

Leadership in the Development of Inclusive School Communities

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Children's and young people's perspectives are not always given priority, yet they can deliver some important messages that help us to understand their school experiences. This article introduces some of the themes from our research with children and young people who have disabilities and considers the role of leadership in developing inclusive schools. While the examples here come from the school sector, similar issues are raised in early childhood research in New Zealand.

Students' perspectives on school

Feeling different

Students with disabilities want to be part of the group of "all students" at school, and disliked being treated in ways that made them feel different from their peers. Being removed from the class for therapies or for 'special' support; having an 'attached' teacher aide; and being grouped with other students with disabilities prevented a sense of belonging in the peer group. Students felt that these approaches imposed an unwanted identity on them that emphasised their disability, and ignored all the other aspects that made them the person they are. Joanne in Year 10 said:

Joanne: I feel like I am an equal and that (being placed in a 'special' group) sets me down a bit, like thinking, 'Oh well I have to go in this group because I am different.'

Interviewer: Would you rather just be in with the other class?

Joanne: Yeah, just in the normal homeroom and like in the other reading group.

Interviewer: Do you get any chances to say that to your teachers?

Joanne: No, not really.

Bullying

Bullying was also a common feature of students' lives. Emma, in Year 9, had cerebral palsy and said that she was 'scared' to speak in class because the boys would make fun of her voice. She said:

I don't speak at all. I don't say anything. I just say "Hi".

Her teachers were unaware that she felt this way so no attempt had been made to address the problem or to support her participation. In some schools bullying was taken seriously and addressed, but in others it persisted because it went unrecognised or, as Luke in Year 9 said, the teacher "did not do a good job because he didn't believe me". Bullying often focused on students' disabilities and threatened their sense of self worth.

Isolation

Isolation and a lack of friends was an issue for some students. Emma described herself as "sitting on my own" at lunch time in Year 9. At primary school Luke played with very young peers or went to the library and read by himself. He struggled to be accepted in his peer group at secondary school, and while he wanted to be out in the school grounds, staff required him to eat his lunch in the Learning Support Centre where he described himself as "isolated".

Some students experienced isolation in the classroom. Adam in Year 9 sat on the edge of the class and played the same computer game for a whole year in his IT class. His teacher rarely included him in class activities, saying that she was not a "learning disabilities teacher". In contrast, Adam's maths teacher prepared material that was at his level every day. She greeted him, sat him in the centre of the classroom, and supported his learning.

Low teacher expectations

Students with disabilities are vulnerable to having their disability viewed as a deficit, and teachers sometimes overlooked students' strengths and capabilities. In Year 10 Joanne described how she challenged her teachers on this point:

Some people think that like being disabled is the worst thing ever, but I just like proving people wrong like 'cos some people say 'Oh you can't do that' and then I show them that I can. ... I can try to do everything. ... I proved my music teacher [was] wrong 'cos he thought I couldn't do it and when we had our test we had to do two things in front of the classroom and he was like 'Oh! Look at this girl! She proved me wrong again', and I am like, 'Oh! Thank you.'

Not present

'Presence' is a key idea associated with inclusion, yet we have observed students with disabilities being removed from class, and from their peer group, for separate teaching or for therapies and other activities that do not appear to have a curriculum focus. In one extreme example, Ian spent less than two hours of the school day with his peers at intermediate school due to a daily programme of therapies, 'wheelchair maintenance'; and 'social skills' classes. Poor physical access also prevented his participation in swimming and assemblies. Ian enjoyed being in class and particularly liked maths, which he was very good at. He and his Dad had talked about the school day and their perception was that it was more about 'special education' and therapy (aimed at getting him to walk) than it was about academic work. Ian wanted these priorities to be reversed, and he told us that in his view:

It's better to be in a wheelchair and know your maths than it is to walk.

The effects of disability are not always understood

Some students felt that their teachers did not have a good understanding of the nature of their disability or of the effects their disability had on their learning. Some found it difficult to move between classes and were tired. Others wanted their teachers to know that they were capable and able to participate independently; and some wanted their teacher and their peers to understand why they behaved in a certain way. Joanne, in Year 10, was tired of being told off for being late to class and wrote a letter to her teachers to explain how aspects of her physical disability made it difficult for her to move quickly between classes. She invited her teachers to "feel free to ask me" if they had any questions about the effects of her impairment.

Leadership for inclusion

Students in our research illustrate how being in a centre or ordinary classroom is not enough if teachers have low expectations or believe they are not responsible for teaching students with disabilities. Equally, if students are poorly understood; if the peer group is unwelcoming or bullying occurs; or their school day is dominated by 'special' and segregated activities that prevent access to the curriculum and valued social experiences, students' learning and social experiences are compromised. While some teachers in our research were switched on to the needs of all their students, some students could walk a difficult path through the school day as they encountered teachers who included and taught them, and others who did not.

What is the role of centre supervisors and school principals in the scenarios described above? The beliefs of those in leadership positions are one of the most influential variables in the development of

school cultures and teaching practices that contribute to inclusion. About 25 years ago, Canadian educator Dr. Gordon Porter, took a key leadership position in the transformation of New Brunswick's education system to one system based on inclusion. Systemic efforts focused on supports, resources and professional development for schools to include and teach all students, and Gordon argues that inclusion necessarily turns our focus to school improvement. As New Zealand researcher Adrienne Alton Lee (2003) has pointed out, teachers develop pedagogically when they learn to understand and meet the needs of a diverse student group. Leaders, Gordon suggests, can begin to address inclusion and the kinds of issues raised by students in our research by focusing on school change. There are examples in this country of innovative leadership driving inclusive schools (see, for example, IHC 2009a & b), and research has recently opened up some new ways of thinking about how schools can progress down this track.

Canadian researcher Ben Levin (2010) has looked at how schools find, share and use research in their work. Principals, supervisors and teachers value *social processes* - collaborative exchanges with respected colleagues that consider new approaches (such as developments towards inclusion) and critique existing practice (such as the scenarios described by students in our research). Change is unlikely to occur when such processes involve adding another task to the already overloaded days and years of school principals and centre supervisors. However, schools have and can use *existing systems* that are based on social processes to critique practice and share research knowledge. This means that issues relating to inclusion and research can be discussed through some modest redirection of existing energies, rather than through new tasks. Staff meetings; Board of Trustees meetings; newsletters; informal gatherings of staff or staff and parents; and professional development events are some examples. Leadership styles that encourage a range of individuals to participate in leadership functions are most likely to foster an inclusive school culture, enhance knowledge throughout the school/centre, and build sound links with parents and communities.

Research suggests that principals and others in leadership positions can support their schools or early childhood centres to move towards inclusion by adhering to some key considerations. These include:

Attend to three broad tasks:

- Fostering new meanings about diversity;
- Promoting inclusive practices within schools/centres; and
- Building connections between schools/centres and communities (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010).

Engage in social processes, using existing structures and energies to:

- Articulate collective purpose (a shared enterprise) and build commitment (develop a common language for talking about teaching and learning; inclusive values; respect for difference; a commitment to teaching all students).
- Create safe environments for trying something new and different.
- Support comprehensive paradigm shifts (e.g. shifts in thinking about education and 'special' education; about who belongs in the student group, in the regular classroom).
- Build collective learning into the process of change (students are likely to be more successful at school if their teachers are actively engaged in learning how to teach within the local context of the school)
- Develop a strategy for inclusive school development and guidelines for action (e.g. specialist provision will be made in the ordinary classroom, rather than by withdrawal; students with disabilities will be consulted and their views will be used in planning and teaching).
- Uphold standards of inclusion while solving practical problems.
- Create a culture that encourages "learning by doing".

- Establish collaborative teams within the school that act as decision making bodies that reference the philosophy and standard of inclusion (collaborative teams assist leaders to embed sound practices throughout the school or centre and ensure that critical decisions involving complex factors are never made alone). (Inclusive Education Canada, 2011; Porter, 2008).

Network within and between schools

- Long-term strategies for inclusive school development can be fostered through networking, collaboration and the sharing of expertise and resources.
- When teachers have opportunities to collaborate and compare practices they can come to view students who have learning challenges in a new light. Rather than viewing the student as the problem (Adam is unable to learn in this class, and I do not have the training to teach him), such students may be viewed as providing feedback on existing classroom arrangements (Adam is disengaged in IT, but is learning in maths, what is the maths teacher doing to engage him in learning?). Students become a source for understanding how classrooms can be developed to benefit all. (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010).

Inclusive education aims to ensure that all children and young people experience an education that enhances their learning and social relationships, and prepares them for a quality adult life in the community. Gordon Porter reminds us that this happens when children grow up and learn with their peers in their local early childhood centres and schools. Students with disabilities in our research remind us that what happens within the walls of our local schools and centres also matters. Principals and centre supervisors who welcome and value all students provide a context in which school change towards inclusion is possible. Just as importantly, when leaders view inclusion as an evolving process in which all teachers have roles and responsibilities, then collaborative and effective teaching is likely to be found throughout classrooms and centres.

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