Integration in a Changing Europe – time for an update?

Focus: Re-examining current integration practices in the light of changing educational and cultural needs

Topic: Educational integration practices and tools, K-6

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Integration and inclusion – a tool for change

In the Europe of unceasing movement of people and ideas, intellectual and cultural viewpoints, primary education plays an increasingly significant role in providing a strong base for the development of children who are able to see themselves as Europeans and world citizens, prepared for change and confident in their ability to develop personal tools to deal with change.

Inclusion in the classroom is change, movement and inclusion in the community at the micro level; the one models the other, and both depend on attitudes, knowledge and practice.

Current practice in mainstream inclusion – theory and practice

What do we try to achieve?

We try to provide an equal educational opportunity for all members of society, so that all of us can contribute to our society; we try to make sure that all the members of our society are able to share knowledge and experience for the common good. Experience teaches us that co-operation is a powerful tool which generally provides greater benefits than individual or unsupported endeavour.

From the March 2003 report of the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education[0]:

- What is good for pupils with special educational needs benefits all pupils.

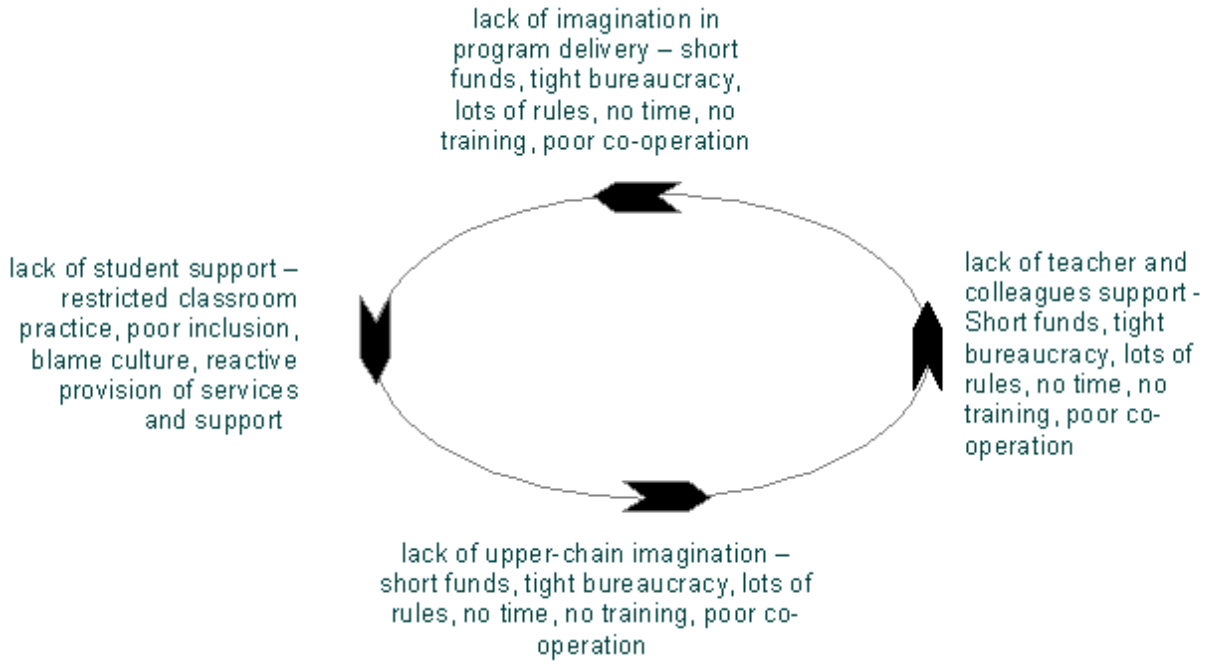
What is it actually like?

The situation is mixed. In some schools things work well; the visually impaired children are a full part of and bring something extra to school life, are appreciated by both staff and their fellow pupils, and their self-confidence and scholastic ability flowers.

Then there are schools where things are not so good. Parents tell stories of bureaucratic nightmares where their appeals for support for their children circulate endlessly between different providers, leaving the situation at the school unchanged; educators tell stories of similar bureaucratic nightmares. Co-operation can be minimal or non-existent, hostility is rife, and the only possibly happy people are the accountants, although that isn't certain!

One of the problems I hear mentioned every week is the lack of resources, given as a reason why something can't be done. Over twenty years in this field, I've come to see that this is largely caused by a general failure of co-operation – and this seems to stem

from a general lack of imagination, something like this:



It looks as though self-esteem is lacking everywhere, with nasty consequences for the workers in the field and for the students in their care. Some people are worried about being responsible for public funds; others are worried about obeying a forest of laws and directives. Parents are worried for their child's future. It seems that all the worrying is having a negative effect, not really helping to improve the situation – there's something of a culture of understandable defensiveness.

There's also a disjunct between the sort of expertise one finds gathered at conferences – like this one – and the situation at the coal-face; there's a real shortage of expertise where it really matters. Classroom teachers and teaching assistants must provide the learning environment when, in many cases, they haven't got knowledge of or access to the necessary tools and methods – and there isn't any time or money to update them. The lack of time is often the most pressing issue, with lack of money equal first or a close second.

Sometimes the problem *is* just a simple failure of imagination. I attended a secondary school one day, and found the student and one of the support workers off in a room by themselves. The class was studying Elizabethan dress. The support workers had provided a thermoform picture of Elizabeth I of England, complete with ruff and farthingale and headdress – you can imagine the amount of detail they'd tried to cram into a 12"x12" thermoform sheet. The Braille notes accompanying the thermoform were several centimetres thick. I don't know what the other students did – maybe they had pictures in a book? On my way home, I wondered: why didn't the class teacher call a costume hire place, and get the costumes for a day, so that the whole class could work together, try the costumes on – and everyone could experience something similar?

There are other times when the "special" child in the class is just *forgotten* - the classroom teacher walks into the classroom and sees the blind student and says to themselves "oh (expletive deleted)!", goes to the teaching assistant and says: this Braille/diagram/whatever is required *now*...

Then there's Braille. In many, many primary schools, the child *always* has to leave the class when it's time to learn Braille. Braille is too loud; nobody else is doing Braille; the classroom teacher doesn't need or want to know about it; the other students don't need

to be bothered... not very inclusive, is it? And it isn't very imaginative either, because there's every chance that the other students will love it, and if it's made part of the classroom activities, then the Braille-using child is participating more often. Everyone benefits!

Mike Steer and Gillian Gale[1] have this to say:

"The mystique surrounding Braille has been perpetuated and accentuated. Visiting teachers many with only a meagre knowledge of Braille, either due to lack of training or practice, and class teachers with no knowledge of the Braille code feel safer and more in control if the student is working in a familiar code which they can read. Many teachers actively encourage a student's complete reliance on the voice of a screen reader and the student's Braille skills and access to true literacy decline in consequence."

This quotation is almost ten years old. Unfortunately it's still possible to say, in the year of Louis Braille's bicentenary, that things haven't changed much - the meme is still going the rounds that Braille is too hard! Wouldn't it be nice if we could start a counter-meme that said how Braille was cool, and interesting, and good fun... and it was really all right for sighted children in mainstream classes to have at least a nodding acquaintance with it, even if they did use it to pass surreptitious notes?

Where inclusion is not so good, who is happy? Not the teachers, not the parents, and probably not the children – they certainly don't seem to be enjoying their time at school as well as those children lucky enough to be attending a truly inclusive school.

Where does inclusion work? Reverse or two-way integration

There are some shining examples of how well inclusion or integration can work for children with all sorts of disabilities; some of the most inspiring are reverse-integrated schools. My own experience and knowledge is with two pre-primary and primary situations in Australia, but they're also in several other countries.

At the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind's school in Burwood, a suburb of Melbourne in Victoria, Australia, there has been a reverse-integration programme operating since 1980. This programme accepts able-bodied sighted children from a local mainstream school, for one year, to be integrated into a class of visually impaired and multiply-disabled visually impaired children, between Years 1 and 3 in primary education.

In his two-volume report published in 1997[2], Geoff Treloar, the principal of the school, describes "the core of an inclusion approach as a belief system which affirms individual differences and interdependence". He also points out that "For children, human diversity simply exists. Notions of mixed abilities, impairments and disabilities are the theoretical constructs of adults."

In this school, everyone reaps the benefits: the teachers, the parents, the visually impaired students and the sighted students. All the students benefit educationally from being exposed to the standard curriculum framework together, the inclusive programme means that the sighted children are taught in more varied ways to their benefit and interest, and the visually impaired children gain in self-esteem and confidence in an atmosphere of acceptance. And the experience is different and interesting for them all:

"A group of sighted children run excitedly to the playground teacher. "Look, we've found some Braille gum leaves." "What do you mean?" asks the teacher. " See, those little dots – it says 'g' for gum.[2]"

In New South Wales, the Royal Institute of Deaf and Blind Children has operated their three pre-schools as reverse-integration facilities since the early 1990s. These pre-schools are for children in the age range 3-5 years. From an interview with Sue Benzie,

manager of Early Childhood Services at RIDBC[3]:

"QT: What do you think the benefits are for those children who do have disabilities?

SB: Again the quality of staff and the nature of the facilities are of benefit for all students but for the children with hearing and visual impairments it offers them an environment where they can have access to an early education and other children of their age who are developing their language skills and social skills at a normal rate. It is extremely important that these aspects are promoted in order for children to reach their age appropriate development.

QT: Do you think the reverse integration program helps the social skills of all the children that attend RIDBC?

SB: Absolutely, sighted children are growing up with, from what we can observe, they grow up valuing the diversity in people. It is not something that is taught, it occurs the naturalistic way. The parents tell us how when their children are out they don't seem to stare or avoid people who appear to be different or have a disability. They learn the important life lessons like social responsibility, that their peers are their equals.

For the children with vision and hearing impairments, it helps them to develop their social skills; they are able to make friends who are not vision or hearing impaired. They learn to communicate and interact with other children; they are treated as equals, and this ultimately builds children's confidence which will only assist them as they go on to higher levels of education and into their lives and the work force."

Where does inclusion work best? Inclusive classrooms

At some mainstream schools that I have seen in the UK and elsewhere, there are truly inclusive classrooms. What do these schools do that's so special it makes them noticeable, and makes parents track them down and enrol their visually impaired children?

First and most important, the school is welcoming. The whole school, led by the principal, welcomes all children, visually impaired children equally with all the other children in the class, and builds an environment where they will be comfortable, feel welcome and be able to extend themselves into their education.

Second, the classroom teacher wants to include the student in their class. This can't be stressed enough. Some classroom teachers will be worried that they don't have the skills or resources, but will feel that if they did, including this child would be a good thing – others just do not want to do this thing, regardless of the availability of resources.

Third, the visually impaired student's environment is thought of in a proactive way. In those inclusive schools, the furniture isn't moved around, or if it is the moving is used as a mobility exercise. All children do tactual and auditory learning; Braille happens around all the children; the visually impaired student isn't removed from the class more than absolutely necessary. Special resources such as Braille worksheets and tactile resources aren't forgotten.

Fourth, the sighted children aren't protected from the special things the visually impaired student does. Large Print, Braille, audio and tactile resources are familiar to the entire class, and are treated as interesting, valuable and good for everyone.

The European Agency report mentions that "meaningful interactions with non-disabled peers are of the utmost importance"[0]. The truly inclusive classroom has a teacher who is prepared to facilitate this, and who will receive from their school all the training and support they need to do so.

Day-to-day practices – what can happen now

The best inclusive classrooms are already doing the sorts of things that are making education in reverse-integrated schools so successful for all the participants. The question now is: how to migrate those practices into mainstream classrooms along with the visually impaired children?

The main caveat is this: a truly inclusive and welcoming classroom ***cannot be established by force***. Phelps, in her report "Inclusion, Integration and School Climate"[4] reports strong negativity from staff in a special school where reverse integration was foisted upon the staff without enough planning and preparation time. While 85% of the respondents did feel that inclusion could be successful, the majority were very unhappy with it at their school. One wonders just what effect this negativity would have on the day-to-day atmosphere of the school, and the educational outcomes for the students.

What sorts of things foster the right climate for a truly inclusive classroom? The European Agency report shows us that where inclusion happens as it should, teachers are well-supported and skilled, there are enough resources, and teaching is effective and imaginative.

However, if you're beginning from scratch to look at a classroom and ask is it truly inclusive, the most important question to ask is this: is this student welcome?

Follow that with: Is this student really a part of this class, or are they just on the fringes? When they work, is it often separately? How much of the way they do things has been integrated into classroom life?

Imagine having everyone in the class using large print several times a week, or having a Braille class for the entire class, on a regular basis; imagine having audio instead of television one time, and imagine doing nature study with the lights off and the curtains closed. Perhaps that would work better for the teacher if the children wore airline masks.

Things like this can happen in a standard classroom; it isn't necessary for a school to be a special school before the able-bodied children get to experience and value something a little other than the mainstream way of doing things.

Looking forward – things to think about

- Defining inclusion in a positive way – changing the meme. A meme is by definition something we make up – so we can make up a new one. Every sighted child under ten years old that I have ever come across ***loves*** Braille. It just needs to be shown to them by someone who loves it too!
- Doing schools the compliment of high expectations. It must be wearing to be criticised all the time – what about a bit of "you can do it!" for schools and teachers?
- Planning the ongoing provision, development and sharing of resources, expertise and support, using an open, community-wide model for inclusive education. Many teachers already try to do this, and would be glad if it were easier.
- Rewarding imagination – this means someone has to be watching for it! But it would be a lot more fun than watching for infractions, I think.
- Setting up flying squads to provide support at the right place as required, and keep skills and knowledge current and available. Wouldn't this solve some of the problems of skills moving around countries and being lost, and schools being suddenly in need of a huge injection of skills?
- Co-operation and by extension, openness: it works better than closed, such as the cathedral (closed) and bazaar (open) models. In the Bibliography I've included Eric

Raymond's The Cathedral and the Bazaar[6], a paper on the relative merits of the open-source and closed-source methods of software development. The open-versus-closed discussion is one that can readily be applied in education – the more knowledge, skills and outcomes are shared, the better the system gets. Problems are seen quickly and are more readily solved; resources and knowledge are shared and are the more readily available for all.

Finally...

It's worth noting that inclusion - whether the educational inclusion we're talking about today or the wider community inclusion that education is a part of - doesn't just apply to the children. It isn't only the sighted, able-bodied children who are being asked to include the visually impaired children in their world, or vice versa. Inclusion applies equally to the adults in the picture – inclusion of adults into the children's worlds, and the children into the adults'.

Let our concerns for privacy, and our unwillingness to move out of our comfort zone not prevent us from reaping the real benefits of inclusion – a stretching of boundaries, a taking on of new skills, ideas and possibilities, and the enhanced quality of life that follows – for all concerned.

Bibliography

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[1] Steer, Mike and Gale, Gillian: *Changing identities and knowledge in educational services to vision impaired students in Australia: analysing the paradigm shift*, 2001. Available from www.tld.uts.edu.au/publications/papers/msteer.doc.

[2]Treloar, Geoffrey: *Inclusive Teaching and Learning, Vols 1 & 2*, 1997, ISBN 0 949390 43 7. Inquiries to Vision Australia, www.visionaustralia.org.au.

[3] Interview with Sue Benzie, RIDBC, 26 February 2009. Electronic copies available upon request.

[4]Phelps, Miriam A.: *Inclusion and Integration and School Climate*, 1993; available online at http://tinyurl.com/d7lt48.

[6] Raymond, Eric S: *The Cathedral and the Bazaar,* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Cathedral_and_the_Bazaar

Further reading:

The Integration Alliance: The Inclusive Education System, a National Policy for Fully Integrated Education, 1992: available online at http://tinyurl.com/bpftnb