



Inclusive pedagogy: From learning to action. Supporting each individual in the context of ‘everybody’



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HIGHLIGHTS

- This is a study of the enactment of inclusive pedagogy by new graduates of the University of Aberdeen.
- The paper shows how theoretical concepts informed actions in different contexts.
- The dignity of each child in the classroom community was central to inclusive pedagogy.
- The paper shows how individual difficulties were addressed through a consideration of ‘everybody’.
- Teachers drew selectively and purposefully from established strategies to ensure inclusion.

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws from a novel study of graduates from a one year Professional Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) course at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland. The study explored how beginning teachers in their various contexts used the theoretical ideas of inclusive pedagogy. Observation and interview data were analysed to reveal linkages between the principles that informed the course and the practices of programme graduates. By drawing on examples from the data that illustrate inclusive pedagogy in action, questions are addressed about how teachers in diverse classrooms create learning environments with opportunities that are available to everybody.

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1. Introduction

This paper explores how the theoretical concept of inclusive pedagogy is being taught and studied in a university based teacher education program. The study is of particular relevance to teacher educators around the world as the role, value and relevance of university based teacher education is being questioned and teachers are under pressure to achieve high standards of academic performance for an increasingly diverse student population. As discussed below, inclusive pedagogy is an approach that has emerged from research into the craft knowledge of teachers who are able to maintain high levels of academic attainment in diverse classrooms (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). The preparation of teachers to meet the challenges of teaching under such circumstances is of concern to teacher educators and policy makers in

many parts of the world because of the significant role that teachers play in influencing student achievement (Hattie, 2009; OECD., 2005). Our work is concerned with understanding how classroom teachers can be prepared to respond to differences between individual students without perpetuating the marginalization that can occur when some are treated differently from others. This is an area of increasing interest among policy makers and teacher educators in many jurisdictions (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2011; EADSNE, 2011; OECD., 2010).

Funded by a research and development grant from the Scottish Government, in the period 2006–2010, the post-graduate initial teacher education programme at the University of Aberdeen underwent a fundamental reform that framed educational inclusion as a core concern for all students, rather than an additional component or an infusion of information about special needs (for details, see Florian, Young, & Rouse, 2010). The course as a whole was underpinned by the principles of inclusive pedagogy (Florian, 2010; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Florian & Kershner, 2009), a

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distinctive approach to educational inclusion that emphasises the responsibility of mainstream teachers to support the learning of all pupils, and promotes an understanding of inclusion as participation (Black-Hawkins, Florian, & Rouse, 2007).

This paper draws from a qualitative study of seven graduates from Aberdeen's Professional Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) programme during their first year as probationary teachers. The purpose of the study was to explore how the ideas of inclusive pedagogy were used in practice by new teachers in their various contexts. The aim was not to evaluate how 'good' the teachers were, or how successful the course had been, but to undertake a more nuanced exploration of how the beginning teachers understood and enacted inclusion in their classrooms. This novel approach to researching the programme effects was designed to generate important new knowledge about how primary and secondary classroom teachers might be better prepared to teach increasingly diverse groups of students. The examples we report reflect the linkages between the principles that informed the PGDE course reform and the practices of programme graduates. By drawing examples from the data which illustrate *inclusive pedagogy in action* we also address the related questions of how these conceptual ideas manifest in practice and how to recognise inclusive pedagogy when it occurs.

2. Inclusive pedagogy

Inclusive pedagogy is a pedagogical approach that responds to learner diversity in ways that avoid the marginalisation of some learners in the community of the classroom. It is a specific approach that has emerged from research into the craft knowledge of teachers who were committed to the principles of educational inclusion in their practice (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). The approach has been further refined by research conversations between teacher educators (Florian, Young, & Rouse, 2010), and discussions with policy makers and academics at national and international dissemination events. Thus the teacher education research and development project of which this study was part (the Inclusive Practice Project, or IPP) has involved a complex reciprocal cycle of knowledge exchange between researchers, practitioners, policy makers and teacher educators. In examining the pedagogy of new teachers, the study reported here further strengthens and consolidates the links between our theoretical ideas and the learning and teaching that occurs in the classroom when teachers are informed by these concepts. This paper provides research detail about what it is that teachers who are committed to the principles of inclusive education actually do.

This is important because inclusive education is a contested concept that has been plagued by definitional problems. Originally conceived as an alternative to special education for students identified as having disabilities or difficulties in learning, the idea has broadened to include any and all learners who may be excluded or marginalised by the processes of schooling. However, the term is used idiosyncratically to mean different things, from a new name for special education to a new way of thinking about mainstream education. The contested nature of the concept creates difficulties for research. Consequently, we have differentiated inclusive education from synonymous terms such as inclusive practice and inclusive pedagogy and defined them specifically for the purpose of our programme of research which focuses on improving the quality of provision for diverse groups of learners in mainstream schools (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Inclusive pedagogy challenges the deterministic practices that pervade contemporary education. For example, schools commonly base organisational decisions on the twinned assumptions, firstly that children's ability is fixed and immutable and secondly that

differences between students should be addressed by offering alternative provision, whether that is through ability grouping within classrooms, setting and streaming within year groups or separate provision for 'special needs'. Thus the structures of many schools have developed in ways which exacerbate difference by providing for some individuals or groups in ways that mark out and reinforce divisions. At an individual level these practices have been shown to selectively undermine some pupils' sense of self-worth (Boaler, William, & Brown, 2000), or their willingness to persist in the face of difficulty (Dweck, 1999) whilst at a societal level they reproduce social inequalities as certain groups, for example some ethnic minorities, are over represented in special education (Harry, 2014).

The supposition that the future achievement (or 'potential') of a child can be determined from present performance also leads to pessimistic assumptions in teachers who do not believe it is in their power to bring about change (Hart, 1998). As an alternative, inclusive pedagogy draws from the work of Hart, Dixon, Drummond, and McIntyre (2004) who argue that a child's capacity to learn is transformable, when teachers remove the limits imposed by deterministic beliefs. Inclusive pedagogy is informed by a socio-cultural understanding of learning. It acknowledges that learning takes place in the context of the 'person plus' (Claxton, 2009), in other words, the individual together with the complex web of social relations which he or she inhabits. Drawing from the work of Vygotsky (1978) children are seen to grow into the intellectual and cultural life of the community through their interactions with others. Hence the capacity to learn is not seen as a solely dependent on innate factors such as intelligence, but instead the social origins of cognitive development and the idea that the capacity to learn can be enhanced by the choices that teachers make (Hart et al., 2004; Kuzolin, 2014) are foregrounded.

A socio-cultural approach also recognises that in the micro-culture of the classroom, the choices that teachers make about learning and teaching convey messages which are much wider than the formal learning focus of the lesson (Alexander, 2001). Through its unconditional recognition and acceptance of all learners, the inclusive pedagogical approach recognises that all children have much in common, whilst acknowledging that each child is unique (Alexander, 2004). Rather than denying differences between children, it seeks supportive ways of accommodating diversity (Florian, 2010). Thus, understanding how to respond to difficulties in learning, in ways which respect what Linklater (2011) has called the dignity of each child within the classroom community, is critical. Specifically, inclusive pedagogy is opposed to the practices which offer provision for 'most' alongside additional or different experiences for 'some'. Instead it demands that teachers extend what is ordinarily available to be accessible to all (Florian, 2010) by offering a range of options which are available to everybody.

The inclusive pedagogical approach, then, favours classroom practices which encourage collaboration between children in learning activities which build a sense of an inclusive community learning together. However, it is also important to be mindful what each individual brings to and gains from the complex interaction of the classroom (Kershner, 2009). Hence it is not a slavish adherence to group work at all costs, but instead asks that teachers draw on their professional judgement to choose the most appropriate approach to teaching and learning in any particular context, being ever mindful about how those choices will impact on the opportunities for all children in the class (De Valenzuela, 2014).

By refusing to categorise children according to perceptions of 'ability', inclusive pedagogy also calls for a reconceptualisation of professional partnership in the field of learning support. Classroom teachers and other specialists are urged to view children's difficulties in learning as professional dilemmas, and to constantly

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