Recognizing all students as learners

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Inclusive education has been defined as "a process that involves the transformation of schools and other centres of learning to cater for all children - including boys and girls, students from ethnic and linguistic minorities, rural populations, those affected by HIV and AIDS, and those with disabilities and difficulties in learning" (UNESCO, 2009, p. 4).

With the world-wide adoption of the philosophy of inclusion for the education of all students, a shift in thinking has occurred which sees schools as meeting a broad range of educational and social needs in regular classrooms. Legislative obligations for equity in Australia have made it mandatory for schools to develop policies which outline how education for all children will be implemented and managed conceptually. However, although the philosophy of inclusion has been accepted for decades, the practice doesn’t appear to match the rhetoric.

It appears that generally the drive in inclusive settings in many learning contexts has been reduced to a matter of physical placement and is dependent on the pupil’s adaptability to the standardized norms of the regular school and classrooms. However, all learning contexts are characterized by situational requirements and demands, and the development of competence is a result of the interaction between the context and learners’ personal attributes. As learner experiences are primarily influenced by communication and interactions, energies of inclusion for all students should be differentiated by flexibility wherein students, including those with disabilities, are involved as active participants in their learning.

This presentation will use the concept of ‘figured worlds’ (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) to explore how student identity develops to overcome barriers to participation in inclusive environments. Figured worlds signify the social forces that influence the ways community members behave, and function within social spaces. Identity is constituted by how students come to understand themselves through their lived experiences, and how they come to "figure" who they are through the "worlds" in which they participate. The presentation will highlight the need for teacher awareness of the learning identities promoted in the learning environment so that students are respected and included in educational activities.