be a fantastic support to children that are not sure as to how to "help" or "not help" someone with a disability like Down's Syndrome. Practical tips like "Talk to the person and use their name. Just because they have learning difficulties does not mean they cannot speak for themselves (Church, 2000) will result in the children reflecting on their actions.

Church was very honest in the way Christopher was portrayed in the book. A perfect example of this honesty would be the front cover (See Appendix A). Below the title, it reads "Meet Christopher who has Down's Syndrome"(Church, 2000). As a result, the reader has labeled Christopher before turning the first page. *At The Seaside* is a very factual book; none of the language (in both the fact boxes or the actual text) used analogies, representations or illustrations to make the topic more sensitive. This book however would be excellent for children learning to read themselves; because the facts are easier to understand the more mature a child gets, and the personal and

inclusive language used means it is a great individual reading tool. Some resources to assist in inclusive education are very minimalistic and fitting for early childhood because of the light language and subtle message portrayed. *At The Seaside* could be one of those books if the fact boxes were ignored.

The glossary, helpful tips and facts are giving children (and their teachers) the opportunity to discuss, learn and use these guidelines in their own setting. Church has exhibited a message of fairness; treating their peers the way they want to be treated. They can be a part of a “normal” classroom as long as everyone is respected and has opportunities to learn together.

At the Seaside, when used as a tool for inclusive education could have the potential to be successful or very unsuccessful. As a positive, the story filled with informative facts for children. This can be a great spark for discussion, research and discovery. This book is written based on realistic experiences. Christopher is treated like any other child, and with his friend Lauren and their Mums, he does what any other child would do; spends the day at the beach.

Teachers need to use resources like picture books wisely as they can genuinely assist in encouraging children to challenge their beliefs about people with differing physical and mental attributes to themselves. As teachers, we cannot forcibly change their ideas to suit our own, but we can promote fairness through modeling, investigation, discovery and discussion. “...positive teacher attitudes represent the key factor in determining the success of inclusion” (Bender, Vial, & Scott, 1995 cited in Gilmore, Campbell & Cuskelly, 2003)

Throughout Church’s book, there is discussion about physical and mental differences between Chris and his friend Lauren. Although it is possible for Church to have made

it more subtle or less direct, she ensures that there's something positive. For example, "...Chris doesn't speak very clearly but his friends and family understand him"(Church, 2000). This is a strategy teachers can use with a class to acknowledge differing abilities, but to ensure that children remember to look at the positives and what strengths they possess. Another important strategy that Church uses in her book is learning from your peers. Throughout the book, Chris and Lauren learn a lot from each other. At the end, Lauren and Chris express how much fun they have together. By grouping children in class with people they don't normally spend time with will develop their social skills and will practice working and learning collaboratively. We need to ensure as educators and role models our actions are fair and just because "...children's interaction within the environment and with peers is often strongly influenced by how well an adult mediates the immediate context" (Erwin & Guintini, 2000, p.17).

Big Brother Dustin By Alden R. Carter (1997) takes a completely different approach to a narrative featuring a child with Down's Syndrome. This book was published 13 years ago and is very "American". The book follows Dustin who has discovered his Mum is expecting. Throughout the book Dustin help his mum, dad and grandparents prepare for the arrival of the baby, and has decided to take on the responsibility of finding a name. The illustrations are photos (like At The Seaside), which is the only evidence to show that Dustin has Down's Syndrome. The best aspect of this book is it is an elementary story about a child who is preparing for his new sibling; the fact he was born with a disability is not important.

Alden puts no indicators on Dustin's struggles because of his condition, because any other child in an identical situation would feel the same. The text encourages empathy from the audience, and has the advantage of having a storyline that is easy to relate to.

Alden is very realistic and honest in *Big Brother Dustin*. His text is based around a very common and relatable story (especially to children in early childhood) and throughout the book there is not one reference to Dustin's disability. The reader watches him go through the emotions, thinking and preparation just like any other child would.

Although the book never mentions it, the message Alden is portraying is that a child with a disability can be and should be a normal member of a family and society. The text and illustrations intentionally portrays Dustin and his family as "typical", by doing common everyday activities (like building, reading, going to the park).

This book is a great tool targeted at 3 to 4 years olds, especially where either there is someone in the class who is preparing for a baby and also has a child that has Down's Syndrome.

Dustin's character represents the important characteristics of being a child; happiness, love and optimism. We only see a glimpse into Dustin's life, however we see how his parents, grandparents, and other children treat him. Dustin is an excellent example of how "...inclusion education is benefiting children with Down's Syndrome" (Buckley & Bird, 2000). Although children with disabilities may struggle with the average workload and complexity, the social interactions and life skills that they learn from their peers would be invaluable. It is the perception and image of including someone in your class that's has a disability and attempting to "...combat[ing] negative stereotypes" (Gilmore, Campbell & Cuskelly, 2003) that causes conflict. Some families may believe that class members will be abandoned, left behind or the teacher's priorities will shift. As noted by Erwin and Guintini (2000), every child has

unique abilities and unique needs; therefore teachers need to ensure that each need is being met.

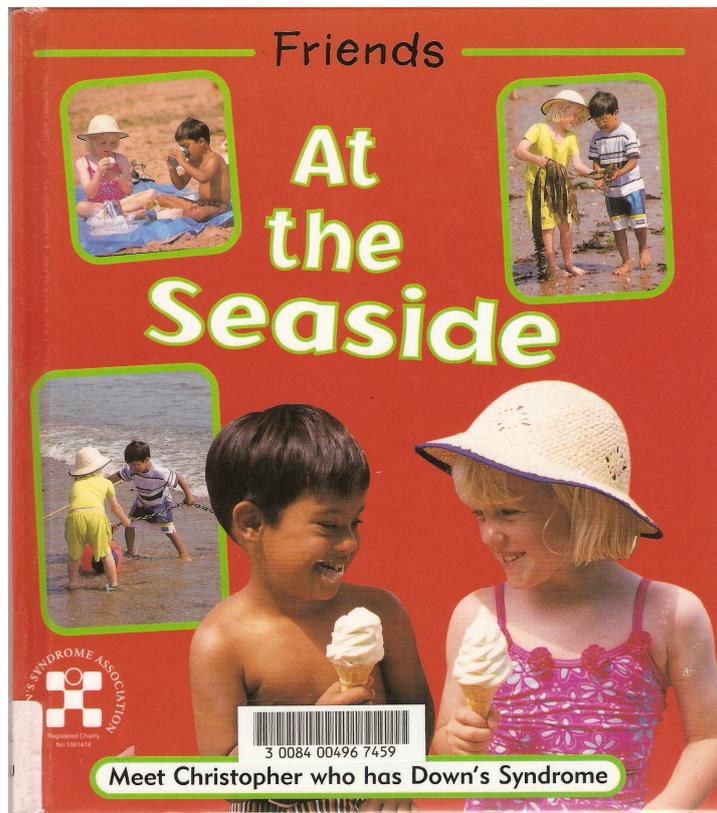
Inclusive education is centered on treating every child the way they want to be treated and the way their abilities and are needs are at. It is important to treat each child fairly, not equally. Having a child with a disability like Down's Syndrome in a "normal" classroom should not be "...seen as something "extraordinary" but rather a natural and necessary part of creating a rich tapestry of diversity."(Erwin & Guintini, 2000). Literature such as *At The Seaside* By Diane Church and *Big Brother Dustin* by Alden R. Carter, if used in the right manner, can be successful resources in an early childhood classroom setting. The teacher has a responsibility to give their students opportunities to reflect on what abilities they have and to model and assist in creating a harmonious and flexible learning environment for all needs. Article 23 in The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (1989) states that no matter who the child is and no matter their level of ability, it is their right to qualities such as dignity, a full and decent life, active participation and self-reliance. To achieve these qualities, it is the collaboration of resourceful, positive and open-minded educators and informed, willing and understanding families. This will influence students to disregard prejudice and assist in creating a community where children like Dustin and Christopher can be treated the way they deserve to be.

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Appendix A: Front Cover of “At The Seaside” By Diane Church (2000)



Appendix B: Front Cover of “Big Brother Dustin” by Alden R. Carter (1997)

