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On Track Toward Inclusive Education

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AUSTRALIA

Until the great mass of people shall be filled with the sense of responsibility for each other's welfare, social justice can never be attended. Helen Keller (1880 - 1968)

ABSTRACT

Research findings from across the globe indicate that schools and teachers are struggling to respond to the wide array of students (Wills & Cain, 2002). Proponents of inclusivity argue that inclusive education is a better education for all participants in schooling and that “differences can be a resource for community development” (Frank, 1999). At the school level, inclusive education seeks to address the learning needs of all with “a specific focus on those who are vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion” (UNESCO, 1994). UNESCO promotes inclusive school communities as the most effective way of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all.

While teacher education programs engage participants in knowledge construction and for classroom teaching and learning, it is essential that teacher training institutions provide relevant opportunities for preservice teachers to develop personal philosophies that promote classroom environments that are supportive of participation and achievement for all learners.

Although much has been written about integration, the construct of inclusive curriculum in Australia is still an emergent topic in need of much research and discourse. The current paper represents the collaborative thoughts of lecturers in two Queensland universities as they prepare to re-examine their inclusive education courses. Such shared dialogue may serve to engage others in the critical reflection that is needed to progress educators on the track toward the philosophical and practical ideals of a socially just education.

This discussion paper commences with a consideration of legislative and policy mandates for inclusion in the context of teacher education in Queensland, Australia. Secondly, the paper attempts to reconcile the broad and somewhat disparate interpretations of inclusivity and diversity in the context of schooling. Finally, we shift the focus from inclusive education as a product to inclusive education as processes of attitudinal change and development of collaborative learning communities. With a focus on learner-centredness, Queensland schools are leading innovative improvement processes toward inclusion. Critically informed teachers are central to those processes.

INTRODUCTION

As general education classrooms increasingly reflect the diverse nature of our global community, members of the education fraternity experience the tension of paradoxical mandates to address national standards and individual learning needs. Legislation mandates anti-discrimination and quality education for all. In response, policy writers exhort *inclusive education*; professional bodies and employers expect teacher accountability towards it; and through course development and accreditation, teacher-education providers must ensure graduates have the necessary attributes, confidence

and competence to design and deliver inclusive curriculum for a diverse range of learners to improve their individual outcomes from schooling.

Inclusive education and *student diversity* are popularized concepts in educational discourse. Despite becoming increasingly familiar terms these do not necessarily describe common knowledge and practice. Cheng (2000) emphasizes the social, rather than isolated, nature of learning. In order to develop an effective learning community we must foster a community of effective learners. To achieve the aims of democracy and social action through the curriculum, all educators need to be prepared to recognise and respect the unique attributes of every learner. From that values-laden stance, educators can attempt to develop shared perspectives and alignment of pedagogy to promote effective teaching and learning.

If we are to bring about real change in our education system and create a model that is more closely aligned to inclusive ideals, then universities must work in close partnership with the profession to formulate and integrate new knowledge about inclusive learning management, particularly in the hearts and minds of those entering the profession. To cultivate critical awareness and potential attitudinal change, educators need to understand the social and political context.

ON TRACK WITH LEGISLATION AND POLICY

Conceptually, inclusive education first emerged as the goal of equal access to mainstream education for students with disabilities. Mainstreaming has been embodied in legislation in the USA (Public Law 94-142/99-457/101-476) since 1975 and the UK's Education Act since 1981. While Australia does not have specific legislation that mandates educational integration, our national education policies do exhort social justice and equity for all students in Australian schools. The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994, Art. 2) asserts that: "Regular schools with inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discrimination, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all."

The rights of those at-risk of under-participation and under-achievement in Australia are protected by the *Education Act 1989*, *Anti-Discrimination Act 1991*, *Disability Services Act 1992* and the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA)*. The DDA was intended to protect people with disabilities against discrimination, including discrimination in education. Despite this intent, surveys and anecdotal evidence indicate that discrimination remains a significant problem at all levels of education and in particular for children with disabilities wishing to be included in mainstream education (Jackson, McAfee & Cockram, 1999).

Educational authorities in Queensland have responded to anti-discrimination legislation by developing policies to guide teacher training and teacher practice. The Board of Teacher Registration (BTR) has two major functions under the Education (Teacher Registration) Act 1988. It is primarily responsible for the registration of teachers in Queensland and secondly it must engage the education sector in collaborative negotiation of standards of courses of teacher education. To embrace the benefits of diversity, the BTR articulates the aim of teachers in Queensland as to 'provide an

education inclusive of all, and strive to redress disadvantage experienced as a result of differences in ability, culture, linguistic background, gender, location, and socio-economic status' (BTR, 2002).

A broad range of policies have been developed by Education Queensland (EQ), to guide school practices against discrimination and toward social justice. More than half of the 28 Curriculum and Studies policies listed in the Department of Education Manual (EQ, 2003) promote equity and provisions for target groups at risk of exclusive practices.

Education Queensland (EQ) also provides guidelines for professional practice of all teachers in all sites of state education in Queensland. The Professional Standards for Teachers serve to define the knowledge, skills and abilities required by teachers and by graduates seeking to enter the teaching service. Specific attention is drawn to inclusive and participatory learning experiences to benefit the diverse range of learners in schooling (EQ, 2001).

ON TRACK TO ALIGN THE LANGUAGE OF INCLUSION

Educational research on inclusion in schooling reveals a range of issues being explored dependent on the authors' definition of inclusion and the contextual boundaries of the research. A quick scan of the literature indicates two traditional contexts for discussion of inclusive education: the integration of students from special education (for example, Bailey & du Plessis, 1997; Daniel, 1997; Kavale, 2000; and Winzer, Altieri & Larsson, 2000) and the marginalization of students from non-dominant ethnic minority groups (such as in Jacobson, 2000; and Scribner & Scribner, 2001). Educators need to be cognizant of the social and political constructs influencing inclusive education discourse.

Regular education was not designed to cater for exceptionality (Brownlee & Carrington, 2000); however as a consequence of the integration era traditional methods from special education have been implemented within regular education to cater for diverse learners. While such practices may be effective for a small group of students with disabilities, they may in fact be a barrier to learning for other students and therefore undermine the intentions of current legislation and policy. Similarly, attitudes toward inclusive schooling and the effective education of diverse learners may well be biased by experiences of traditional integration practices (Forlin, Hattie & Douglas, 1996).

Emerging in world-wide research and educational policy, particularly in the Queensland context, is the transformational notion of inclusion which exhorts school reform to improve learning outcomes for the diverse student population characterised by a variety of backgrounds, cultures, experiences, interests, abilities and differences (Ainscow, 1991; Boscardin & Jacobson, 1996; Slee, 1996; Robertson, 1999; Cheng, 2000).

At the core of inclusivity is the human right to education. While there are also very important human, economic, social and political reasons for pursuing a policy and approach of inclusive education, it is also a means of bringing about personal development and building relationships among individuals, groups and nations. Slee supports Touraine who views schools as instruments of political and social change

toward democracy (2002, p.195). Slee suggests that schools are both reflections of, and training institutions for our society.

Inclusive education means that "... schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. This should include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalised areas or groups" (UNESCO, 2001).

In the current major reform of Queensland's education and training system, the government aims to "create a state of prosperity and social justice with a commitment to equality of opportunity" (State of Queensland, 2002). The Education and Training Reforms for the Future white paper aims to bring about a culture change toward collective community responsibility "for developing our young people into productive, informed members of our society" (Raey, 2003). It is about finding new ways in our community to provide different pathways for young people to keep developing as learners and contributors to society. The ETRF declares (2002, p8):

While the pathway through schooling will continue to be the main track to university or further study for most students, we want to ensure that the 27 per cent of students who currently do not finish Year 12 have the best possible chances to succeed.

The developing philosophy of inclusion is not about identifying deficit and labeling diverse groups of learners in a class. Even to use the term *diversity* suggests some 'other' state as the accepted norm. Equitable, social sustainability depends on societal acceptance that diversity is 'the norm' and that policies and programs must be exceptional in order to maximise life long learning opportunities for every participant in formal and informal education settings.

As mirrors of social reality, our classrooms need to reflect high expectation, high achievement and the full participation of all learners – a view endorsed by Graham Donaldson, Chief Inspector of Scotland's *HM Inspectorate of Education*. "It is based on the premise that schools have an important role in developing the capacity of young people for responsible participation in political, economic, social and cultural life. This approach to education for citizenship articulates well with the broad definition of educational inclusion advocated in this report" (HMIE, 2002).

"Educational policy has moved beyond the medical and dependency models ... to a new paradigm ... (that) requires that teachers possess positive attitudes towards inclusion" (Brownlee and Carrington, 2000, p.104). Teachers must redefine their roles to enable rather than disable students. Teacher educators share responsibility for giving future teachers a lens through which to view every learner as ordinary and essential. How can preservice educators develop the knowledge, understanding and desire to promote the success of every learner in order to build the success of the inclusive learning community?

ON TRACK TO INCLUSIVE ATTITUDES AND ACTIONS

Education is not the only sector struggling with the tension between social justice-in-rhetoric and social justice-in-practice. The gender debate may be old news but recently the Queensland sports press reflected the very strong, juxtaposed public opinion about the inclusion of female golfer, Annaka Sorenstam, in a PGA American male tournament. A major Queensland newspaper, asked the question “What is Driving Annaka?” (unknown, 2003) and in the sports section on the same day, Ferguson walks a fine line between reporting and sexism with his headline article, “Annaka proves she’s not just a pretty birdie” (2003, p.43). Why should she have to prove anything? Opponents of Ms Sorenstam’s invitation to play in this tournament believed she should have stayed in her own backyard for her own good and that of the game. Could her participation have damaged the golfing institution? Although the precocious Ms Sorenstam did not make the final cut her appearance, both her detractors and supporters in the golfing fraternity would certainly have benefited from the unprecedented public attention.

This situation reflects the current status quo in the inclusion debate in many Queensland schools. The education system has long moved past the “girls can’t do Manual Arts” and the “boys can’t do Home Economics” debate, however, many teachers are protective of their ‘turf’ in the curriculum and want to deny access to the curriculum by some learners. Other teachers may welcome learners but feel ill equipped at times, to deal with the diverse range of needs (Forlin, Hattie & Douglas, 1996). McGowan (1984, cited in Trent, 2002) estimated that approximately one quarter of Queensland teachers were experiencing acute stress and burnout. There is little evidence to suggest that teacher stress has diminished over subsequent decades.

As teachers are regarded highly as the key to change in education, their feelings of frustration and inadequacy are potential barriers to inclusive education. Such challenges are compounded where curriculum and assessment demands may appear inflexible. With the ‘given’ of a statewide curriculum and assessment framework in Queensland schools, it would seem that the real key to inclusivity in this context is through pedagogical decision-making. In fact, advocates of inclusion do not tend to focus upon inclusive education as a product but as a process (Robertson, 1999; Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Winzer et al, 2000) founded very much on the democratic principles of mutual respect and collaboration (Jacobson, 2000; Marshall et al, 2002). Inclusive processes are becoming central to school effectiveness research and development.

From the UK, the *Index for Inclusion* is a resource designed to build on school-based knowledge and existing practices and to challenge the school to move forward. The Index’ invites school communities to reduce those barriers to learning and participation through a collaborative investigation of the school’s cultures, policies and practices and to set new priorities for development (Booth & Ainscow, 2002).

Two Queensland-based initiatives for school effectiveness are attracting global attention for their potential to build collaborative learning communities that support individual learner success. The IDEAS process (Innovative Design for Enhancing Achievement in Schools) of change centres on the professional learning and action of teachers as they collaborate to develop their own vision for school improvement (Andrews & Lewis,

2002). A research-based framework guides teacher learning and development toward school improvement.

Social justice, equity and inclusivity have been foregrounded in the recommendations from the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study. The QSRLS represents the most rigorous educational research in Queensland schools. It sought to investigate relationships between school-based management practices and enhanced student outcomes, both academic and social (Hayes, Lingard & Mills, 2001). Key findings of the QSRLS research indicate the need to focus on alignment of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment and in particular, this school improvement research demonstrated that academic and social pedagogies are both central to effective schooling. Educators need to shift their pedagogical focus from testing and reporting on outcomes to supporting and improving outcomes from schooling.

The development of positive and self-fulfilling values within all participants in education depends on building learner confidence within a supportive learning environment. This is true for all learners whether they are experienced teachers participating in school improvement processes or whether they are learners who have been disadvantaged within the educational system.

Attributes of inclusive educators include:

- * awareness of the history of injustice in our schools as a result of discrimination against diverse human conditions whether physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or ethnic;
- * recognition and acceptance of the educator's pivotal role at the classroom-based "intersection of knowledge and power" (Henderson, 2001); and
- * the ability to collaboratively implement innovations that accept difference as the norm and enrich schooling through sensitivity and responsiveness to the diverse contexts of students' lives.

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