

Inclusive Practice Project:

Key Lessons for Schools

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Today's schools face a period of unprecedented change as well as some long-standing challenges. A policy of inclusive education - the idea that all pupils can and should be educated together in mainstream schools - has become increasingly common throughout the world as a strategy for dealing with diversity and difference but it has proved difficult to implement.

Although almost all school-aged children attend mainstream schools there are big differences in the quality of educational opportunities available to them. This raises important questions about equity for educational policy makers who work to reduce the discrepancies in learning opportunities for pupils.

Many schools struggle to deliver on the promise of inclusive education to achieve good academic and social outcomes for everybody. Although many things are done well by dedicated teachers and staff in schools, the long tail of under-achievement and lack of participation in and beyond schooling is a chronic problem for certain groups. A key concern is that many classroom teachers report feeling unprepared for inclusive education.

In addition, schools face challenges associated with migration, mobility, disability and first language spoken by pupils. Schools are dealing with changes to the curriculum, new approaches to assessment, new understandings of how pupils learn and demands for multi-agency

working. These challenges and changes have huge implications for how teachers are prepared and supported.

The task of initial teacher education is to prepare new teachers to enter a profession that accepts individual and collective responsibility for improving the learning and participation of *all* pupils, taking account that there will be differences between them. To this end, the Inclusive Practice Project (IPP), a Scottish Government funded project in the School of Education, University of Aberdeen, has been developing and studying new approaches to preparing teachers to ensure that they:

- have a greater awareness and understanding of the educational and social problems/issues that can affect pupils' learning; and
- have developed strategies they can use to support and deal with such difficulties.

The IPP involved university colleagues in reforming the Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) so that inclusion was at the heart of the programme. Studies of these reforms have highlighted many challenges, but also new opportunities to prepare teachers to be more inclusive. The PGDE at Aberdeen served as a site for the reform of teacher education and the intention was that the research and development activities associated with the project would generate lessons that might be useful elsewhere.

This short pamphlet highlights some of the lessons arising from the project for school staff.

Lessons for Practice

It is well known that labelling pupils as 'low ability' or as having 'learning support needs' can impact negatively on their expectations of themselves and lead to lower expectations on the part of teachers who do not believe they are able to change things for the better. What is less well understood is what to do about this - how to organise schools and classrooms in ways which do not place these unintended limitations on pupils' learning. Inclusive pedagogy offers a way of thinking about learning and teaching of *all* pupils, in a way which avoids the damaging effects of marking out some pupils as different.

Inclusive pedagogy is an approach, which has been developed, over a number of years, through studying the work of teachers who address issues of fairness in education by a commitment to inclusion of all pupils in the classroom learning community. As a fundamental principle, inclusive pedagogy rejects the idea that a learner's ability is fixed, and that what a pupil can do today is a good indicator of his or her future potential. Instead, it follows the work of Hart and her colleagues (2004) who argue that a learner's capacity to learn can be enhanced, and that the experiences that a pupil has in the classroom can bring about significant change. Because learning is affected for better or worse by the expectations that are placed on pupils, learning opportunities must be organised in ways that do not send out negative signals about those who are thought to be different. Thus inclusive promotes the use of strategies that offer an alternative

to the widespread educational practice of providing opportunities for 'most' pupils alongside something additional or different for 'some'. Instead it asks teachers to consider ways of extending what is available to everybody. In planning for everybody, the teacher takes account of the individuality of the learners in his or her class.

Given the focus of the inclusive pedagogical approach it is important to understand that what works in one setting with a particular group and a particular teacher may not necessarily work in another setting. However underlying the surface differences that are produced by different contexts is an approach where teachers who encounter *individual* pupils who are having difficulties, seek responses that work for *everybody*. The following examples were part of a study of graduates from the University of Aberdeen whose initial teacher education programme had been based upon the principles of inclusive pedagogy.

Inclusive pedagogy in action: Addressing individual difficulties in the context of everybody

A teacher whose class included 'Paul', a boy with profound hearing difficulties, made sure that what was offered to everybody included a visual component, to ensure that Paul could access the learning. She didn't provide different or additional work exclusively for Paul, but she ensured that the range of options available to everybody took account of his particular difficulty. The teacher commented that the additional

visual aspects of her communications with the class were of benefit to many pupils. Here Paul was seen as a valuable member of the learning community, rather than someone who represented extra work or was treated differently because he had a hearing difficulty.

In a second example, 'Danny' was causing concern due to his disengagement from the classroom learning and the belief of many in the school that he would never pay attention. The teacher in this case (Chloe) got to know Danny and to understand that he was always desperate for school to finish so he could return home to the family farm, and get on with the part of his life that he found more interesting. Chloe responded to this by introducing a whole class cross-curricular project based on environmental aspects of farming. In choosing this topic, she was able to reposition Danny from bored outsider to being an 'expert' within the class. Rather than addressing Danny's disengagement on an individual basis, she tried an 'everybody' approach to draw him back into the learning, and was able to derive a learning benefit for everybody in the class from her response to Danny.

Both of these examples illustrate how the choices that teachers made took account of the individual needs and interests of the learners in their class, and neither of the stories above is necessarily helpful in other settings. But the principle of seeking to support difficulties in learning in ways that respect the dignity of the individual in the learning community is a universal principle.

Whole class strategies - planning for all, not 'most and some'

A key feature of the teachers' practice was the way in which their general planning provided a range of opportunities for everybody, so that no one would find himself or herself in a position where they could not participate or were treated as an outsider to the main learning activities of the class.

In some cases this was achieved by providing choice - offering a range of options and asking the pupils to choose which activity or which approach they felt would benefit their learning. This worked well when supported by formative peer assessment, so that the pupils had an idea of what they were trying to achieve, and what they needed to learn in order to do that. In this way ceilings were not placed on the pupils' learning by the expectations of the teacher, but instead options available to the pupils were wider, and their negotiation through the different opportunities was less predictable.

Where group work approaches were adopted, the teachers would choose groups that they felt would benefit the learning of all. Rather than always grouping according to perceptions of ability, teachers took a flexible approach to grouping - mixing learners in different ways, so that pupils could learn together and from each other in ways that respected the contribution that each pupil could make to the classroom learning.

Key Messages & Implications

When the principles of inclusive pedagogy are used to guide the choices made by teachers, this will result in different actions in each case owing to the unique circumstances of each learner and each classroom. In order to include all learners in the learning community of the classroom, teachers must believe that all children can learn and draw from their understanding of the way that pupils learn in planning for all pupils taking steps to avoid marginalising some pupils within the classroom. Inclusive pedagogy rejects a model of 'most and some' provision and instead looks for ways to plan for the learning of each individual in the context of 'everybody'.

In developing inclusive pedagogy within schools, professional development activities for individual teachers linked to school development plans are essential. Further implications for professional and school development activities suggest that:

- 1) All teachers need to be supported to teach all children because they will meet children with a wide range of needs in the classes they teach. A deeper understanding of the theoretical principles and practical approaches that underpin inclusive pedagogy, where the classroom teacher accepts responsibility for all learners, should be a central core of professional development programmes.
- 2) In order to build inclusive pedagogical approaches it is helpful to suspend judgments about the practices associated with other, perhaps less inclusive approaches, rather than seeing them as problems. Articulating and debating what is pedagogically significant, and why it is significant, with colleague teacher educators is likely to strengthen the involvement of staff and the sustainability of reform.
- 3) The role and responsibility of learning support, together with its associated specialist knowledge, should be routinely reviewed so that it is consistent with the principles of inclusive practice and pedagogy as outlined in this pamphlet.
- 4) Teachers need support to develop new ways of working with other adults, in order to improve collaborative ways working in support of all pupils.
- 5) Within all programmes of professional and school development, there is the need to challenge deeply embedded thinking about (fixed) ability and bell curve thinking, which is apparent in organisational structures in many schools. Alternative approaches and understanding should be explored.
- 6) Consideration should be given to improving the experiences of inclusion for student teachers during school placements. Schools and classrooms vary in the extent to which inclusion is seen as an important aspect of practice

but teachers who are committed to inclusion can help in developing the skills of reflective practice, critical thinking and using evidence from their teaching to inform decision-making in ways that are consistent with the principles of inclusive pedagogy.

- 7) Professional development opportunities for teachers and other adults designed to enhance inclusive practice should be more widely available.

Further Reading

Those interested in learning more about how these ideas have developed might be interested in reading:

Florian, L., & Linklater, H. (2010). Preparing Teachers for Inclusive Education: Using Inclusive Pedagogy to Enhance Teaching and Learning for All. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 40(4), 369-386.
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Florian, L., & Black-Hawkins, K. (2011). Exploring Inclusive Pedagogy. *British Educational Research Journal*, 37(5), 813-828. doi:10.1080/01411926.2010.501096

Hart, S., Dixon, A., Drummond, M.J., & McIntyre, D. (2004). *Learning without limits*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Swann, M., Peacock, A., Hart, S., & Drummond, M.J. (2012). *Creating Learning without limits*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.

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