

Shifting Exclusion to Inclusion: Introducing a Reflective Framework to Support Student Teacher's Understanding of Inclusion

Haley Brock, Manukau Institute of Technology, New Zealand

The Asian Conference on Education 2025
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper introduces a reflective framework intentionally developed to support initial teacher education (ITE) students to expand their understanding of inclusion. The framework is grounded in the view that an authentic understanding of inclusion must begin by bringing exclusionary practices to our consciousness (Ballard, 2013). The tool combines Likert-scale and open-ended prompts to guide critical reflection. Students are guided to identify and reflect on exclusionary moments tamariki experience, as observed within their Early Childhood Education (ECE) environment. Prompts encourage students to consider how exclusion impacts the child, revisit their thoughts in the moment, and examine changes they could implement in future practice. Developed with an awareness of the diverse worldviews held by student teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand, the framework honours individual perspectives, creating space for identity-informed responses. This paper outlines the theoretical basis for the framework, its design process, and how it was introduced within an ITE programme. Early patterns of engagement will be briefly discussed, not as outcomes, but as indicators of how the tool may encourage deeper, ongoing reflection. This pilot study invites discussion around the role of structured reflection on exclusion and how this may impact student's developing understanding of inclusion.

Keywords: inclusion, exclusion, reflection, initial teacher education

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Everyday exclusion in ECE environments is embedded in systems and ways of doing, even sometimes well-intentioned practice. Educationalists have long discussed the need to interrogate our own beliefs and perceptions first when building an individual teaching philosophy and understanding of inclusive practice. This study explores whether recognising and revisiting potentially uncomfortable moments can deepen this understanding for students. The small pilot study is guided by the idea of first needing to understand exclusion before inclusion (Ballard, 2013). To explore this, a reflective framework was created. Combining Likert and open-ended questions, asking student teachers to identify and examine moments of exclusion within their ECE setting. 18 Year One students participated, revisiting and examining their perception of exclusion within their environments. This paper shares an overview of the project, theoretical basis of the framework, the methodology, and a brief thematic analysis will share insights from responses received in its implementation so far. The paper is positioned as exploratory with further analysis and discussion to follow.

Context: Aotearoa

Recent data published in Aotearoa highlighted challenges kaiako are facing having the confidence to respond to diverse needs within their ECE environments (Education Review Office, 2022; Hood & Hume, 2024). Kaiako are frequently requesting more strategies, more knowledge. While intentional teaching strategies have their place, how these are implemented and included within a learning environment can be influenced by one's personal teaching philosophy, beliefs, and understanding. Creating truly inclusive education environments calls for us to go beyond the “strategy”; we must identify and expose factors that have created the reverse in the first place (Ballard, 2013). To do this kaiako must examine their perception, revisiting scenarios they observe or experience and reflecting on if there are adaptations that could be made.

In Aotearoa, Early Childhood environments follow the curriculum document Te Whāriki:

Te Whāriki is an inclusive curriculum - a curriculum for all children It holds the promise that all children will be empowered to learn with and alongside others by engaging in experiences that have meaning for them. (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2017, p. 13)

This study is anchored in a rights-based approach to participation; the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) declares every child has the right to access equitable and inclusive learning environments. An additional governing document for kaiako, Our Code Our Standards. This requires all kaiako in Aotearoa to position inclusive practice as an ethical commitment of the profession (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2017). Together these documents place a legal requirement for kaiako in Aotearoa to be creating inclusive spaces for tamariki and to be protecting their rights for participation within these. To do this, kaiako must have the confidence to advocate and remove barriers to participation tamariki experience. Understanding how these requirements play out in everyday environments is crucial for our student teachers to build the confidence to (McAnelly & Gaffney, 2025).

Initial Teacher Education

Students need to experience and understand the theoretical knowledge that accompanies topics of inclusion; students need this theory of practice to be able to think and reflect critically (Ballard, 2013). This framework stands to accompany the content delivery model of teaching. Across Aotearoa, within ITE programmes the topic of inclusion is covered throughout. Students are often taught with traditional content delivery; tasks may be set where students are asked to reflect on ways to create a more inclusive environment or respond to individual needs. An initial literature search was conducted, to surface additional models or studies exposing moments of exclusion and reflecting on these; similar studies were not surfaced. In a study conducted, Dayman (2020) explored the role ITE plays in modelling inclusive pedagogies and promoting deep understanding of inclusion within education settings. Dayman (2020) identified that even though ITE in Aotearoa aims for inclusion, the discourses and beliefs held by student teachers and teacher educators often still include deficit framing or exclusionary assumptions. Describing a gap where further individual exploration of these beliefs is needed. This shift in understanding begins in ITE, at this level educators instructing the students can use reflection as a tool to guide exploration of beliefs and a changing of these beliefs (Dignath et al., 2022). A report published by the Education Review Office (2022) highlights the value of reflection as a tool to develop understanding of inclusion. Reflection has the power to surface assumptions that students once had, deepen empathy for others by revisiting scenarios again and to activate the critical consciousness that guides them in building their own understanding of inclusion (Minott, 2019).

Theoretical Foundations of the Framework

Ballard (2013) suggests that to authentically understand inclusion, we must first understand exclusion; one cannot exist without the other. Until we expose the underlying causes and influences of these within an environment, we cannot authentically build inclusive spaces. Ballard calls for us to identify the many influences within an environment that shape the experiences of others, although does not explicitly state how. This framework begins by starting with ourselves, attempting to activate a shifting in perception, interrogating our own belief systems. By first exploring instances where tamariki have experienced exclusionary practice within ECE settings, reflection could raise awareness of the intentional or sometimes unintentional ways this is happening. Reflecting in this manner may identify ingrained habits or behaviours of teachers, potentially shaping a more inclusive mindset and aligning with Ballard's call for interrogation of how exclusion comes to be (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021).

As a bicultural nation in Aotearoa, when designing the framework, inspiration was drawn from Te Ao Māori worldview. Acknowledging and respecting that understanding develops through relationships with people, places, and things, within our personal identity, not in isolation. Identity and culture shape understanding. Upholding the mana of each participant means recognising their participation and contribution is shaped by their identity as a person. Who they are and what experiences they bring with them in that moment. Macfarlane & Macfarlane (2019) call for researchers to listen to culture when designing studies; their plea to scholars to ensure research methods and studies are culturally responsive, acknowledging cultural identities of those who may engage, and inviting individual world views. The framework ensures space for culturally informed responses and values. Open-ended questions are frequent and throughout the framework, inviting students to share responses rooted in their identity.

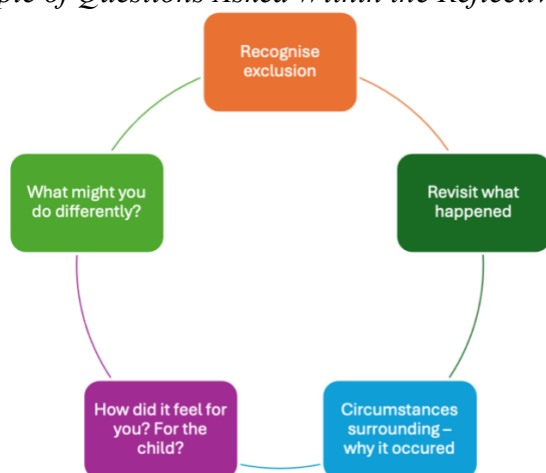
He Awa Whiria (Macfarlane et al., 2024) became a visual inspiration for the framework. In its true form representing the intersecting of Maramatanga Māori and Western theory. Each stream crossing paths over time, to braid a new stream of knowledge. Neither of more importance than the other, both upholding the mana of each other, interacting together over time to build a new stream of knowledge. The reflective framework design was inspired by the braiding of knowledge streams metaphor, not as a methodology but as a visual representation. The reflective framework represents one stream; student's thoughts and perception of exclusion represent the other. They cross paths over time within the reflective process, with the potential for a stream of knowledge: a deepened understanding of inclusion, to be created one that is internal and personal to the participant.

A third theoretical influence in the creation of this framework is the work of Paulo Freire (1970/2018). His work challenges us as kaiako to interrogate our belief systems and expose our inner thoughts, revisiting what we have internalised because of the system we are raised in, and experiences we have had. Reflection becoming something that does not just revisit moments of practice but exposes potential for change and implements this. Recent research by Qi and Sterling Henward (2024) reinforced Freire's ideas that critical reflection within ECE is not just about noticing moments; it is about examining underlying assumptions about these. Local research by Kahuroa et al. (2023) explored Freire theory within an ECE context, with children as participants in the reflective process. This study adapts those pedagogical ideas to an ITE context with student teachers using the guided reflection to examine these moments in time, deepening their understanding of how the systems they are within influence outcomes for our tamariki. Aligning Freire's discussions of critical consciousness and the role this plays in inclusion for all (1970/2018).

With these ideas influencing the framework reflective questions which explore the reason for the exclusion, how it felt for the child, and as kaiako have been included. Participants are then guided to examine what they may do differently next time in an attempt to interrogate their critical consciousness. The act of searching for exclusion within their settings may activate an internal process of exploring their understanding of what this truly looks like, challenging their own belief systems. Through this process participants are encouraged to expose their unconscious assumptions, to surface an awareness and understanding of inclusion and what this may look like in everyday practice within their environments.

Framework Design

The framework visual below symbolises a process or circle of reflection. Reflection does not need to be linear as this shows; the process of reflection can move in any direction, with those engaging returning to previous thinking, jumping ahead a step etc.

Figure 1*Example of Questions Asked Within the Reflective Framework*

Methodology

Students in their first semester of Diploma of ECE or Bachelor of ECE were invited to participate. First semester students chosen for initial pilot study as majority are new to the sector and starting to build their professional philosophy as well as an understanding of inclusion. Of those invited, 18 students chose to participate. Students completed the framework via anonymous google forms. Time was allocated in class or at home to complete. The framework was introduced when students were exploring inclusion within their curriculum content. The framework was designed to encourage personal responses, Likert Scale and Open-ended questions were included to ensure this was possible. Ethical considerations taken into account included participation being voluntary; no loss to learning impacted those who chose not to participate. There was acknowledgement this could be a triggering topic; support for students was offered on information sheets via MIT counselling services and other external agencies. A thematic analysis of responses was conducted by the publishing author, themes discussed under headings of some framework questions within this paper. This initial study, being exploratory in nature, highlighted future iterations needing to take place to deepen analysis.

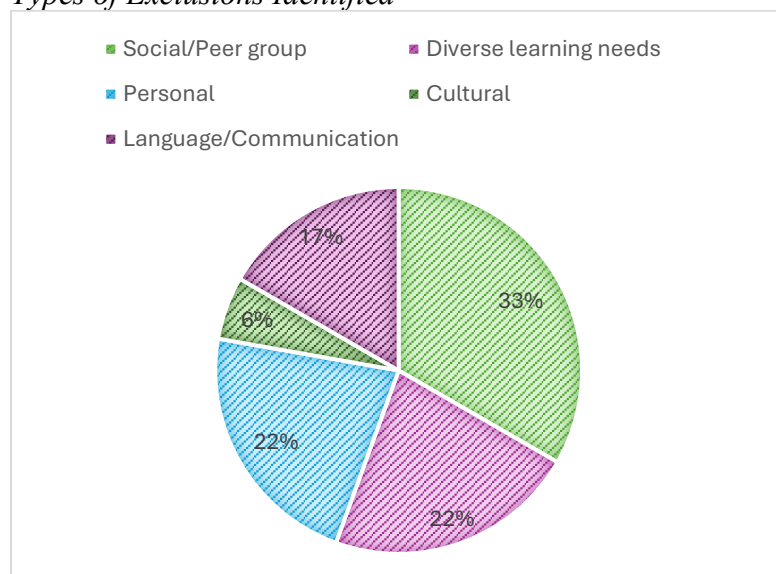
Patterns of Engagement and Early Insights

As this was a pilot study, data is presented as patterns of engagement with the framework rather than as definitive outcomes.

Forms of Exclusion Identified

Individual perception of exclusion appears to be shaped deeply by the environment they are within, and their internalised beliefs. This is seen in the variety of responses given. Although themes are identified here, there was not one response identical to the other.

Figure 2
Types of Exclusions Identified



The open-ended nature of this question inviting potentially culturally informed answers to be shared, respectful of the individual idea each participant has—creating space and valuing this is a personalised reflective journey. Together Ballard and Freire suggests that the surfacing of these moments is the first step toward critical consciousness (Ballard, 2013; Freire, 1970/2018). Responses to this question aligning to the intention behind the framework. Bringing to the surface minor, or micro exclusions that at times may be normalised and critically examine individual understanding of these moments.

Emotional Responses to Exclusion

When asked “how did you feel as this was happening?”, participants emotional responses ranged from empathy or sadness to acceptance. Revisiting these moments, appeared, for some, to activate a deeper understanding of the impact on the tamariki involved. Possibly showing a further step towards critical consciousness. “I find that very unfair as you can see in their eyes they were keen to try...”

Participants perception of exclusion shaped their emotive responses, highlighting how these responses are personal, and identify-informed. For some it was distressing to revisit, for others it is normalised, respecting that there is a difference in beliefs and this is ok. While some responses empathised with the external influences not the child, this shows how personalised thoughts and perceptions are for each participant.

Reflections on Future Practice

71% of participants proposed something they would do differently next time. A lot were personal changes to practice, not systematic. A few participants shared they would not do anything differently, accepting what happened or that it was not their place to become involved, reflective of their role as a student teacher. This may indicate that confidence is still growing. The data shows the potential of this question inspiring deeper thought and attempting to transform acceptance of these moments, to ones of awareness and potential for action. Aligning with Freire in that the reflective process did not just bring moments to the surface but brought

about thoughts of change. Further consideration is needed to plan for and identify a measurement of this change from written reflection into practice.

Shift in Thinking

78% indicated they value inclusion more now, while 22% indicated no change had occurred. For many participants, an internalised change was reported. Suggesting potential for this approach in activating critical consciousness and guiding a deeper understanding of inclusion for students. "I think this is because reflecting on the experience showed me how easy it is for kids to feel left out."

Noticing exclusion, examining the situation and one's individual role in enacting change a process which is unique to each participant. Dayman's (2020) study concluded that content delivery on inclusion can be influenced by the bias and approach of lecturers, for example whether this is a social or medical model of inclusion. The personal nature of responses recorded in the study indicates the potential for this approach as a way of mitigating this possibility.

Limitations and Implications for ITE

This is a small pilot study, with 18 first-year students engaging. Results are there for indicative; further inquiry and future adaptations of this approach are needed. The study was limited to one ITE institute, where the researcher is known to participants. Participants are first year students, mostly new to ECE with concepts such as inclusion and reflective practice. The changes recorded are based on the day of reflection. Data shown is not a measurement of change of practice, but potentially a change of thinking. While this pilot shows potential in this approach, further exploration is needed. Further consideration is needed to plan for and identify a measurement of this change from written reflection into practice.

There is opportunity within ITE as students are building their own teaching philosophy and being introduced to the idea of reflecting through a critical lens. Guided reflection which surfaces moments unique to the student's experiences, show potential in raising awareness of the many factors which influence how a child experiences their ECE environment. Along with supporting students to make the theory to practice link more explicitly.

Conclusion

Creating inclusive spaces does not require only a series of strategies; it involves exposing everyday moments that matter and interrogating one's beliefs. Reflective practice shaped in this way could be how we get there. This pilot study has illustrated a pedagogical approach which responds to Ballard's (2013) call of exposing and examining exclusion to deepen understanding of inclusion. Reflection must go beyond describing events, it must interrogate underlying assumptions to have a transformative impact. Recognising learning does not occur in isolation; this study respects diverse and culturally informed ways of thinking and seeing. The initial exploration of the project has shown potential for this type of reflection for student teachers, adding an additional layer to their learning journey when exploring the topic of inclusion. This pilot highlights future research in the area and implementation with a broader scope of participants needed.

References

- Ballard, K. (2013). Thinking in another way: ideas for sustainable inclusion. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 17(8), 762–775.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2011.602527>
- Dayman, T. J. (2020). *Developing inclusive pedagogy: A case study of one initial teacher education programme in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Doctoral thesis, University of Canterbury). <https://doi.org/10.26021/10199>
- Dignath, C., Rimm-Kaufman, S. E., van Ewijk, R., & Kunter, M. (2022). Teachers' beliefs about inclusive education and insights on what contributes to those beliefs: A meta-analytical study. *Educational Psychology Review*, 34(6), 2609–2660.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-022-09695-0>
- Education and Training Act 2020 (New Zealand).
- Education Review Office. (2022). *A great start? Education for disabled children in early childhood education*. Education Review Office.
<https://evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/a-great-start-education-for-disabled-children-in-early-childhood#read-online>
- Freire, P. (1970/2018). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). Bloomsbury.
- Hood, N., & Hume, R. (2024). *The illusion of inclusion: The experiences of neurodivergent children and those supporting them in Aotearoa New Zealand's education system*. The Education Hub. https://cdn.theeducationhub.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Ed-Hub_Illusion-of-Inclusion-report_v2_low-res.pdf
- Kahuroa, R., Lees, J., Johns, T., Ng, O., & Abeyratne, N. (2023). A space for critique: Opening up the world with young children, through the possibilities of critical pedagogy. *Early Childhood Folio*, 27(1), 22–26. <https://doi.org/10.18296/ecf.1118>
- Macfarlane, A., & Macfarlane, S. (2019). Listen to culture: Māori scholars' plea to researchers [Listen to culture: indigenous people of New Zealand scholars' plea to researchers]. *Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand*, 49(Suppl. 1), 48–57.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03036758.2019.1661855>
- Macfarlane, A., Derby, M., & Macfarlane, S. (Eds.). (2024). *He awa whiria: Braiding the knowledge streams in research, policy and practice* [He braided river: Braiding the knowledge streams in research, policy and practice]. Canterbury University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.26021/14970>
- McAnelly, K., & Gaffney, M. (2025). E koekoe te tūi, e ketekete te kākā, e kūkū te kererū: Early childhood kaiako amplifying the rights of the neurodivergent learner [The tūi sings, the kākā chatters, the kererū coos: Early childhood teacher amplifying the rights of the neurodivergent learner]. *He Kupu*, 8(3), 45–53.
<https://hekupu.ac.nz/article/e-koekoe-te-tui-e-ketekete-te-kaka-e-kuku-te-kereru-early-childhood-kaiako-amplifying>

- Ministry of Education. (2017). *Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa – The Early Childhood Curriculum [A woven mat of learning for the children of New Zealand – The Early Childhood Curriculum]*. Ministry of Education. Wellington, New Zealand.
- Minott, M. A. (2019). Reflective teaching, inclusive teaching and the teacher's tasks in the inclusive classroom: A literary investigation. *British Journal of Special Education*, 46(3). <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8578.12260>
- Rapp, A. C., & Corral-Granados, A. (2021). Understanding Inclusive Education—A Theoretical Contribution from System Theory and the Constructionist Perspective. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.1946725>
- Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand. (2017). *Our code, our standards: Code of professional responsibility and standards for the teaching profession*. Author.
- United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>
- Qi, Y., & Sterling Henward, A. (2025). Paulo Freire in ECE: Towards a critical understanding and alternative narratives. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/14639491241311656>

Contact email: haley.brock@manukau.ac.nz