



The inclusive practice project in Scotland: Teacher education for inclusive education

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ABSTRACT

While differences in national contexts are associated with variations in how teachers are trained and school systems are organised, the conceptual and philosophical problems of equity and inclusion in schooling are shared concerns. This paper describes how the structure and content of an initial teacher education programme for primary and secondary teachers has been revised to ensure that social and educational inclusion is addressed within the core programme. A rationale is presented for the development of 'inclusive practice', followed by a discussion of the reforms and an outline of the effects that are expected in the classroom practices of teachers in schools.

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1. Introduction

Differences in educational opportunities for children depend not only on their individual cultural, economic, health or disability circumstances, but also on where they live and the ways in which educational systems are structured, regulated and supported in their home country. Regardless of these differences, there is widespread acknowledgement that teachers play a crucial role in providing quality education. In developed countries that have long histories of compulsory school attendance, concerns about access and equity in schooling, and teacher quality remain relevant. Even in these countries, not all children are in school, and even when they are, they do not necessarily have positive experiences of education, nor do some 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, giving a new impetus to the call for more inclusive education (Black-Hawkins, Florian, & Rouse, 2007). Scotland is no exception. The so-called 'achievement gap' between those who achieve most and those who achieve least, is a major concern in many places, especially in the countries of the United Kingdom (UK) (OECD, 2007).

Each of the four countries of the UK (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) has its own different educational systems. And whilst there have been strong similarities and links in the past

between the English and Welsh systems, Scotland and Northern Ireland have always had separate and distinctive systems. Although there are fundamental differences between the countries in the ways in which teachers are trained, many of the concerns about inadequate preparation for inclusion are relevant across all of the countries of the UK as well as internationally. While differences in national context may produce variation in how teachers are trained and school systems are organised, the conceptual and philosophical problems of equity and education for all are shared concerns.

Addressing these concerns has focussed on a variety of approaches, including the introduction of widespread school reforms, sometimes referred to as 'standards-based' reforms, to raise attainment in schools, for example, the Education Reform Act 1989 in England and No Child Left Behind in the United States (US). These changes began 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. These reforms were characterised by new approaches to governance, accountability, funding mechanisms and parental choice (Ball, 1990). Often these changes were associated with the introduction of national curricula and standards, together with national approaches to assessment and compulsory testing. In England, for example, the results of these national tests were widely published in 'league tables', in the belief that parental choice of school would be better informed by such evidence about the performance of schools. Policy makers in many countries saw competition between schools as a way of raising standards, although national education policies have varied with respect to the extent to which they have embraced the principles of the marketplace. In contrast to the

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situation in England, Scotland has retained a largely comprehensive secondary school system, yet problems of equity persist. According to a 2007 report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Quality and equity of schooling in Scotland*, the variation between student attainment in England is predominately a between school phenomenon, whereas in Scotland it is a within school problem. In both cases the variation in attainment is associated with beliefs about some children's (limited) ability and potential. These beliefs sometimes get translated into low expectations and organisational responses such as ability grouping and setting.

At the same time in many countries, but independent of the 'standards-based' legislation, there has been a focus on children who have been identified as having disabilities and/or 'special educational needs' who had been largely ignored in the early efforts to improve standards in schools (McLaughlin & Rouse, 2000). In the US such children are referred to as 'children with disabilities', in England as 'children with special educational needs', in Scotland the current preferred term is 'children with additional support needs'. Terminology is important because language reveals assumptions about why and how people are perceived as having difficulty in learning. Scrutiny of what is meant by terms such as 'difficulty' and 'disability' suggests that students so identified are thought to be somehow different as learners from others, thus justifying the provision of something 'different' or 'additional', such as special education or learning support, in the name of educational equity. But often the students identified as having special needs are those who do not perform well on standards-based assessments thereby exacerbating 'chicken and egg' type dilemmas about whether additional support helps or hinders efforts to raise standards for all students. In spite of these efforts to support children's learning, levels of achievement for many vulnerable children, however they are described, remain problematic.

While there has been significant progress in understanding the relationship between teaching, curriculum and learning, in many schools the education of children who are perceived as having 'difficulties' is often still the sole responsibility of special needs experts rather than being shared with classroom and subject teachers. This form of provision is historical, having its roots in the notion of 'diagnostic-prescriptive' teaching where interventions are based on discredited ideas about remediating the underlying deficits within individuals (Ysseldyke, 2001). While understanding differences between learners has been a central interest of research and practice in special needs education, the emphasis on studying human differences has perpetuated a belief that human differences are predictive of difficulties in learning. This is a view that has become self-reinforcing and has sustained deficit-based categorical approaches to the provision of educational services in most countries (Florian & McLaughlin, 2008). Yet the frequently used medical categories of disability have not proved useful in determining educational interventions.

Since the Warnock Report (DES, 1978) there have been efforts across the UK to abandon categorical and deficit thinking about children who experience difficulties in learning but with limited success (Norwich, 2008). In part this is because of deeply embedded assumptions about the nature and distribution of ability, which is often informed by a hegemonic belief in bio-determinism (Gould, 1996), and the idea that intelligence is fixed and normally distributed throughout the population (e.g. Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). As a consequence, expectations and achievement levels for some children, including those who are perceived as having special educational needs, or who are from certain social, cultural or ethnic backgrounds, are still too low in many schools (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). Such uneven outcomes are seen as expected and predictable by the Qualifications and Curriculum Agency (QCA, 2000). Indeed,

in England advice from government encouraged ability grouping in schools as can be seen in the White Paper 'Excellence in Schools' (Department for Education and Employment, 1997):

'... unless a school can demonstrate that it is getting better than expected results through a different approach, we do make the presumption that setting should be the norm in secondary schools.' (p. 38)

It is hardly surprising then that many schools continue to organise learning groups on the basis of perceived ability. Setting and ability grouping remains a common organisational structure in schools despite the research evidence that it does not lead to improved outcomes (Ireson, Hallam, & Huntley, 2005) and that it could be the single most important cause of the unacceptably low levels of achievement in mathematics in Great Britain (Boaler, William, & Brown, 2000). The argument put forth here is that practices associated with ability grouping are divisive and may contribute to the levels of underachievement that are apparent in many schools. We suggest that new approaches to inclusion are necessary, because attempts to raise attainment of the lowest achieving groups have been largely unsuccessful (OECD, 2007).

In recent years the concept of educational inclusion has widened to incorporate broader issues of social inclusion. It was the theme of the 2008 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) 48th International Conference on Education, and it has been embraced by many governments (e.g. Scottish Executive, 2005) as a strategy for achieving access and equity in education for all (Peters, 2003). There is now greater awareness of the exclusionary pressures associated with migration, mobility, language, ethnicity and intergenerational poverty. The reciprocal links between poverty, disability, special needs and underachievement in schools are now clearer, but these links manifest themselves differently in different places and at different times, for cultural as well as policy reasons. Given the competing policy agendas of standards-based reforms, and moves towards greater social and educational inclusion, the development of inclusive education, is a daunting prospect. This is relevant not only for teachers, but also for those who prepare teachers to work in schools.

2. To what extent are teachers being prepared to meet the challenges of inclusive schools?

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. Barriers to learning and participation arise from inflexible or irrelevant curricula, inappropriate systems of assessment and examination. It is argued that these barriers are exacerbated by inadequate preparation of teachers, particularly in the area of 'special educational needs' and for working in inclusive schools (Forlin, 2001). But criticisms of the ways in which teachers are educated to work in inclusive schools are not new, concerns were raised by Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools (HMI, 1990) suggesting that there were many approaches to training teachers to work with students with special educational needs, few of which were successful. Nor are these concerns confined to the UK.

Preparing teachers for inclusive education has been a long-standing but elusive goal of teacher education in the US (Blanton & Pugach, 2007). Hardman (2009) attributes this in part to his observation that teacher education programs in the US with their emphasis on the differences between sectors and different kinds of learners (e.g. early childhood, primary, secondary, and special

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