Enhancing Effective Inclusive Practice

Knowing, doing and believing

Based on a keynote address delivered by **Professor Martyn Rouse** at the *Learning for All: Enhancing Effective Practice in Special Education Symposia,* June 2006.

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INTRODUCTION

This article attempts to locate recent developments in inclusive practice and learning for all in a broader discussion about the need to educate all children more effectively than we may have done in the past. In particular it will explore the ways in which teachers' thinking, beliefs and actions could be developed in ways that might enhance inclusive practice. It is based in part on a keynote lecture given by the author at the Enhancing Effective Practice in Special Education (EEPiSE) national workshops held in New Zealand in June 2006. During the workshops, teachers, principals, students and facilitators presented their accounts of their school-based, action research and action learning projects designed to develop inclusive practice. The EEPiSE project has looked at different ways in which teachers and schools can become more inclusive of children who may have found learning and participation difficult in the past. Whilst listening to the reports from the project schools, it was apparent that the successes and difficulties encountered in the EEPiSE project have clear links to the kinds of approaches that are currently being undertaken in other places throughout the world. The messages coming from the project schools were not only about how to increase access to schooling, but also about how to improve children's participation in a relevant and meaningful educational process. Central to this task is a focus on what teachers and other adults who work in schools might do to foster learning, achievement and participation. It is suggested that new ways of thinking about what teachers might need to know, do and believe, are required.

A series of key questions will be addressed in this article:

- Why learning for all?
- What is the current international policy context?
- Why is inclusive practice difficult to develop?
- What are effective inclusive schools?
- How might teachers reconceptualise the inclusion task?

LEARNING FOR ALL? THE CURRENT INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT OF INCLUSION, EXCLUSION AND UNDERACHIEVEMENT

Education for All (EFA) is one of the Millennium Development Goals, in part because education is seen as being a crucial element in human development, but also because so many children do not have access to education, UNESCO (2005). There are many reasons why some children do not attend school, including social conflict, movement of populations, child labour and exploitation, poverty, gender, and disability. It is the world's most vulnerable children who are at most risk of not attending school, or of receiving a sub-standard education. In some parts of the world, schooling is not available because of a shortage of school places, a lack of teachers, or because schools are too far from where children live. Sometimes families choose not to send their children to school because of the poor quality of schooling or because of the economic cost. Such costs might include school fees, having to buy uniforms, books and materials, and so-called "opportunity costs" that arise when young people are not economically active because they are in school.

Throughout the world there is an increased awareness of differences in education provision as well as a growing understanding of the power of education to reduce poverty, to improve the lives of individuals and to transform societies. It is acknowledged that children with disabilities and those who find learning difficult are amongst the most disadvantaged in education. Where provision for such children is available, it is often in separate, segregated facilities such as long-stay institutions, special schools or units. The continued existence of separate facilities means that significant human and material resources are unavailable to help with the development of inclusive practice. Therefore, the reconfiguration of separate facilities and the inclusion of children described as having special education needs is seen as an essential component for achieving education for all. It is hardly surprising therefore that inclusion is part of a worldwide agenda. As a result of this interest, a series of national and international initiatives intended to broaden participation for vulnerable groups of children have been enacted. These include the United Nations Education for All initiative (EFA) which was launched in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990, the Dakar Declaration (UNICEF, 2000) and the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994).

Differences in educational opportunities for children depend not only on their individual circumstances, but also crucially on the country in which they live. In highly developed countries such as New Zealand and the United Kingdom, with their long histories of compulsory school attendance, such concerns may seem irrelevant, but even here, not all children are in school. And even when they are in school, they do not necessarily have positive experiences of education, nor do some children have much to show for their time in school. Most school systems have children who are excluded, who do not participate in meaningful learning, or who underachieve. The so-called "achievement gap" between those who achieve most and those who achieve least, is a major concern in many countries. Even successful school systems find some children difficult to educate. Therefore, in many countries the concern is not only about access to schooling, but it is also about ensuring meaningful participation in a system in which achievement and success is available to all. But why is there such a long tail of underachievement in so many countries? Why do so many educational systems have chronic institutional barriers to participation and achievement? And why do so many teachers and schools think that these problems should not be their concern because they are someone else's responsibility?

Some would argue that the presence of segregated special facilities is a barrier because it absolves the rest of the education system from taking responsibility for all children's learning. Such beliefs are not surprising because the "classic" special education view assumes that it is not desirable to include children with learning difficulties in mainstream settings because their needs are different. The assumption that underpins this view is that it is possible, and indeed desirable, to group children according to the nature of their abilities, disabilities or difficulties. There are those who claim that because children are different, there will be diversity of instructional needs. In turn this requires teaching groups to be formed according to these perceived individual characteristics. According to Kauffman, Landrum, Mock, Sayeski, and Sayeski (2005), teaching children well requires that they be grouped homogeneously for instructional purposes.

In spite of articulate challenges to deterministic beliefs about ability (for example, Gould, 1997; Hart, Dixon, Drummond & McIntyre, 2004), there is a widespread and persistent belief that human abilities are distributed throughout the population according to the rules of the "bell-curve". In this view of the world, those who are located at the bottom left hand end of the curve are both qualitatively and quantitatively different from the rest. Given these assumptions, it is not surprising that many teachers and parents continue to believe that only professionals who have undertaken specialist training have the skills and knowledge to do the special needs task.

In such a context, achieving inclusion is a daunting task. The European Agency on the Development of Special Needs Education (2006) reports that dealing with differences and diversity is one of the biggest problems faced by schools across Europe, with behaviour, social and/or emotional problems presenting the biggest challenges for inclusion. It is suggested that difficulties in creating schools for all are often associated with intergenerational poverty and underachievement, and a belief that education is a privilege and not a right that should be available to all.

In addition, barriers to participation arise from inflexible or irrelevant curricula, inappropriate systems of assessment and examinations, and inadequate preparation of and support for teachers. In some countries schools are operating in a hostile policy environment that results in insufficient "capacity" because of restrictive school structures, a competitive ethos, negative cultures and a lack of human and material resources. In turn these views lead to negative attitudes, low expectations and a belief that some children are "worthy" but others are "unworthy".

In response to concerns about under-achievement and global competitiveness, many countries have enacted "standards-based" reforms such as No Child Left Behind in the United States, and the Education Reform Act (1998) in England (McLaughlin & Rouse, 2000). At the same time, but mostly independent of the "mainstream" reform legislation, many countries have enacted educational policies designed to encourage greater inclusion of children considered to have disabilities or difficulties. The process of education reform began in many countries in the mid 1980s when concerns about global economic competitiveness and the efficiency of school systems resulted in the adoption of marketplace principles in education (Rouse & Florian, 1997). Such reforms were underpinned by the idea that competition and choice raise standards and accountability. It could be argued that competitive environments result in winners and losers and that in such a climate some children may be seen as more attractive to schools than others. Children who are considered difficult to teach and those who find learning difficult are at increased risk for exclusion when schools operate in a competitive educational marketplace (McLaughlin & Rouse, 2000).

It is important to note that this broader policy context can affect the development of inclusion. Educational reform can be both a facilitator and a barrier to the education of children with special education needs. On the one hand it can be argued that higher standards are good for all children because schools are held accountable for the progress of all learners. On the other hand, it has been argued that the difficulties children experience in learning are a consequence of unresponsive education systems. "Special education needs" are often the result of a discrepancy between what a system of schooling ordinarily provides and that which is considered "additional" because it is more than that which is generally available (Florian, 2007).

The research literature suggests that the implementation of inclusion policies has been uneven (Evans & Lunt, 2002). Whilst there are many success stories to be told about inclusion (Ainscow, 1991; Florian & Rouse, 2001), there have also been failures and difficulties. Such difficulties have been blamed on a variety of factors including competing policies that stress competition and high standards, and a lack of funding and resources. It has also been suggested that one of the greatest barriers to the development of inclusion is because teachers do not have the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes to carry out this work (Forlin 2001).

Nevertheless, developing schools for all is important because schooling is linked to human, economic and social development goals. Dealing with exclusion, marginalisation and underachievement is not only the right thing to do; it makes sound economic and social sense. Failure to develop schools capable of educating all children not only leads to the creation of an educational underclass, but also a social and economic underclass which is likely to have serious consequences for society now and in the future. Therefore, the development of successful inclusive schools, "schools for all" in which the learning and participation of all children is valued, whilst difficult, is an essential task for all countries.

Therefore, although inclusion is seen as important in most countries, experience tells us that it is difficult to achieve for children with special education needs because of:

- deterministic beliefs about intelligence and fixed abilities
- a lack of resources
- the continuing existence of separate specialist facilities and institutions
- the shame and stigma associated with disability and difference
- disagreements about the nature and viability of inclusive education
- uncertainty about professional roles and the status of specialist knowledge
- inadequate preparation of and support for teachers
- inflexible curricula and examination systems
- didactic "lecture style" whole class teaching
- other policies that impinge on the development of inclusive schools such as the competitive marketplace reforms.

Clearly the development of inclusive practice is difficult, but how is it that some schools become more inclusive while others struggle?

WHAT ARE EFFECTIVE INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS?

There is now sufficient evidence from around the world to know what inclusive schools do and what they look like. A series of factors at various levels seem to facilitate inclusion. These factors include, the broader policy context, the features of schools as organisations, the leadership of the school, classroom processes, the quality of learning and teaching, and the nature of relationships. Pro-inclusion policies that value all learners, rather than just some, are an important feature of schools for all. However, I am going to concentrate on outlining the features of schools and classrooms, because that is where most teachers have some professional responsibility and power.

First it is important to remember that inclusive schools are created one at a time. All schools have their histories, traditions, strengths and areas that need improvement.

Therefore, each of the features below may evolve differently in various schools and it is important not to view these characteristics as part of a checklist for improvement. Nevertheless successful inclusive schools seem to have:

- support from inside and outside the school
- leadership from the principal and the local authority or school district
- cooperation with parents and the community
- multi-agency working and the sharing of expertise
- a positive ethos and supportive cultures
- flexible use of resources
- long-term professional development for all adults
- a range of outcomes that are valued, not only academic attainment
- involvement in action research development projects, often involving outside partners
- a belief that becoming inclusive is not only about special educational needs, but is part of a broader school improvement agenda
- engagement with self-review and audit of policies and practices
- using approaches such as the *Index for Inclusion.*

The last factor on the list is important because it provides a foundation of evidence upon which other developments can be built. The *Index for Inclusion* is more than a tool for developing inclusion. It supports a process that encourages the learning and participation of all learners. According to Booth & Black-Hawkins:

> *It does not focus on a particular group of learners who are disabled or categorised as having special educational needs, although it is concerned with them too. It encourages a critical examination of all aspects of schools, including approaches to teaching and learning, curricula, and relationships between and amongst teachers and learners. It asks staff to build on their own knowledge and experience and that of learners, parents and other members of communities, in identifying development priorities and implementing them. In the process of working with the materials schools adapt them to their own contexts* (2005, p.5).

As can be seen there is an emphasis on using evidence as the basis for developments in learning and teaching, the curriculum and relationships. Schools cannot become more inclusive unless there are changes in classroom practices that enable children to learn successfully and help them to feel better about themselves as learners. Therefore, inclusive classrooms should emphasise:

- a positive social and emotional climate by encouraging positive behaviour
- learning as well as teaching
- classroom organisation and management
- an inclusive pedagogy and the use of a wide range of teaching strategies

- adults working together collaboratively
- cooperative learning
- building on children's interests and what they already know and can do
- the use of assessment practices that support learning.

And of course teachers are crucial in determining what happens in classrooms. Many see the development of more inclusive classrooms as requiring teachers to cater for different student learning needs through the modification or differentiation of the curriculum (Forlin, 2004). For some, this approach has been interpreted as requiring individualisation. At its most extreme, this view can be seen in the call for one-to-one teaching of students with specific learning difficulties. Questions about the sustainability of such expensive provision are rarely adequately answered. Further, there are those who argue (for example Kaufman, et al., 2005) that there are specialist teaching approaches for children with different kinds of disabilities and that specialist training is required. An unintended consequence of these views is that most mainstream teachers do not believe they have the skills and knowledge to do this kind of work and that there is an army of "experts" out there to deal with these students on a one-to-one basis or in small more manageable groups. Research carried out in England for the Department for Education and Skills challenges some of the traditional views about the nature of a specialist pedagogy (Davis & Florian, 2004) and in this issue Lani Florian explores questions about special knowledge and pedagogy in more detail.

Nevertheless, teachers do have concerns about inclusion and many surveys have found that teachers' attitudes towards inclusion are not particularly positive (Ellins & Porter, 2005). Further, they express concerns about their lack of preparation for inclusion and for teaching all learners (Forlin, 2001). But in settings where teachers are encouraged to try out a range of teaching strategies, they report that they knew more than they thought they knew and, for the most part, children learn in similar ways. Although some children might need extra support, teachers do not distinguish between "types" of special education need when planning this support (Florian & Rouse, 2001). Many teachers reported they did not think they could teach such children, but their confidence and repertoire of teaching strategies developed over time. This would suggest that by "just doing it" teachers are capable of developing knowledge and positive attitudes to inclusion.

By looking at the main findings from research that Lani Florian and I have carried out over a period of 15 years or so, it would seem that successful inclusive classroom practice depends on teachers':

- attitudes to pupils with special education needs
- capacity to enhance social relations
- willingness to deal with differences effectively
- repertoire of skills, expertise, knowledge, pedagogical approaches and confidence
- beliefs that all children can learn
- willingness to work together with specialists and other colleagues.

It could be argued that developing effective teaching is about extending teachers' knowledge, encouraging them to do things differently, getting them to reconsider their identities and their attitudes and it is also about reviewing the kinds of support they need. In other words, it is about "knowing", "doing", "being", "believing", and "having". But what does this look like in practice?

For many years both initial teacher education and continuing professional development focused on extending teachers' knowledge. Courses would often focus on the characteristics of different kinds of learners, how they should be identified, and details of any specialist teaching strategies that were considered appropriate. In other words these courses focused on:

Knowing about

- teaching strategies
- disability and special education needs
- how children learn
- what children need to learn
- classroom organisation and management
- where to get help when necessary
- the best ways to assess and monitor children's learning
- the legislative and policy context.

It is important to point out that such content knowledge is important, but the evidence suggests that it is insufficient because many teachers did not act upon this knowledge when they returned to the classroom. It was clear there was a big gap between what teachers know as a result of being on a course and what they do in their classrooms. In an attempt to bridge this gap, initiatives have been designed to link individual and institutional development. In other words "doing" has become an essential element of professional learning. In many cases this has involved action research-type initiatives built around school or classroom-based development projects and new ways of:

Doing

- turning knowledge into action
- using evidence to improve practice
- learning how to work with colleagues as well as with children
- using positive rewards and incentives.

Although many action research initiatives have had positive outcomes and involved changes in practice, it became apparent that some were "content-free" and only focused on process. Others ran into barriers associated with negative and deterministic attitudes about children's abilities and "worth". Sadly there are those who believe that some children will never be able to learn those things that are important to their teachers. Further, there are teachers who do not believe they have the skills to make a difference, perhaps because they "have not been on the course", and they lack confidence.

Therefore, it is also important to consider how it might be possible for teachers to develop new ways of:

Believing

- that all children are worth educating
- that all children can all learn
- that they have the capacity to make a difference to children's lives
- that such work is their responsibility and not only a task for specialists.

Changing attitudes is difficult, particularly for those teachers whose professional identities are secure. If a teacher sees themself as a teacher of, let's say chemistry or French, it is likely that the subject they teach will play an important part in the construction of their professional identity. Further, if their subject is seen as intellectually demanding, then why would they be expected to have to teach it to all learners? But it is not only subject specialist teachers in secondary schools who have difficulty in redefining their professional identities. Some teachers of young children with special education needs see themselves as experts in dealing with children's difficulties in learning. It is an identity built upon the belief about specialist knowledge and skills for the work. Other teachers not only do not know how to do it, but they wouldn't want to do it if they did know how. Inclusion threatens assumptions that teachers have about many things. In particular it can threaten their identities. If responsibilities are to be shared and teachers are to take on new roles and responsibilities, then there have to be changes to teachers' ways of:

Being

- through exploring and extending their identity of what it means to be a teacher in inclusive settings.

And finally it is important to ensure that teachers not only have the knowledge, skills and attributes listed above, but also that they are provided with the conditions which enable them to do the job. This entails:

Having

- the materials, resources, space and place to do the work
- the time to consult with colleagues
- positive attitudes about self and others
- the confidence to try new things in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

The development of inclusive schools is not an easy task and not all people are committed to the development of inclusion because they have strong beliefs about where and how different "kinds" of children should receive their schooling. In particular there are still unanswered questions about the purpose and nature of specialist knowledge. In spite of these difficulties there are sufficient examples of good practice across the world, and particularly here in New Zealand, for us to be optimistic that, if we so wish, we can create successful inclusive schools for all. The examples given at the EEPiSE workshops provide indicators of how this might be achieved. All of the examples involved teachers and principals approaching inclusion with open minds. Many reported difficulties and obstacles, but most reported about ways in which practice had changed over the life of the project. In many schools things were being done differently and teachers were trying out new ways of working. Over time, "just doing it" will lead to changes in attitudes and the development of new knowledge. It was clear from many of the project reports that there was new knowledge being developed and more positive attitudes were becoming apparent. As mentioned earlier in this article, becoming more inclusive is not only the right thing to do, but it is also in everyone's interest. It is essential that teachers and schools play their part in the creation of a fairer, more stable and more secure society in which everyone feels included.

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