Making Inclusion Happen – Podcast: Episode 5

With Associate Professor Jennifer Alford and Dr Francis Bobongie-Harris

Haley: Welcome to Making Inclusion Happen. Welcome to Making Inclusion Happen – the podcast that opens up conversations about what genuine inclusive education is and is not, and what we can do to make inclusive education a reality. This week, I’m speaking with C4IE Centre members, Associate professor Jennifer Alford and Dr. Francis Bobongie-Harris. Jen and Francis have both worked as teachers and they have expertise in culturally diverse learners. Jen’s area of expertise is in critical literacy of students with English as an additional language or dialect. And Francis’ research focuses on Indigenous education in Australia and the Pacific and set australian South Sea Island of policy, history and cultural studies. Welcome, Jen and Francis.

Thanks Hayley.

Haley: It's great to have you vote with both with us today. I’m really excited about this conversation that I know that our listeners are going to really be super engaged by the things you have to share with us today. So, thanks for your time. This podcast is a place where we think and talk about what we need to do to make inclusion happen. How can schools deal with students that are seen as different without stigmatising them on that basis?

Jen: Well, Hayley, that’s a very good question and Francis and I met recently and we had a good yarn about this. I think the first thing, that we “deal”, and that’s an interesting one, isn’t it? What we often say we’re “dealing” with students who are different and even that’s a bit of problematic language.

Francis: I also think as teachers, as educators, it's really important to reflect on our own stereotypes and biases and think about how that informs the way we interact with our students, families, and communities as well. So I think, yeah, I agree with what Jen’ saying. “Deal”, “different” – they are words that were used to hearing, but can we look at using alternatives? I'm not sure and I don't have the answers to it because this is, the language is, the narratives, this dialogue we always have around you know students who are in this position

Haley: But just rolls off the tongue because that's the discourse that we’re surrounded by. So maybe we need to trouble a little bit and say, well, we’re not dealing with these people were catering for them. And the second one really is looking at the word “different”. And what do we mean by this concept of difference? Because I work in the area of culturally and linguistically diverse learners. But we are all culturally and linguistically diverse from each other. So, it's really about problematizing some of those concepts to begin with. And when we start to do that, it opens up great possibilities for doing things differently in really generative ways.

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Haley: But language is so important in, in inclusion, isn't it? The way that we speak often reflects the way that we think and the way that we position ourselves and other people. And so, I totally agree it is a very problematic term, but agree, It's very common in the discourse in schools or in the media. I certainly, I read an article this morning in the conversation that I could see that that person was really rejecting just the kinds of things you’re talking about.
Jen: And I think part of an approach to inclusive education is just being aware of that. And when you do say a word like deal with or, you know, problematize or use a deficit view, it's just about catching yourself and going up. There it is again, done it again. Okay, let's reframe and choose a different word. Thereby you start to shift the discourse in your staff room, in your school playground, in your classroom.

Haley: Yeah. Absolutely agree.

Jen: But if I could just add a little bit to what Francis was saying. As Francis was saying, it's about reflecting on our own biases, and particularly for white Anglo-Saxon middle-class Australians like myself, reflecting on our privilege that we have in that space and what that means for what we bring into classrooms. Because in Australia we have a really big problem. We are a multilingual, multicultural country, but we have a monolingual, monocultural mindset in much of our education spaces. So, yeah.

Francis: And as educators, we all come to the table with different expectations on our students and that sort of thing as well. So, I guess, when we're dealing with inverted commas, I'm still not sure what word we're going to use there yet. But we need to, we need to wipe that slate clean and come to the table without these misconceptions and misunderstandings of who these children might be because of their differences.

Jen: Yeah.

Haley: Yeah. So, do you think a better term, I'm sitting here thinking "responding" is a better term.

Jen: Yeah.

Francis: Yeah, that's great.

Haley: because I think that's something that people do struggle with is that they know which terms they want to reject, but they're not always sure how to replace.

Francis: Exactly.

Jen: Yeah.

Haley: Okay. So, what would you both identify as the greatest barrier that school students from culturally diverse backgrounds face?

Francis: Probably having those initial stereotypes and misconceptions about people from different countries and backgrounds, history, culture, whatever. And I think, importantly, as educators, we need to understand first of all, those languages and cultures and what makes these students unique, because they are unique. They I bring to the education spaces things that we can't provide. So, we need to really think about how we understand and how we maximise on that within our, within our classrooms.

Jen: Yeah, I think one of the biggest barriers with culturally and linguistically diverse learners is, is just that “othering”. Edward Said talks about othering people. And it's coined a term he coined in 1978. And it's still very relevant today. Because for a lot of culturally and linguistically diverse people, well, we're all culturally and linguistically diverse. But because there's a monolingual, monocultural mindset, which is the dominant view, people who don't fit that view or don't fit that description, they look and sound different. And so that's a real barrier, that initial reaction people can have. I also think another barrier is not understanding different histories and trajectories and languages. Languages, as we've already been
Haley: So, what are the strategies that school stakeholders and teachers, school leaders, support staff, etc, can use to engage Australian South Sea Islander students in education, um, but also, I guess drawing on, you mentioned about the history and how important that is. How can we use history to inform our practice?

Francis: Yeah, so Australian South Sea Islanders are another disadvantaged group with a lot of communities within Queensland and northern New South Wales. And I think to include or have inclusion in this, in this area is to really understand the community context and the history that surrounds that. And I think once educators, once schools, once teachers understand their localised context, that makes the interaction, the understanding of working with Australian South Sea Islander families and even Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, just that little bit more different because history and policy has definitely defined how and why these communities exist. You know, there were a lot of intermarriages between South Sea Islanders and Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander families. Because there are intermarriages, there are two out of three Australian South Sea Islander children that are catered for within that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, um, I guess contexts with schools – closing the gap and that sort of thing. But there is that other group, the one-third or one out of three that aren’t included within that. They experience very similar disadvantage to that of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the sense that education can sometimes not be accessible. It's not important, it's not valued within their families. And also access, access to education, access to resources, access to things as simple as health and that sort of thing too. I'm thinking specifically about those first 1000 days where you have, there's a huge focus on the emotional, social, academic growth of children in general. And how there's a lot of focus with the Closing the Gap scheme to enforce that Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander children have access to certain health and education requirements. But there is one out of three within these complex communities where they miss out on, I guess, access to those types of resources as well. Because they fall under this mainstream, culturally and linguistically diverse, but they're also not necessarily the typical culturally linguistically diverse because in that section we’re talking about refugees, asylum-seekers, migrants, international students. So there's a very different, they kind of sit very differently.

Haley: And so, in terms of teachers – you know, short of asking kids about their background, are there processes in place where data is collected at, like, a school level? I guess I'm thinking about because it sounds like this group is very hidden. And as I said, lots of educators might ask kids and find out. But if that's not happening, I can see how these kids kinda get swept up in the tide.

Francis: Yeah. Well, there are some schools within Queensland that do have a checkbox with enrolments. You know, are you Aboriginal? Are you Torres Strait Islander? Are you Australian South Sea Islander? Or do you identify as both? Or that sort of thing. There are schools that do do that. But that statistical data is not always necessarily available for people to know and understand, which is why it's really important for educators to have a sense of that localised context and the history just so they can think about the families that they are engaging with. Yeah.

Jen: And that gets quite complex, doesn't it, in schools where you've got kids coming from a long way away. Like feeder schools are in different parts of the city, for example. And my experience is with secondary school, so you get to secondary school, you've got discrete discipline areas divided up into subject areas. You've got different teachers teaching different content, kids moving around classrooms. It's very different to the primary environment where you do have more of an overt connection to community and family. I think some of that work could really be beneficial in high schools. But it is challenging for teachers in that space to be able to connect with families who may not be local. Yeah, so that's challenging. We do we do recognise that it's very challenging work, but it's something that we really have to engage with.
Francis: Yeah and it's always driven from the top, isn't it? So, our principals, our management within our schools really need to think about ways in which they can creatively engage with the different communities which are represented within the school.

Jen: Yeah.

Francis: But I mean, as a baseline, it would be helpful to just look at the local community and where your school is and what's happening in that community. How can we plug people into the community and learn about the history of the community and how it impacts on the people who function in the school every day. Teachers as well, and staff as you said before, Haley, support staff, and have that whole of school ethos around that. And how to keep us open to new understandings, differences that they may not have thought about.

Jen: I think, too, it comes to having a culture of inquiry and curiosity. If we can develop a culture of curiosity in schools, wanting to know how other people's experiences have shaped them and histories, as Francis said. And identifying the invisible groups in our schools in ways that we think are really going to be eye-opening for positive outcomes. Which is also challenging when you're in the cut and thrust of teaching kids and delivering curriculum or implementing things.

Haley: In your research, have you both seen examples of where that is being done well? Where there is that kind of culture of inquiry, open dialogue between teachers, students and families and community?

Francis: Well, for me it's more, I've seen it more in the regional areas where there are large communities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and Australia South Sea Islanders coexisting and have been there historically for 150 years, basically. So I think regional areas do it well. But the challenge now is with that, and what I'm finding is, because there's a migration coming from the south since COVID, a lot of families are moving north, those communities more broadly change. So the people coming into the community don't necessarily understand the history. And then the domino effect of that is, why is that important to me? Or why do I need to understand that? Do you know what I mean? So there are communities that have been working well for very long time, but now there are lots of, the communities are being reshaped because of what's been happening more broadly within Australia, within the world.

Haley: Yeah, interesting. What about you, Jen? Have you seen any examples where those dialogues have been open in schools and what's that look like?

Jen: Yeah, I have, I have to say tends to happen more in smaller schools. And I'm thinking particularly here of Milperra State High School, which is a deliberate, deliberately established school to work with newly arrived migrants and refugees. And they make very conscious efforts to understand the histories of the students in the schools. Their arrival experiences, whether they were migrants or through some kind of traumatic refugee experience. Their music, their culture, their songs, their ways of learning, their knowledge bases. I mean, they really go to great efforts. But it is a small school that has that intentional focus on diversity as fundamental to what they do. Some of that can get lost in bigger high schools with different agendas. But I think we can learn from those schools and what they, what they do well, we can try to bring into other contexts because they do do it very well. I was at a wonderful Welcome Home to Milperra celebration recently where the kids were all up dancing and singing and it was very inclusive. It was fantastic and not in a tokenistic way. Because that's one of the criticisms of all of that, is that it's just the token, multicultural fair once a year, which just doesn't cut it. It has to be embedded across day-to-day practice. And I saw it, and I've seen it there before, too, so I know that that is genuine.
Haley: It's kind of foregrounding of that value isn't it, and making sure that that's embedded within everything, as you said, otherwise it does risk being tokenistic.

Jen: Yes.

Haley: So what does the legislation and policy in Queensland say regarding the inclusion of students from culturally diverse backgrounds? And do you think these documents are helpful in guiding practice?

Jen: Well, we've got a bit of a new situation happening in Queensland at the moment with the new inclusive education policy, every student succeeding. And on the one hand, that's really admirable. We're wanting to be more inclusive about our practice. But the risk that happens with that kind of overarching umbrella policy is that certain groups, as Francis has mentioned already, kind of get lost in the fray and their specific needs may not be met.

Haley: So, some groups are I mentioned, and other groups are not, is that what you mean?

Jen: I think all groups are mentioned but there can be a little bit of conflation about what the distinct groups are and what they require.

Haley: I understand.

Jen: I know in my work with EAL D students – English as an additional language or dialect. They are a very diverse group. And some of them need just a little bit of help with English and academic literacies. And others need a huge amount, especially if they've had interrupted schooling. They haven't been exposed to the kind of curriculum concepts that we absolutely rely on, especially in high schools. And these kids are at real danger of failing and never completing high school to any kind of degree they may be able to achieve given targeted explicit education around language and literacy and academic knowledge bases. So, these are really crucial times to be looking for where those things might slip off the radar. So, while I'm not opposed to a rock-solid inclusive education policy, we have to be really vigilant about what that's going to mean for different groups.

Francis: And maybe even look at what success means. Is students, if we want every child succeeding, what does that success look like? And that comes back to our own biases, our own understandings of what we think as educators that success should look like and that may not necessarily be what success should look like in an inclusive education context.

Jen: Yeah. Which makes me think about the role that children and young people have to play in making those decisions. We talk a lot now about pathways, which is great, but whose pathways? And I think we need a lot more conversation with the young people themselves about designing education and making it work for them. Which is massive, a bit revolutionary.

Haley: What are some of the practical strategies that teachers can use in supporting diverse classroom groups?

Francis: I think this comes down to grassroots level stuff where teachers, educators just need to really engage with the community. Obviously, they're always going to be different processes and protocols with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Always different processes and protocols. People you need to talk to. Australian South Sea Islanders the same. I would imagine that within culturally and linguistically diverse there are different processes and protocols there too, depending on their background and where they've come from and that sort of thing. But I can't comment too much on that obviously, but I just think grassroots level engagement with your
community. And that's how you begin that knowledge and understanding of the history of the community and why that's important to the students that you teach.

**Jen:** Yeah, I love that, Francis. And I think too, that the understanding of what community is because you've got your local community, geographical around the school, but then you've got communities of families that are all over Brisbane perhaps that are represented in the school population. I've just done some work in Toowoomba with schools who are responding to young people who've come from Iraq and Syria and other countries who are Yazidi people and the Kurdish people and they speak Kurmanji. And they've come through a particular refugee pathway, and it's challenging for many of them. And so, the schools are starting to understand a lot more about the Yazidi community, the languages, the history, the experiences they've been through in order to respond. So that's one thing. So in the literature that I've been working with lately around refugee-background learners in particular. And I'd like to talk about them today because in so many ways they're really up against it. And they are the students who are at risk in many of our schools. Because they've got interrupted education trajectories, they may not be literate in their first language. So that makes it really quite challenging to become literate in a new language, especially if you're older. But, in the literature, we know that there's a number of things we might call key practices that schools can engage with. So I'm going to talk quite broadly here and then listeners can sort of make their own mind up about how that might look in their context. And so the first thing is, and we've already talked a little bit about this, is to really celebrate the diversity that you have in your school context. And as Francis said before, it goes to understanding the local. And actually just a little aside here, since this is quite conversational, Francis and I were talking about the rock walls that were built by the Australian South Sea Islanders around Bundaberg. I grew up in Bundaberg and drove to Bargara beach and saw these rock walls every day of my life. But no one in my school history explained to me who built them, or why they were there. Exactly. And it wasn't until I was much older and studying at university in my BA that I did some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Indigenous First Nations history in my degree and learned a little bit more about this sort of thing. And I was like, wow, gee, if I had known that as a school student, I might have had a whole different appreciation for the people in my own community. So anyway, that was a little aside, but this is about celebrating diversity and understanding the locality of that.

You can engage with a range of different practices that value and commemorate the different cultural traditions and practices of students. Targeted support is another one. And I think this is really important, particularly for refugee background students who have complex social and emotional needs, then they also have complex learning needs, some of them. Positive relationships are incredibly important. I mean, it's the cornerstone of education, isn't it, really. Making those connections, having good social exchanges with respect, care, and trust as the cornerstones. Parental involvement, really important, even right up to senior high, if that can be managed. So employing a range of strategies designed to engage parents of students from refugee backgrounds in school-related activities. And of course, community partnerships with the many amazing organisations who wrap around schools to provide that specialist support that some schools don't know exist. But it's a matter of really tapping into all those organisations because teachers have a lot of responsibility and they really can't do everything, but they can reach out and get the help that everyone needs.

**Haley:** The Centre for Inclusive Education aims to produce high-quality impactful research on matters that affect school students in education both in Australia and around the world with the aim of improving the educational experiences and outcomes for all, but particularly those that experienced marginalisation. So basically, the plan is to change the world. So how does your research contribute to this important goal? I think that my research gives voice to Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander students and Australian South Sea Islander students, their families and their communities. I think that's really important. I also think that my research now has a platform within the centre and I think it's going to go more broadly to get the conversations about Australian South Sea Islanders out there for people to listen to and think about. And the broader aim there is to have their history and culture visible within the curriculum. Because I think if you can see your history or culture within the curriculum, that makes
it easier for teachers and educators to understand who, what, when, where, why – you know, all the important questions. And then that also helps with the connections with the families and the communities as well. So, I think for me it's more about the voice and providing a platform for these voices to really sing and be heard. Be heard, yeah, definitely. And, you know, Australian South Sea Islanders are connected to the Pacific, so that brings a more international context as well. We all have families and islands that we visit within the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. So there's very deep connections to place outside of Australia that people may not recognise or realise and they're not that far away from Australia. So, I think that the voice and the platform really is how my research contributes to all of that. Yeah.

**Jen:** Well, similarly, I'm interested in giving voice to marginalised migrant and refugee background youth who are really under-represented in research and also in classroom practice. And the other thing that I'm interested in is giving voice to teachers who are really grappling with interpreting national curriculum and state mandated syllabuses. How they interpret that, the curriculum, etc. and make it real, realise that in the classroom with culturally and linguistically diverse learners. Because we know the curriculum has elements that talk about being inclusive and addressing diversity. But the curriculum is the curriculum. And then teachers have to make it work for diverse learners, which is everybody. We're all diverse from each other, remember? So teachers have it tough and they know it. I talked to a lot of them and it's hard work. And so I'm really interested in talking to them about what sense they're making of it, how they're packaging it in different ways. And I'm using that term packaging very lightly. How they make it happen with impact. The question was about improving educational experiences and outcomes, I mean, that's the goal, isn't it? And making it, making it make sense, making it clear, accessible, challenging, interesting, and relevant to the point we are in history. We're on the cusp of something pretty amazing. We were chatting about this the other day weren't we, Francis. With the change of government, we've got a really great opportunity now to do some amazing things for First Nations people. I think when you're on, in that moment in history, it gives you opportunity. It gives you licence to think, how could things be different, right? Let's start to bring some of that into our classroom practise today.

**Haley:** Yeah. Great. Well, thank you both so much for your time today. It's been such a great conversation and your generosity and sharing ideas from your research with our listeners. We'll pop some of your publications in our show notes so people can continue reading if they would like to do so. Thank you again.

**Jen:** Thank you.

**Francis:** Our pleasure.