

## Chapter 6

# Shaping Perspectives on the “Culture of Disability”: Lessons from an Australian Online Role Play

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Reflecting a more inclusive ethos, teachers in Westernized countries today work with students with diverse needs. Mainstream classrooms may include students with a range of disabilities and/or those from disadvantaged backgrounds including single parent families, rural/remote locations, and lower socio-economic status. How might pre-service teachers be encouraged to see the potential of these students, rather than categorizing them unidimensionally as problems to be solved, or cases to refer? This case study investigated how an online role play could assist Australian pre-service teachers to adopt the perspectives of different stakeholders and develop a more holistic approach. The role play took a constructivist approach to learning and encouraged participants to apply legislative frameworks, work with students' strengths, and devise solutions to scenarios where there was no single, correct answer. Exposure to multiple viewpoints through the role play helped participants to develop inclusive strategies, rather than marginalizing pupils with additional needs into a special education “**culture of deficit**”.*

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## **ORGANIZATION OR SITUATION BACKGROUND**

### **Opposite Sides of the Same Coin: Inclusion and the Culture of Disability**

Today, increasing numbers of students with additional needs are being taught alongside their typically-developing peers in local mainstream classrooms (Ferguson, 2008). This reflects the widespread adoption of an inclusive education philosophy, particularly in developed countries. Inclusion is a complex concept that draws on a moral position about equality and human rights, and has been variously defined as “*a dynamic approach of responding positively to pupil diversity and of seeing individual differences not as problems, but as opportunities for enriching learning*” (UNESCO, 2005, p. 9) and *the rights of every student to participate in, or have access to, the full range of programs and services offered by the education system ... [inclusion] supports and celebrates the diversity found among all learners* (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2005). Proponents of inclusion argue that inclusive strategies benefit not only students with additional needs, but others more widely (Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education [CSIE], 2008).

One of the hallmarks of inclusion is a positive *attitude*. In an inclusive school all students and staff are valued equally, participation of everyone is encouraged, and the school community is responsive to and welcoming of diversity. Inclusion thrives where it is promoted by strong leadership, interdependency between those with and without disabilities, proactive planning about accommodating all students, and effective staff training (Laluvein, 2010; Elliott, 2008). Given these attitudinal and behaviour factors, it follows that mere co-location of students with and without disabilities does not guarantee inclusion. It is a relatively simple matter to place a student with disabilities in a mainstream classroom. It is

far more complex to provide necessary supports that could encompass: a visual reminder to stay in their seat; modified rules for physical education; a list of terms to help the student understand the history lesson; or a management system to foster peer relations by rewarding the whole class once the student earned specified stars for good behaviour. If such supports are lacking, students with disabilities may be effectively excluded from learning successfully, interacting with peers, or generally developing their academic, social and emotional potential. Partly because of these classroom realities, an inclusive philosophy is compatible with an array of conflicting conclusions. Notions about being fair to all students, or “holding back” talented students, have been particularly problematic. Inclusion has been used by different proponents to argue both for and against a number of educational policies, such as the advisability of special schools, and the provision of paraprofessional support (Vehmas, 2010).

One way to gain a more in-depth understanding of contemporary frameworks is through contrasting them with former approaches from which they evolved. These earlier conceptions of disability tended to focus on medical or other deficiencies. Historically, students were considered to be limited in what they could learn because of factors unrelated to teaching, such as ability and/or socio-cultural background (Fleischer & Zames, 2001). In some countries, disability was attributed to spirits or parental wrongdoing (see for example, Senior’s (2000) description of aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, Zhang’s (2001) description of Chinese attitudes, and Silwamba’s (2005) description of Zambia). Whatever its rationale, this deficit thinking served to perpetuate the achievement gap, because teachers were not encouraged to provide optimum environments for all students. Instead, affected students were either disregarded, or a proliferation of special exclusionary services ensued dedicated to categorizing and then remediating various underlying deficits. Unfortunately it was all too easy for mainstream

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