



Effective inclusive teacher education for special educational needs and disabilities: Some more thoughts on the way forward



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HIGHLIGHTS

- How some models of inclusive teacher education for special educational needs fail.
- Practices and principles underpinning efficacious inclusive teacher education.
- The findings of an inclusive action research project.
- The evidence base for effective inclusive teacher education.
- Recommendations for teacher educators about ways forward.

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to identify the principles and practices underpinning effective inclusive teacher education for special educational needs (SEN) in ordinary schools through an inclusive action research project. The findings demonstrate that where practitioner development involves critical-theoretical, reflexive, research-oriented collaborations among a professional learning community, practitioners become more confident and skilful in enacting inclusive practice. This community was formed in the context of a school-university partnership and included pre-service teachers, experienced teachers, teaching assistants and university tutors. Its findings cast serious doubt over the efficacy of de-intellectualised, 'on the job' training models favoured by policy makers in England and elsewhere.

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1. Introduction and context

This paper explores an essential question: *What models and pedagogic frameworks are effective in developing skilled, confident and effective teachers who can successfully include learners with special educational needs (SEN) within mainstream classrooms?* Drawing on international evidence and reporting the findings of an important research study, its purpose is to inform teacher educators and policymakers about pedagogic design for effective inclusive teacher education. The research reported here sought to bring together, test out and add to what is currently known or hypothesised about efficacious approaches so this paper presents a thorough and broad literature review so that its contribution can be fully understood. Following this, an account of the complex

methodological design is provided with reference to context, research principles, research tools and the challenges posed by its core questions. Findings are analysed and discussed with the purpose of providing practical direction through the assertion of key recommendations for all providers of teacher education.

In this paper, the term *Inclusion* refers to the process through which education systems respond to diverse learners in ways that enable participation, equal opportunities, respect for difference and social justice. It places particular focus on the inclusion of learners with special educational needs within mainstream classrooms though the complexities of this term are further explored in 2.5.

The question raised by this paper is pertinent worldwide but has particular currency in England where a review of initial teacher 'training' (ITT), (Carter, 2015) has emphasised the urgent need to improve the SEN elements of teacher preparation programmes. Citing Burns and Mutton (2014), Carter (2015, p.21) recommends models of 'clinical practice' whereby pre-service teachers draw on

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'the practical wisdom of experts' whilst engaging in rigorous trialling and evaluation so that they might 'develop and extend their own decision making capacities or professional judgements' (Carter, 2015, p.22). However, there may not be a surfeit of 'practical wisdom' about inclusive practice on which to draw nor a tradition of clinical practice disruptive enough to the status quo. For this reason, McIntyre insightfully argued that inclusive pedagogy could be innovated in teacher education through particular models of partnership:

... if a partnership team of school-based and university based teacher educators agrees that a new practical idea, even a complex idea such as inclusive pedagogy, merits a place in the ITE curriculum, then student teachers will not only be introduced to the relevant practical suggestions (clearly conceptualised and rigorously justified) in the university, but will also have opportunities in the schools to explore their feasibility and to debate its merits of practicality.

McIntyre, 2009, p.605

McIntyre (2009) proposed effective models as situated within *professional learning communities* comprising pre-service teachers, serving teachers and university tutors since practices in schools were likely to be under-developed as models of inclusive pedagogy. McIntyre's ideas were published posthumously in a special edition of Teaching and Teacher Education as 'The difficulties of inclusive pedagogy for initial teacher education and some thoughts on the way forward' (McIntyre, 2009). The research reported in this paper took McIntyre's proposal forward in ways that also addressed international concerns about inefficacy. For example, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) reported an international commitment to ensuring inclusive systems of education given that such systems are *educationally justified* - adaptation to diversity benefits all (UNESCO, 2009). They are also *socially justified* since inclusion builds positive attitudes for a just society. Finally, they are *economically justified* given complex segregated and specialised services are expensive. Pre-service teacher education and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is regarded as a decisive factor in developing inclusive education for SEN (Forlin, 2010, 2012a, 2012b; Florian & Rouse, 2009; Vickerman, 2007). There is recognition that 'the challenges faced by the teaching profession are increasing as educational environments become more complex and heterogeneous' (European Parliament, 2008, p.2). In the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) survey of teacher development for inclusion (OECD, 2010), 96% of pre-service teachers and 65% of serving teachers reported that diversity issues were covered in their teacher preparation programmes in some form. 47% of pre-service teachers and 66% of serving teachers judged that current teacher education was offering little in the form of *effective* preparation. This suggests that *contemporary models of teacher preparation may be ineffectual, even when giving attention to diversity issues*.

In England, Davies and Garner (1997) and the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) claimed that the curriculum for pre-service teachers was not preparing them for the practical challenges of inclusion (TTA, 1997). This view continues to predominate in England (Florian, 2010; Forlin, 2010a; Hodgkinson, 2009; McIntyre, 2009; National College of Teaching and Leadership (NCTL), 2012; Slee, 2010). This is also true internationally (Engelbrecht, 2013; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, (UNESCO), 2009). In summary, across the international community the literature reports on the poor preparation of beginning teachers for inclusive practices. Empirical research exploring the

relative effectiveness of particular pedagogic models is reported as lacking. This paper explores the complex and interrelated set of conditions, processes and activities that might comprise effective inclusive teacher education for SEN.

2. Evidence and hypotheses related to effective inclusive teacher education: review of the literature

A broad review of the literature is presented in what follows to enable identification of the principles and practices that might underpin efficacious inclusive teacher education. This leads to an account of methodological design, which itself was drawn from the evidence arising in the literature.

2.1. The importance of collaboration

There is widespread evidence that inclusive practices are most likely to emerge from collaborative action, reflection and enquiry (Argyropoulos & Nikolarazi, 2009; Florian & Rouse, 2009; Sin & Law, 2012; Waitoller & Artiles, 2013). Opportunities for sustained, thoughtful enquiry in an authentic classroom context have been identified as particularly propitious (Chapman, 2008; Jobling & Moni, 2004). For example, Argyropoulos and Nikolarazi (2009) reported on how an action research network formed between pre-service teachers, class teachers and university tutors enabled the inclusion of two children with sensory impairments. Also, in their in-depth study of four schools, Black-Hawkins, Florian, and Rouse (2007) made a powerful case for the importance of collaboration between practitioners for inclusion. They described inclusive cultures as those in which *collective action* is embedded. Though Carter (2015) and the Teaching Standards (DfE, 2012) have acknowledged the importance of working effectively with others, other policy statements in England such as the Inclusion statement in the National Curriculum (Department for Education, (DfE), 2013), have portrayed a more individualised image of the inclusive teacher as a *lone perfectionist*. This individual can eradicate and make redundant, all of the complex factors that might come into play when barriers to learning are being created or diminished:

With the right teaching, that recognises individual needs, many disabled pupils have little need for additional resources beyond the aids they use as part of their daily life. Teachers must plan lessons so that these pupils can study every national curriculum subject. Potential areas of difficulty should be identified and addressed at the outset of the lesson.

DfE, 2013, p.8

This paper exposes the extent to which official discourses might be contradictory or ambiguous when seeking improvements to teacher education in this area. Teacher education may be charged with simultaneously complying with a system of individualised competence standards whilst building programmes that resist them in favour of more collaborative modes of teacher development and assessment. Hence, the problem of inclusive pedagogy is drawn as much from the policy context as it is from those charged with teacher education. These macro issues represent the wider social structures that impact upon the work of teacher educators and are discussed in 2.5 and 2.7.

2.2. Adopting a research orientation

In the UK, the British Educational Research Association (BERA) was commissioned to conduct an enquiry into the impact of *research oriented* models of teacher education by the Royal Society

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