

Measures to combat educational disadvantage: A European consultation symposium December 2011

Rapporteur Report

Workshop 6: How to improve the situation of young learners with special needs?

Learners identified as having special needs are, by definition, those who are judged to need something 'additional to' or 'different from' that which is generally available to others of similar age. The practice of comparing and classifying learners of similar age for educational purposes is widespread and rarely questioned despite the disadvantages that can accrue when learners are rank ordered on specific criteria such as ability, or the occurrence of certain conditions or impairments. However, as a structural feature of the school system, these sorting practices set the point at which individual students' educational needs come to be defined as 'special'.

Learners are categorized as having special needs when what is generally available to others does not appear to meet their individual needs. Following this, many forms of provision developed to meet special needs assume that difficulties *in* learning are problems *of* individual learners that are best addressed by separate or specialist provision.

The assumption of the need for separate specialist provision has been shown to be discriminatory in many cases because not all learners with special needs experience educational difficulties and even when they do, eliminating the environmental and attitudinal barriers to learning and participation that are present in many settings can often address these difficulties. This raises questions about the role of separate forms of provision.

The relational definition of special needs often places those who need more than what is generally available at the margins of educational provision. It also accounts for much of the variability within and between jurisdictions as learners in different contexts encounter a range of barriers to participation and learning depending on the appropriateness of what is generally available.

As a group, learners with disabilities, or patterns of behaviour commonly associated with educational difficulties, are particularly vulnerable to the marginalization that can occur as a result of the limitations imposed by what is generally available. As individuals they may be excluded from access to mainstream education on the grounds that attention to their special needs will interfere with the progress of other learners, despite clear evidence that this is not necessarily the case. In fact, some studies show that inclusive education - the call to include all learners in mainstream schools and classrooms - can support higher achievement for everyoneⁱ.

However, while the experience of inclusive education has challenged many stereotypical beliefs about learners with special needs, the practice is also highly variable. While all

countries can point to examples of good practice, every country struggles to make good on the promise that inclusive education will produce good results for everyone.

The question of how quality mainstream provision can be balanced with individual learning programmes is ultimately a question of how mainstream provision can be reconfigured to provide for all without marginalizing some.

Focusing on how to provide for all without marginalising some as an inclusive approach to improving the situation for learners with special needs avoids the binary divide that occurs when individual differences in education are discussed in terms of universalism or specialism. To this end, the role of specialist support must be reconsidered so that it is consistent with inclusive ways of working because every learner differs from every other in some way. It is only when the magnitude of particular differences are considered beyond the reach of what is generally available that the binary divide of special needs is manifest.

New measures to combat the educational disadvantages facing those who are disabled and those who are identified as having special educational needs are needed. These measures encompass three important and overlapping areas of policy advocacy, research and development: (1) developing and extending sound inclusive practices, (2) locating inclusive practice in the wider context of education and society, and (3) teacher education and professional development.

(1) Inclusive education is often defined as ‘a process of increasing participation and decreasing exclusion from the culture curriculum and community of mainstream schools’ⁱⁱ. However, because the boundaries of what is generally made available within a school system are varied, so too is the practice of inclusive education. There is a need to reduce the variability in practice by developing benchmarks against which practice can be assessed and by encouraging good practice to be made public by supporting networking and other dissemination activities.

However, while there are many examples of good practice, there is still much to be done if inclusive education is to become a meaningful form of educational provision.

Developing and extending what is known about sound practice in inclusive education will require an acknowledgment that too many people still do not believe that inclusive education is educationally sound. There are also concerns that a focus on inclusive education will result in the dismantling of necessary specialist supports.

There is also a need to acknowledge the limitations inherent in some of the practices that are promoted in the name of inclusive education. Intervention efforts based on individualized approaches to inclusion can sometimes reinforce the idea that schools can only provide for all by differentiating for some. Indeed this is the criterion upon which many school inspection regimes make judgements about the effectiveness of inclusive practice.

While the practice of differentiation is a sound one, it can be implemented in ways that reinforce marginalisation within the classroom rather than facilitating inclusion. Just as policies and practices of special provision were intended to ensure access to education but paradoxically created problems of equity within it, some individualized approaches to inclusion can reproduce marginalization in the classroom. New approaches to inclusive practice based on the relationships between all members of the learning community of the classroom are needed.

There is a need to develop a more robust consensus on what should count as good practice and for guidance to be developed. Inclusion is not a linear, either/or, or step-by-step process and guidance that helps bridge the 'theory-practice' gap and support those who struggle to implement a policy of inclusion in their schools and classrooms is needed.

Scaling-up good practice will depend on research that 'drills down' to the classroom level to articulate how teachers committed to inclusive education do their workⁱⁱⁱ. There is a need for more and better qualitative and quantitative data about the practice of inclusion.

Child-friendly schools, approaches to classroom instruction based on the principles of universal design for learning, collaborative learning, formative assessment, inclusive pedagogy, and the use of adaptive technology, all strengthen the practice of inclusive education in mainstream schools. These practices have been shown to support the learning of all, an important consideration because learners with special needs are not the only students who benefit from such approaches in the classroom.

However, there are many structural barriers that interfere with the enactment of inclusive education. For example, some countries' education laws specify separate curriculum for students with special needs.

International, national and school level educational assessments can also discriminate against learners identified as having special needs, particularly when the designation leads to a lowering of expectations that places a ceiling on the level of examination in which learners are entered. This practice has implications for future educational opportunities, and forces many learners to leave school early, thus limiting their life chances.

At the same time, there is a need to develop more robust and appropriate measures of formative assessment for learners with impairments. Holistic measures, that stress the importance of environmental factors, for example, measures that are based on the areas of functioning in the ICF (International Classification of Functioning) are needed to support the development of educational interventions. This is of particular relevance in countries that have adopted the ICF as an assessment tool. While practitioners in other countries may benefit from formative assessment measures based on this classification system, others holistic measures based on different ideas about classification are also needed.

(2) The wider context of education views all schools as community resources. Special schools and specialist facilities can support the development of inclusive practices in mainstream schools when they operate as local resource centers, sharing their expertise with colleagues in mainstream schools. However, such learning is a two way process, in which special schools have much to learn from mainstream settings. This type of collaborative work is essential in re-balancing the relationship between specialist and mainstream facilities so that a 'single-track' education system of inclusive education, based on the idea of multi-disciplinary learning communities replaces the 'dual-track' of special and mainstream education. In some countries incentives for changing dual-track practices may be needed.

The single-track collaborative approach to inclusive education has particular relevance for those who are deaf. Many deaf people identify with social, cultural and linguistic aspects of deafness and want to be part of a deaf community within the broader society. Specialist facilities as community resources can facilitate the opportunity for deaf people to associate as a group while simultaneously offering opportunities for hearing learners to benefit from the language development and learning that can occur through exposure to sign language.

Often interventions initially developed to respond to a 'special need' have been found to benefit everyone. For example, the removal of physical barriers to enable easier mobility for those with physical disabilities also makes life easier for cyclists, the elderly and those with small children.

The promise of inclusive education as a means for combating educational disadvantage requires that the practices that occur in the name of inclusive education must not reproduce disadvantage in the classroom. Strategies such as ensuring that every school has a specialist teacher, or a partnership with a specialist facility are not sufficient to establish inclusive education as a mechanism of educational equity.

Public awareness of disability and disability discrimination can also help to combat educational disadvantage. Funding from the European Structural Fund can be used to support the development of anti-discriminatory educational materials to be used at all levels of education and show positive images of people with disabilities. Protocols and guidance that can be used in mediating the disputes that can occur when rights are in conflict are also needed.

Awareness raising activities can also be organized around a Commission declaration establishing December as Disability History Month. Such an action would help to educate the public about disability discrimination as well as promoting positive images of disabled people who are empowered by their educational opportunities to live productive lives.

However, real empowerment of disabled people will require more than public awareness campaigns. Good educational opportunities along with specialist support when needed will ensure that a constellation of services is available as part of local

community resources. Such provision can redress the structural barriers inherent in current practices and patterns of provision.

However, brining about this shift is more than a matter of scaling-up good practice. There is not yet a robust and substantive body of knowledge about the practices of inclusive education to simply to call for initiatives to scale-up good practice. While existing pockets of good practice suggest that what happens in some schools and communities can happen in more places, the fact that this is not happening suggests that more needs to be learned about the conditions and dynamics of including all learners with the structures and processes of mainstream education and society. There is more to learn about relevant practices that support the learning and participation of all without marginalizing some.

In considering which way forward it will be important that calls to scale-up good practice are coupled with investments in research that focuses on how to translate the theory of inclusive education into daily practice. There is a need to draw upon the lessons learned about inclusive practice and extend them to support the professional learning of teachers and others who work in or support the work of schools.

(3) Teacher education and continuing professional development is vital to the success of inclusive education but until recently very little attention has been paid to this aspect of inclusive education. While there is an international consensus^{iv} that teacher education and continuing professional development of teachers and other key stakeholders (e.g. classroom assistants, other professionals, parents, head teachers and teacher educators) are important areas of need, there are more questions than answers about how teachers and others should be prepared. The issues to consider are both structural in terms of the form of the training (what type of course or programme, and at what level) and substantive in terms of course content.

Many now believe that teachers are not sufficiently well prepared and supported to work in inclusive ways, and too many teachers do not see this as part of their professional responsibility.

Questions are now being asked about what all teachers, mainstream and specialist, need to know and be able to do to promote inclusive education^v. The European Commission has an important role to play in encouraging Member States to address issues of teacher education and lifelong professional learning for multiple stakeholder groups in support of inclusive education.

While some call for the adoption of mandatory courses of inclusive education for all mainstream teachers, it is important to consider the content of which such courses should consist. This will be an important step in ensuring that mandatory courses achieve the intended aim of transforming the knowledge, attitudes and beliefs of teachers. Such steps must be taken if new models of teacher education are to avoid reproducing and/or reinforcing the discriminatory social and educational structures described above.

Introducing specialist knowledge as part of teacher education can empower teachers to be more confident about working with children with particular impairments but it can also reinforce the idea that the class teacher is not qualified to undertake such work. Course content must be designed to include measures on how teachers can act to counter educational disadvantage, how they can work collaboratively with other professionals, how they can enact the principles of inclusive education in their classrooms and schools.

The development of new models of teacher education and professional development will require that teacher educators themselves have opportunities for professional development. Many teacher educators do not have relevant experience of inclusive education that they can draw upon in developing new courses.

Specialist courses are still needed but the knowledge base of these courses should take account of the need to work collaboratively with mainstream colleagues and others in support of the learning of all. There is support for activities such as peer shadowing and swapping roles as part of professional development.

More diversity in the educational workforce is viewed as a key strategy for increasing inclusive education. Disabled teachers will increase the diversity of the workforce and serve as role models.

In sum, measures to combat the myriad structural problems and institutional discrimination faced by people with disabilities and those with special needs require that multiple strategies to be used simultaneously. Better representation of people with disabilities, parents and advocates at all levels of policy-making would help to ensure that relevant barriers and remedies are identified and addressed.

As the current economic crisis requires that the public sector must manage to do more with fewer resources, it is important to remember that that poverty, social disadvantage, disability and poor educational achievement are inextricably linked and it is members of disadvantaged groups suffer most during times of economic downturn. As a group, students living in poverty are more likely to be disabled or described as having special educational needs, are less likely to do well in school and are less likely to attend well equipped schools. Attempts to tackle the causes and consequences of these inequalities must not ignore the broader cultural, social and economic contexts in which they are located, but build on the lessons learned from programmes of research such as the EPASI^{vi} (Charting Educational Policies to Address Social Inequalities in Europe) that outline principles for multilateral action.

While there have been many achievements, there is still much to be done if inclusive education is to become a meaningful form of educational provision to combat educational disadvantage. The structural barriers are challenging but there are also many things that can be done if teachers are supported to understand the many small things that they can do to promote more inclusive practices, even when the policy and structural context of schooling make that practice hard to undertake. Outside pressures

to change policies and legislation are necessary but they can only be implemented by informed professionals and educated communities.

Submitted by:

Lani Florian
University of Aberdeen
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ⁱ Ruijs, N. M., Van der Veen, I., & Peetsma, T.T.D. (2010): Inclusive education and students without special educational needs, *Educational Research*, 52:4, 351-390.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2010.524749>

ⁱⁱ Booth, T., & Ainscow, M. (2002) *The Index for Inclusion: Developing Learning and Participation in Schools*, 2nd edition. Bristol: CSIE.

ⁱⁱⁱ Florian, L. & Black-Hawkins, K. (2011) Exploring Inclusive Pedagogy. *British Educational Research Journal*, 37(5), 813-828. doi: 10.1080/01411926.2010.501096

^{iv} see for example, Forlin, C. (2010) *Teacher education for inclusion*, London: Routledge

^v European Agency for Development in Special Needs Educaiton. (2011) *Teacher education for inclusion across Europe: A synthesis of policy and practice in 25 countries*. Østre, Denmark: Author.

^{vi} Ross, A. (2009) *Educational policies that address social inequality: Overall report*. London: Institute for Policy Studies. <http://www.epasi.eu/overall.cfm>