

# **Developing Inclusive Practice: A Role for Teachers and Teacher Education?**

*Martyn Rouse*

*University of Aberdeen*

## **Abstract**

*Although there is widespread support for inclusion at a philosophical level, there are some concerns that the policy of inclusion is difficult to implement because teachers are not sufficiently well prepared and supported to work in inclusive ways. Inclusion requires teachers to accept the responsibility for creating schools in which all children can learn and feel they belong. In this task, teachers are crucial because of the central role they play in promoting participation and reducing underachievement, particularly with children who might be perceived as having difficulties in learning. The paper reviews some of the barriers to the development of successful inclusive schools and suggests that one way of overcoming these difficulties is to reconsider the roles, responsibilities and identities of teachers. It also provides some suggestions about the role of teacher education in the development of teachers' skills, knowledge, attitudes and beliefs. In this context, the Inclusive Practice Project (IPP) at the University of Aberdeen is working with colleagues on the reform of the Post Graduate Diploma of Education (PGDE) to look at different ways in which teachers and schools can become more inclusive of children who might have found learning and participation difficult in the past. Some details of the Project are provided.*

## **Introduction**

This article locates recent developments in inclusive education in a broader discussion about the role of teachers in educating *all* children more effectively than may have been done in the past. It considers broad issues of achievement, underachievement and participation, and the roles, responsibilities and identities of teachers, as well as the development of their skills and knowledge. In particular it argues for the central role of teachers in promoting inclusion and reducing underachievement, particularly when dealing with children who are perceived as having difficulties in learning.

Although there is widespread support for inclusion at a philosophical level, there are concerns that it is difficult to implement for a number of reasons, including that

teachers do not know how to do it. In an attempt to address this concern, the Inclusive Practice Project (IPP) at the University of Aberdeen has been established. A central task of the IPP is to work with colleagues on the reform of the Post Graduate Diploma of Education (PGDE) and to look at different ways in which teachers and schools can become more inclusive of children who might have found learning and participation difficult in the past.

This article addresses a series of key questions:

- What is the current international policy context for inclusion?
- Why are inclusive practices difficult to develop?
- How do teachers perceive their roles in supporting inclusion and reducing underachievement?
- How might teacher education contribute to the development of inclusive practices?

### **Inclusion: the current international context**

Extending access to education is part of a worldwide agenda. The Education for All (EFA) initiative from the United Nations is an essential element of the Millennium Development Goals, in part because education is seen as being crucial to human development, and also because so many children do not have access to education UNESCO (2005). Across the world, there are many reasons why children do not attend school, including high levels of mobility, social conflict, child labour and exploitation, poverty, gender and disability. Many children are at 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 quality teachers, or because schools are too far from where children live. Sometimes families choose not to send their children to school because of fears about safety and security, the poor quality of schooling or because of the economic costs. 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.

Differences in access to, and outcomes from, education depend not only on children's individual circumstances, but also crucially on the country in which they live and in many cases, where they live within that country. In well-schooled, internationally successful countries, such as Scotland, with its long history 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, some children do not have positive experiences of education, nor do they have much to show for their time in school. The so-called 'achievement gap' between those who achieve most and those who achieve least, is a major concern in many countries, including Scotland (OECD, 2007). In response, new initiatives such as *More Choices, More Chances* (SEED, 2006) have been introduced to tackle this problem. In such 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 (Black-Hawkins, Florian & Rouse, 2007). But why is there such a long tail of underachievement in many countries? Why do educational systems have institutional barriers to participation and achievement? And why do so many teachers think that the problems that some students have in learning should not be their responsibility because they have not been trained to deal with these matters?

Throughout the world, there is an increased awareness of differences in access to and outcomes of education. This has to be understood in the power of education to reduce poverty, to improve the lives of individuals and groups, and to transform societies (e.g. Grubb & Lazerson, 2004). Developing 'schools for all' is important because schooling is linked to human, economic and social development goals. But at the same time, it is apparent that many school systems perpetuate existing inequalities and intergenerational under-achievement. The reasons for this are complex, but it often relates to deeply embedded attitudes to, and beliefs about, human differences. Nevertheless, dealing with exclusion, marginalization 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 an educational

underclass, but also a social and economic underclass which has 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, is an essential task for all countries. It is hardly surprising therefore that tackling under-achievement and increasing inclusion are 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, and the Dakar Declaration (UNICEF, 2000).

As previously mentioned, many countries have educational systems that work better for some children than for others. These concerns have become more apparent because of concerns about global competitiveness and the rise of the so-called 'knowledge economy'. In response, many systems have introduced 'standards-based' reforms (McLaughlin & Rouse, 2000). The process of mainstream education reform began in many countries in the mid 1980s when concerns about economic competitiveness and the efficiency of school systems led to the introduction of marketplace principles in education (Ball, 2006). Such reforms were underpinned by the idea that competition and choice raise standards and accountability. However, 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, Gillborn and Youdell, 2000).

At the same time, but mostly independent of the 'mainstream' reform legislation, many countries have enacted educational policies designed to develop their special education systems or to encourage greater inclusion of children considered to have disabilities or difficulties. Examples can be seen in a series of European Agency for the Development of Special Needs Education (2006) and OECD (2005) initiatives

and reports. At the national level, there is the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 which points out that a child may require additional support for a variety of reasons. It is clear that such legislation will have an impact not only on the roles of teachers and schools but also significant implications for professionals working in health, social work and other agencies.

In spite of a positive policy framework in many countries, achieving inclusion and reducing under-achievement is a daunting task. The European Agency on the Development of Special Needs Education (2006) reports that dealing with differences and diversity continues to be one of the biggest problems faced by schools across Europe. It is suggested that difficulties in creating schools for all are often associated with low expectations and aspirations, intergenerational poverty and underachievement, and a belief by some 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, didactic teaching methods, 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 about learners who struggle, low expectations and a belief that some children are 'worthy' of help but others are 'unworthy' because their difficulties are their own (or their parents') fault.

It is important to reiterate that this broader policy context can affect the development of inclusion. Mainstream educational reform initiatives designed to raise standards can be both a facilitator and a barrier to the education of children with learning needs. In many cases these two strands of policy development, inclusion on the one hand and higher standards on the other, do not necessarily make comfortable partners. 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. As a result children are often seen as having 'additional support needs' when there is a discrepancy between what a system of schooling ordinarily provides and what the child needs to support their learning. Thus the professional focus tends to be on what is 'additional to or different from' the provision which is generally available, rather than on what can be done to make schooling more accessible for all (Florian, 2007).

In addition, there are persistent beliefs that when children find learning difficult, it is because there is something wrong with them. The 'classic' special education view assumes that it is not possible to include children with learning difficulties in mainstream settings because their needs are different. The assumption that underpins this view is that it is 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 a diversity of instructional needs. In turn this requires teaching groups to be formed according to these perceived individual characteristics. According to Kaufman *et al.* (2005), successful teaching of children who are different, requires that they be grouped homogeneously so that special pedagogical approaches can be deployed by teachers who have been trained to use them. It could be argued that when special education is conceptualised in this manner, it is a barrier to the development of inclusion because it absolves the rest of the education system from taking responsibility for all children's learning.

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 (e.g. Ainscow, 1997; Black-Hawkins, Florian & Rouse, 2007), there have also been failures and difficulties. Such difficulties have been blamed on a variety of factors including, competing policies that stress competition and ever-higher standards, a lack of funding and resources and existing special education practices. It has also been suggested that one of the greatest barriers to the development of inclusion is because most teachers do not have the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes to carry out this work (Forlin 2001).

Therefore, although inclusion is seen as important in most countries, experience tells us that it is difficult to achieve for children with additional support needs for a number of reasons including:

- Uncertainty about professional roles and the status of teachers especially those who have responsibilities for additional support needs
- A lack of agreement about the nature and usefulness of specialist knowledge
- Territorial disputes between professionals associated with certain 'special' practices
- Inadequate preparation of teachers and a lack of on-going professional development opportunities.

### **Teachers' views of the inclusion task**

The current context in which teachers are working is one of rapid change. All areas of education have changed during the past decades, with major changes to the role of teachers, together with the introduction of new approaches to the curriculum and assessment. In addition, the legislation has seen changes in how difficulties in learning are conceptualised from special educational needs to additional support for learning. These changes have involved the development of new understandings about the interactive nature of children's needs and a shift in focus from 'what is wrong with the child?' to 'what does the child need to support their learning?' Such developments have substantially affected the professional identity as well as the roles and responsibilities of many teachers. It also has implications for how teachers are trained and supported in their professional development.

In Scotland, as in many other countries, there is currently very little time allocated within initial teacher education programmes to cover issues of inclusion and additional support needs. Further, with the exception of teachers of the blind and the deaf, there are no nationally mandated qualifications for teachers of pupils with additional support needs. The General Teaching Council (Scotland) is currently working on the development of a Framework for Recognition for teachers of children

with autism and dyslexia (perhaps with others to follow), and although specialist courses are available in a number of universities, funding is scarce and many teachers do not have the opportunity to pursue courses leading to higher-level qualifications in the area of learning support and inclusion.

In addition, the rapidly changing policy context, together with uncertainty about how best to organise provision leads to a range of understanding about the purpose and nature of the support needs task. Provision varies from school to school and from local authority to local authority. Therefore any exploration of the role, status and identity of teachers who teach children who have support needs has to take into account the complexity of the task. Such complexity arises from uncertainty about who these children are, the 'type' of needs they have, the range of settings in which they are educated, the professional qualifications of the teachers themselves, how teachers construct their own professional identity and how they should work with other adults as well as children.

It is clear that teachers are crucial in building more inclusive schools. But how do they feel about this task? And how do they perceive their roles, status and identity. Over the past few years I have carried out one aspect of a large-scale study of the status of teachers in England for the Department of Education and Skills (Hargreaves *et al.*, 2006). This strand of the research is based on a series of focus group discussions with teachers designed to explore their perceptions of working with children designated as having special educational needs (SEN). Although the research was conducted in England where the policy context is somewhat different, there are many resonances with the current situation in Scotland. The findings of this research inform the sections that follow.

### **Teachers' roles and identities**

The range of teachers who have responsibilities for learning support is wide, as are their professional identities. Primary teachers are more likely to see their identity as a class teacher first, then as a learning support teacher second, whereas secondary



learning support teachers probably will have made a specific career choice and are more likely to have undertaken additional professional development leading to qualifications. Thus, secondary teachers more commonly describe themselves as ‘a learning support teacher’ than do primary teachers. Similarly, teachers in special and local authority support services are more likely to have a clear professional identity as ‘support teachers’. There is considerable variation in status between learning support teachers in different schools and local authorities. In some schools provision for learning support is marginalised. In other schools, the principal teacher (PT) learning support will have significant influence and a high level of management responsibilities, often as a member of the senior management team. Although status is linked to pay and position in the management structure, it is also associated with personal and professional credibility, knowledge, skills and responsibilities.

Differences in professional identity are associated with whether the teachers have specialist qualifications and have made deliberate career choices to work in this field. Many teachers who have responsibility for learning support in primary schools see it as a stage in their career, something they will undertake to get extra experience, or because ‘it’s my turn’. Several teachers reported that they became interested in the work by accident or because it was available on a part-time basis and it fitted well with other commitments when they returned to teaching.

The picture then is complex. Learning support teachers come from a range of different professional backgrounds, their identity and status is influenced by a variety of factors including by where and who they teach, their experiences and their qualifications. Nevertheless, a common theme emerged throughout the focus group discussions with teachers. Most believe that they can make a difference to children’s lives. Many said they were motivated by a desire to help vulnerable children, but they were frustrated that not all colleagues shared their commitment to this task.

### **The nature of the work**

The support for learning task is complex. In part this is because of the contested nature of the concept of learning support outlined above and a lack of agreement about what constitutes best practice. Given the rapidly changing policy context and a lack of shared understanding about what constitutes good practice, it is inevitable that roles and responsibilities will vary between schools. However, when mainstream teachers were asked about the nature of their roles and the tasks they undertake, a long list was produced, it includes; teaching, assessing, counselling, administrating, organising, liaising with external agencies, consulting with colleagues, providing staff development, and managing other adults. Many reported tensions between the teaching functions and management and consultancy functions of the role.

Such wide-ranging tasks require knowledge, skills and attributes that not all feel they possess. One commented:

When I came into the work, it was to teach children. Now most of my time is spent working with other adults, such as colleagues and assistants, external agencies and families. I have never received any support in making this move, so whilst in some ways it has raised my status, it has undermined my credibility.

Recent initiatives in integrated children's services, such as *Getting it Right for Every Child* (SEED, 2006), are likely to mean that teachers will be undertaking more multi-agency work with social services, school psychology services and health authorities. Most respondents saw such initiatives as a positive development for vulnerable children, but also wondered whether it would be properly funded and supported. Many respondents spoke of the difficulty in managing the demands from colleagues, children and parents. One of the biggest challenges is convincing their colleagues that there should be a shared responsibility for children who face difficulties:

My colleagues always want me to deal with their problem pupils and I find it difficult to say no because I don't want to see the kids struggling. I know that

the more I agree to do this for them the less likely they are to see it as their responsibility...it leads to a kind of learned helplessness I suppose.

The overall picture is one of a rapidly changing field in which there is a lack of consistency in the role and responsibility of many teachers of children with additional support needs. The nature of tasks and responsibilities varies from school to school. In part this variation arises from differences between school policies and the perceived skills and attributes of teachers. Many however, speak of a role that is overloaded and confused.

Teachers of children with support needs cover a wide spectrum of professional roles and responsibilities. Thus, the views of other teachers are complex and vary from context to context. Crucially it seems to be the skills and attributes of the teachers themselves that seems to be the determining factor when it comes to whether they have status in the eyes of their colleagues. However, there was widespread consensus that teachers who do this work are held in high esteem by parents and the community and most of them feel that they do make a positive contribution to children's lives and learning. Overwhelmingly, they expressed the view that more sustained professional development opportunities would help raise the status of the work and enable to work more effectively with, and through, colleagues in a consultative capacity.

Central to this task was widespread agreement of the need to reform initial education so that all beginning teachers enter the profession better prepared to deal with diversity in their classrooms and also more aware that they will be working with adults as well as pupils.

### **Teachers' roles in developing inclusion**

Teachers are crucial in determining what happens in classrooms and there are those who would argue that the development of more inclusive classrooms requires 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 learning difficulties. Questions about the sustainability of such provision are rarely adequately answered. Further, there are those who argue (e.g. 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 that 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.

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 need when planning this support (Florian & Rouse, 2001). Many teachers reported that they did not think that 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.

I have suggested elsewhere (Rouse, 2007) that developing effective inclusive practice is about not only about extending teachers’ knowledge, but it is also about encouraging them to do things differently and getting them to reconsider their attitudes and beliefs. In other words, it should be about ‘knowing’, ‘doing’, and ‘believing’. But what might this look like in practice?

For many years, teacher development courses focused on extending knowledge and skills. Courses would often concentrate on the characteristics of different kinds of learners, how they should be identified and the current policy context. In addition

they would cover the specialist teaching strategies that should be used. In other words these courses focused on:

*Knowing about:*

- Teaching strategies
- Disability and special needs
- How children learn
- What children need to learn
- Classroom organisation and management
- Where to get help when necessary
- Identifying and assessing difficulties
- Assessing and monitoring 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 to improve practice in schools because many teachers did not act upon this knowledge when they returned to the classroom. It was clear that there was a big gap between what teachers knew as a result of being on a course and what they did 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 and institutional development. In many cases this involves action-research type initiatives built around school- or classroom-based development projects and new ways of:

*Doing*

- Turning knowledge into action
- Moving beyond reflective practice
- Using evidence to improve practice
- Learning how to work with colleagues as well as children
- Becoming an 'activist' professional

Although many action research initiatives to develop inclusion have had positive outcomes and have resulted in changes to practice, it became apparent that some were 'content-free' and only focussed 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 that 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 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 her/himself as a teacher of (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 special needs teachers see themselves as experts in dealing with children's difficulties in learning. It is an identity built upon certain beliefs about specialist knowledge and skills for the work. In this view, 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 some teachers have about many aspects of schools and schooling. In particular it can threaten teachers' identity. If responsibilities are to be shared and teachers are to take on new roles, then there have to be changes to the way inclusion is conceptualised and a realisation that it can only be achieved if all teachers are

supported in the development of all aspects of this process; knowing, doing and believing.

But how might this be brought about? As pointed out earlier, the traditional way of attempting to bring about developments in inclusion was to focus on improving teachers' knowledge and skills, but this did not always work. Providing new knowledge has been seen as a necessary but not sufficient condition. Equally it was not sufficient to establish 'content free' action-research development projects as they often drift aimlessly. I have argued elsewhere (Rouse, 2007) that if two of the three aspects of development (knowing, doing and believing) are in place, then it is likely that other aspects will follow. In other words, if teachers acquire new knowledge and they are supported in implementing new practice, using a 'just do it' approach, then attitudes and beliefs will change over time. Equally if teachers already have positive beliefs and they are supported in implementing new practices, then they are also likely to acquire new knowledge and skills. Therefore, if two of the three elements of developing inclusive practice are in place, the third is likely to follow.

### **Conclusion**

A crucial element in the development of inclusive practice is better preparation of and support for teachers that incorporates the elements outlined above. One way of conceptualising this task might be to take the lead from Shulman (2004) who talks about the need to ensure that training and induction in all the professions has three essential elements. He refers to these elements as the 'three apprenticeships'. The first is the 'apprenticeship of the head': by this he means the cognitive knowledge and theoretical basis of the profession; the second is the 'apprenticeship of the hand': this would include the technical and practical skills that are required to carry out the essential tasks of the role; and the finally the 'apprenticeship of the heart': the ethical and moral dimensions, the attitudes and beliefs that are crucial to the particular profession and its ways of working.

So how does this relate to developments in the University of Aberdeen? The Inclusive Practice Project has begun the task of working with colleagues on reforming the one-year Post Graduate Diploma of Education (PGDE). The Project reflects an ongoing interest in the School of Education to reform initial teacher education to ensure that is more responsive to the demands facing schools today. At the heart is the involvement of the staff in the School in developing new approaches to training teachers to ensure that new teachers:

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

Florian (2007) has identified three areas that deserve particular attention in the reform of teacher education based on the argument that future progress in inclusion requires new ways of thinking about provision and practice. These are: clearer thinking about the right to education; the need to challenge deterministic views about ability; and a shift in focus from differences between learners, to learning for all.

Major changes have been made to the structure and content of the PGDE programmes for primary and secondary teachers to ensure that social and educational inclusion is addressed at the heart of the professional studies element of the programme rather than being an elective selected by only a few student teachers. Florian's 'three areas' (educational rights, anti-determinism and learning for all) have been embedded in the course. It is also informed by the principles of learning, participation, collaboration and activism as drivers of teacher professionalism in changing contexts of education that include the multiple overlapping layers of teaching and learning, the community of a school, and the school in the broader social and political context (Sachs, 2003). The over-riding aim is to help new teachers accept the responsibility for the learning of all pupils in their classrooms and



to know where to turn for help when required. If this task is to be successful it will entail addressing all three of Shulman's (2004) apprenticeships.

A research programme has begun to explore the impact of these changes on the content of the course, the practice of colleagues and the knowledge, skills and attitudes of students in order to inform future developments in the course. 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 the area of additional support needs. In spite of these difficulties there are sufficient examples of good practice across the world and particularly here in Scotland for us to be optimistic that, if we so wish, we can create successful inclusive schools for all. If the Inclusive Practice Project can support new teachers in 'knowing', 'being' and 'doing', it will be an important step in this vital task.

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