

## Studying Inclusive Pedagogy

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### Background

While there is a broad consensus and understanding that inclusive education is ‘a process of increasing participation and decreasing exclusion from the culture, community and curricula of mainstream schools’ (Booth, Ainscow, Black-Hawkins, and Shaw, 2002), this process can take many forms and little is known about the detail of practice at the classroom level. As a result, inclusive practice, the things that people do to give meaning to the concept of inclusion is not well articulated. Inclusive practice also varies widely: from the very specific, for example, including children with disabilities in mainstream schools by relocating specialist provision from special to mainstream schools; to a very broad notion of responding to diversity among learners without regard to categorical differences. Both the relocation of specialist provision and the disregard for approaches based on categorical differences between groups of students and perpetuated raise questions about what constitutes good practice, what counts as evidence of such practice, and how it can be known.

The key challenge facing teachers who wish to become more inclusive in their practice is how to respect and respond to human differences in ways that include learners in, rather than exclude them from, what is ordinarily available in the daily life of the classroom . However, extending what is ordinarily available to all learners, as opposed to doing something different or additional for some is a complex pedagogical endeavour that is not easily visible to observers because:

- teachers’ responses to individual differences occur while they are also doing other things;
- observers lack knowledge about the detailed context of teachers’ actions underpinning their decision; and
- if observers focus on teachers’ responses to differences between different groups of learners it will not be easy to discern when they are extending what is ordinarily available in classrooms.

Focussing on how teachers extend what is ordinarily available in a classroom lesson or activity, offers an alternative perspective to consider inclusive education, practice and pedagogy when compared to those of traditional approaches to teaching children, identified as having special educational needs, that are based upon the argument that such children necessarily require something ‘different from’ or ‘additional to’ that which is ordinarily available.

### Research Questions

Two questions shaped the research:

- (i) What teaching strategies are effective in supporting the participation and achievement of all children, including those identified as having special or additional educational needs?
- (ii) How can examples of inclusive pedagogy in action be articulated in ways that are useful to other teachers and supportive of their practice?

The research project set out to examine teachers’ inclusive pedagogy, in terms of what they do, why and how. A focus on teacher craft knowledge seemed especially pertinent to this task because it offered an alternative to the ‘individual differences’ approach to inclusion and emphasises individual teachers’ successful practice. Through classroom observations and subsequent interviews we set out

to encourage teachers to articulate how they make meaning of the concept of inclusion in their practice. Thus, a primary purpose of the research has been not only to observe the teachers' inclusive pedagogy, but also to encourage them through interview, to articulate their thinking about that practice.

## **Methods**

Methodologically the study built on previous approaches we had developed. In particular, we adapted and extended the 'Framework of Participation' to enable us to focus our observations on the teachers' inclusive pedagogy. We then used this modified version to guide the collection of evidence from our observations of eleven classes in two primary schools. Before and after the observations, numerous informal conversations took place with the teachers involved. The purpose of these were: to clarify any immediate questions about the observations; to encourage the practitioners to begin to think about their inclusive pedagogy; and to help to build rapport in preparation for the extended interviews.

Finally, we interviewed the eleven class teachers (plus, for background information, a learning support teacher, a nursery nurse, and a depute headteacher). In preparation for the interviews with the class teachers we first reflected on the observations and informal discussions that had taken place with each of them. In so doing, we drew on our own developing theoretical understandings of inclusive pedagogy to help us to identify teaching strategies and approaches used by individual teachers that could be considered as tangible examples of their inclusive pedagogy in action. These then became the focus for the interviews in which we explored with each teacher how and why they had made the decisions and taken the actions that they had. This meant that although all the interviews followed a similar format, each one was prepared individually following this preliminary consideration of the observations. At the same time, we were aware of the methodological challenges, when observing teachers' responses to children's differences within the context of whole class teaching. Hence, we were careful to ensure that all teachers were given the opportunity to talk about aspects of their practice that were less visible during the observations. Finally, all interviews were recorded and transcribed, so as to 'capture' the words of the teachers, and the transcripts were returned to and checked by the interviewees.

## **Frame**

Students who have been identified as having special educational needs are especially vulnerable to exclusion from the culture curriculum and community of mainstream schools because of the determinist beliefs that underpin them (Hart, Drummond & McIntyre, 2007). This is exacerbated by the widespread belief that mainstream classroom teachers are not well-prepared to work with such students but little is known about exactly what teachers need to know in order to teach all students in inclusive schools. Lack of clarity about definitions of inclusion and wide ranging practices in the name of inclusive education have contributed to confusion about inclusive education and practice, and debates about whether it is an educationally sound practice for students who have been identified as having special educational needs.

In an attempt to address the complex issues involved in the provision of a meaningful 'education for all', we have been developing the concept of inclusive pedagogy. Our conceptualisation of inclusive pedagogy focuses on how to extend what is ordinarily available in the community of the classroom as a way of reducing the need to mark some learners as different. This is underpinned by a shift in pedagogical thinking from an approach that works for most learners existing alongside something 'additional' or 'different' for those (some) who experience difficulties, towards one that involves providing rich learning opportunities that are sufficiently made available for everyone, so that all learners are able to participate in classroom life. This new approach to individual differences is distinguished from earlier notions inclusive education and inclusive practice, which are based on the process of providing for all by differentiating for some. By focusing on what is to be learned by the community of learners in a classroom, the inclusive pedagogical approach aims to avoid the problems and stigma associated with marking some learners as different.

## **Research findings**

In an attempt to address the complex issues involved in the provision of a meaningful 'education for all', we have been developing the concept of inclusive pedagogy by studying the craft knowledge of teachers committed to inclusive practice. The key finding from this study was that by focusing on the craft knowledge of teachers' inclusive pedagogy we have been able to identify a number of strategies that meet the conceptual criteria of an inclusive pedagogical approach to individual differences (attending to individual differences while avoiding the stigma of marking some students as different). This finding was qualified by the further insight that inclusive pedagogy is defined not in the choice of strategy but in its use.

These findings are of particular relevance and importance to teachers who are committed to the principles of inclusion but work in education systems dominated by policy and practice that rely on developmental norms to assess learning and identify and categorise learners by ability level. Such practice, while widespread, often serves to limit rather than enhance the learning and achievement that are possible for far too many children in school. An inclusive pedagogical approach, based on the assumptions, actions, and the approach to extending what is ordinarily available as opposed to doing something different, as described here offers an advance in understanding the development of inclusive pedagogy and important implications for teacher professional learning