

# **DEVELOPING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF INCLUSIVE TEACHER EDUCATION FOR SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND INCLUSIVE PRACTICE**

*Abstract:* This paper reports on the findings of a research study which sought to identify the conditions, processes and activities underpinning *effective* inclusive teacher education. The study took forward what was currently known (or hypothesised) and from this built a pedagogic model (in the form of inclusive action research) that was applied in a partnership school during the practicum period among 22 participants (preservice teachers, experienced teachers and teaching assistants) to support the professional development of all involved. The findings support the claim that socially situated, research oriented, reflexive, collaborative approaches to developing inclusive practice are important elements in an effectual programme. They also cast light on the conceptual and practical challenges involved in being inclusive and on the impact of external cultures on the professional identities and actions of practitioners. This paper takes the position that de-intellectualised, competence based ‘on the job training’ models of teacher education will not be effective in preparing teachers for the deep challenges involved in becoming and being a more inclusive practitioner.

*Key words:* Inclusion, teacher education, special needs, disability

## **1: The current context for inclusive teacher education**

That inclusive education is a priority for development has been confirmed in official European and Global forums (OECD, 2010; Council of the European Union, 2010; Council of the European Union, 2009; European Parliament, 2008; Commission of the European Communities, 2007). Initial Teacher Education (ITE) (also known as preservice education) and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is often regarded as the decisive factor in developing a more inclusive education system (Forlin, 2010; Florian and Rouse, 2009; Ainscow et al.,

2006; Golder et al., 2005). 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). However, there is also widespread evidence that teacher education is falling short in securing sufficient confidence, skill and preparedness for diverse learners. For example, the outcomes of the first Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) by the OECD (2009) revealed that surveyed teachers across 23 countries did not feel well prepared to respond to the challenge of diverse learners. The vast majority reported that they had significant development needs in teaching learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), with a third identifying this as an urgent development need. The OECD survey of teacher development for inclusion (OECD, 2010) found that though 96% of student teachers and 65% of teachers reported that diversity issues (including SEND) were covered in their ITE programmes in some form, 47% of student teachers and 66% of teachers judged that current teacher education was offering little in the form of effective preparation. Such loss of transfer from input to feelings of preparedness is perplexing and suggests that contemporary models of teacher education may be ineffectual, even when giving attention to diversity issues. Hence, it is important to identify those principles and practices that underpin effective approaches.

## **2. Reforming partnership for effective inclusive teacher education**

Across the literature, it is widely proposed that the role of ITE is to prepare critical activists who can deconstruct exclusive practices as they enter their careers (Forlin, 2010; Rouse, 2010; Slee, 2010; Moran, 2009; McIntyre, 2009; Florian, 2007; Pearson, 2007). It is important to understand how challenging a project this is for beginning teachers. As an illustration of this, Cook (2007) demonstrates the powerful influence of mentors’ beliefs and practices on student teachers and Stoddard et al.

(2006) found that on entering a placement or a first post, beginning teachers were likely to adopt the instructional behaviours of their mentors or use behaviours that arose from their own memories of schooling. The relative impact of the alternatives offered by university was poor in relation to the influence of dominant (and arguably, traditional) practices in schools. Breaking the circle of traditionality (Korthagen et al., 2006) is widely regarded to be necessary if inclusion is to be forwarded but it is recognised that this is difficult to achieve through traditional, fragmented, theory into practice models of teacher education. In England, McIntyre (2009) seems exceptional in offering a potential solution to this problem with specific reference to *inclusion* and *partnership*. McIntyre is distinctive in reframing partnership as a form of collaborative *research and development*. Schools and universities might develop inclusive practices through drawing on equal but different forms of expertise. Inclusive teacher education then is also a question of continuing professional development (CPD). McIntyre (2009) notes that progress in inclusive ITE will be thwarted if there is not *synchronous* development in school given that it might involve the deconstruction of tradition and of the status quo.

### **3. Effective models of inclusive teacher education**

The study described in this paper sought to take the model proposed by McIntyre (2009) forward and synthesise it with what is currently known (or hypothesised) about the principles and practices that might underpin effective inclusive teacher education in the wider international literature. The aim was to draw on this to build, apply and critique a pedagogic framework that could be operated within the context of a school placement so as to identify those aspects that were effectual. The informing principles and practices are summarised in Table 1.

*Table 1: Principles and practices for effective inclusive teacher education*

Principles/Practices	Sources
Working and learning within a collaborative and collegiate professional community	Argyropoulos and Nikolarazi, 2009; Florian and Rouse, 2009; McIntyre, 2009; Ainscow, 2007; Black-Hawkins et al., 2007; Ainscow et al., 2006
Adoption of a research orientation (engagement <i>with</i> and <i>in</i> research)	Beauchamp et al., 2013; Mincu, 2013; Argyropoulos and Nikolarazi, 2009; Florian and Rouse, 2009; McIntyre, 2009; Ainscow, 2007; Black-Hawkins et al., 2007; Ainscow et al., 2006
Networking ITE into CPD and fostering synchronous research informed clinical practice	McIntyre, 2009
Focussing on instructional techniques and outcomes for learners in an authentic context	Rodriguez, 2012; EADSNE, 2012; EADSNE, 2010; Gudjonsdottir et al., 2007; Kershner, 2007; Stoddard, 2006; Jobling et al., 2004
Carefully chosen and structured field experiences that scaffold development of mastery and self-efficacy	Darling-Hammond and Lieberman, 2012a; Chong, 2007; Lancaster and Bain, 2007; Molina, 2006; Sharma et al., 2006; Hopper and Stogre
Critical theoretical approaches; opportunities for reflexive work and deconstruction of dominant discourses (e.g. expertism*)	Forlin, 2010; Florian, 2009; Florian and Rouse, 2009; Pearson, 2009; Lambe and Bones, 2006; Stanovich and Jordan, 2002
Adopting a practice into theory approach and resisting a theory into practice model	Commission of the European Communities, 2008; Darling-Hammond and Richardson, 2009; Korthagen et al., 2006

\*See section 5

#### 4. Methodology

Founded on McIntyre (2009) and broader evidence and hypotheses emerging from the literature (see Table 1), the study involved 22 participants (preservice teachers, teachers and teaching assistants, a research facilitator/university tutor) and used *inclusive action research*

(O'Hanlon, 2003) as a means of structuring the collaborative activities of the participating group over a period of 22 months. This approach adopts the principles common to other critical-theoretical action research but centres its activity on promulgating inclusive practice through adopting democratic, just and equal forms of professional collaboration. Hence, it emulated the structured, systematic and collegiate model proposed by the literature whilst being situated within the social justice paradigm. It took place in one of the largest primary schools in England, well regarded locally for its commitment to inclusive education. This school had worked in partnership with the university in its teacher education programmes for ten years, hosting several student teachers every year for placement experiences. Given concerns about the limited transferability of action research (Waterman et al., 2001; Jarvis, 1991) additional methods were employed. These included a field-work journal (for the collection of incidental data outside the specific project actions), reflective conversations with the participants during and after the project and reflective summaries written by participants. These supported identification of the wider conditions, processes and activities that were relevant to the participants' professional development in inclusive practice.

## **5. Findings**

Evidence arising from the study supports the claim that the principles and practices presented in Table 1 do underpin effective inclusive teacher education. Participants involved in the study (preservice teachers, teachers and teaching assistants) reported gains in self-efficacy, skill and understanding. These reports were corroborated by wider data (for example in that illustrating inclusive outcomes for children). More distinctively, the study offered strong support for the model of inclusive teacher education proposed by McIntyre (2009). In addition, light was cast on three important phenomena, all of which need to be understood

when designing effective inclusive teacher education. Firstly, the *discourses of expertism* were confirmed to have a significant impact on the self-efficacy of preservice and experienced teachers. Arguably, ‘expertism’ constructs Special Education as technical and specialist and relates the concept of ‘need’ to personal pathologies requiring prescription pedagogies outside the skills base of mainstream teachers. Frequent in the literature is the claim that such discourses strengthen divisive constructions of education. (Florian, 2010; Forlin, 2010; Rouse, 2010; Slee, 2010; Silverman, 2007). Arising from the study was evidence that when *expertism* was in abeyance, preservice teachers and experienced teachers were more likely to identify within themselves, the skills and knowledge needed for effective inclusive practice and hence to engage with it. The project provided regular opportunities for participants to deconstruct these discourses. This supports the view that a research-orientation with reflexive work can be a powerful means of scaffolding feelings of mastery and accomplishment through abating *expertism*.

Secondly, inclusive practice has a *dilemmatic and contradictory character*. For example, though the participants operated a strong anti-labelling position and a dislike of deficit discourses, they found this difficult to sustain (in any pure way) when the concept ‘SEND’ was at work. Where the concept ‘inclusion’ would trigger diversity discourses (which celebrate diversity and uniqueness), ‘SEND’ would trigger disparity discourses (where diversity is associated with pathologisation, differential treatment and different expectations). This presents challenges to teacher education given that ‘SEND’ is historically positioned as a disparity discourse. In England, disparity discourse is also embedded in official policy for ITE which assumes that competence depends on knowledge of specific types of disability and distinct approaches applicable to groups or categories of learners with the wider label of SEND (Teaching Agency, 2012; Ofsted, 2009). There was evidence that participants were challenged by *external cultures* that were at odds with their principles and which required of

them practices that they believed were not inclusive (such as the need to use 'labels' to gain resources and support for a child). They were continually engaged in mediating these external cultures to safeguard their professional integrity and defend positive outcomes for learners. For preservice teachers, taking a strong and principled stance (for example in deliberately adopting capacity discourses) seemed to be important as a means of navigating this unsettled and contradictory political landscape. Thirdly, teaching assistants can make an important contribution to the professional development of student teachers in terms of their wellbeing and in terms of their learning. They should not be overlooked in this sense nor marginalised from the research and enquiry community of a partnership.

## **6. Conclusion**

This paper takes the position that inclusive teacher education must adopt a complex, multi-modal, collective, critical-theoretical, socially situated, research-oriented and partnership-oriented pedagogic model if it is to advance. It has provided an account of the principles and practices that underpin effective pedagogic frameworks. If reforms to ITE result in a culture of 'on the job' training that demotes research informed critical enquiry and reflexive work (as current policy seems to promote in England), practitioners may be neglected as they struggle to understand and resolve the dilemmas that arise in securing inclusive education for all. The result of this may be professional disengagement from the battle for a fairer system and a sustaining failure to serve the rights of those learners most vulnerable to exclusion.

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