

Inclusive school cultures

***Getting inclusion right raises standards for everyone.***

### ***Defining Inclusivity as a process***

Despite working in inclusion for years, it's still easy to assume a shared understanding of the term, thinking that people know what we mean when we talk about it, but surprising how often these assumptions are misjudged. That's confirmation and proximity biases for you. At a teacher CPD session recently, it struck me how such different interpretations of the word inclusion can have such an impact on how schools lead on the issue and consequently on how new teachers develop their personal framing of what inclusivity means for them and their teaching. This reflection may also help us understand the mismatch there can be between the values and behaviours new teachers develop whilst training to teach; being influenced by their ITE tutors and their placement schools, only to find it uncomfortable starting induction in a new school that reflects a very different ethos.

It's essential therefore, that trainee teachers have clarity and purpose about what inclusion means and recognise how their understanding may differ from others. Steps to achieve this:

- 1) Establish a set of values regarding inclusivity that the trainee wants to develop in their classroom and align these as the basis for having high expectations of pupils and what they are able to achieve, as described in Standard 1 of the Teacher Standards
- 2) Recognise school culture may differ from the inclusive ambitions and values they hold.
- 3) Know they have agency in their own classroom to work toward their own emergent values as they build and improve their inclusive teaching.

School culture influences teacher behaviours and a range of statutory guidance over many years has often made it possible to interpret and perform inclusion, without embedding effective inclusive pedagogy and practice. It is important that trainee teachers have a sense of agency in identifying the nature of inclusion within a school in which they are placed and in understanding how the team with whom they work (their mentor, department peers, leaders within the school) engage with the concepts of inclusive practice.

### ***Establishing personal values for inclusive teaching***

So engaging in activity that helps to identify and explore the values and attitudes that trainees hold in relation to inclusion is important.

Task - Ask trainees to consider what inclusion means and what other words or concepts explain the notion of inclusivity? This can elicit multiple responses and help to explain inclusion as a process rather than a fixed state. The variation in responses crystallises the dual challenge of language and ethos.

For some, inclusion is still a physical concept relating to how we physically include a learner. We want trainees to deepen their perception to understand the dynamic nature of inclusivity; it's physical, social and cognitive frame; notions of inclusion defined as accessibility or belonging need unpicking in relation to each of these.

In 2017, UNESCO developed a guide to ensuring inclusion and equity in education with the central premise that *every learner matters and matters equally*. It's a strong working definition. The good news is that no leader or teacher disagrees with the principles of inclusion. On a practical and operational level, however, we have multiple realities of what teachers mean by inclusion (Armstrong and Spandagou 2011). Some of these are physical, where pupils with SEND are literally in the classroom; some participatory, where good work is done to ensure access to the curriculum; others purposeful, where the school is a centre of the community and a demonstrable effort of social justice in action.

Numerous studies (UNESCO 2009, Wilkinson and Pickett 2010, OECD 2012) show the benefits of inclusivity on achievement and national standards. Yet we continue to contend with a system that encourages forms of student segregation through policy and funding that identifies one group of pupil characteristics above or beyond another. In this context, senior leadership should plan what they mean, what is important and what they want to achieve with inclusion. Perhaps the challenge for leadership is less about the subtleties of definition and more about the quest to achieve shared endeavour.

A University of Helsinki study looking at the difference between the rhetoric and the practice of inclusion in Alberta and Finland recognised that leaders were pivotal to the degree of inclusivity demonstrated by a school. If inclusion was poorly defined within the schools and for the principals, it was usually just the physical integration of pupils that pre-occupied their ambitions. The researchers made a clear recommendation that leadership training programmes should contain more broad and central issues related to the practice of inclusivity within school development planning (Lynch 2012).

### ***Inclusive cultures and shared endeavours – Schools and ITT Providers***

Leaders in all settings (schools and ITT Providers) need to reinforce inclusive practices with frequently articulated expectations, support and acknowledgement that, for all stakeholders, inclusion is a constant journey toward a shared vision.

It is highly topical. During a time of high anxiety around school closures due to the pandemic, the Education Endowment Foundation published new guidance for supporting SEND in mainstream schools. The five-point summary is clear:

1. Create a positive and supportive environment for all pupils without exception
2. Build an ongoing, holistic understanding of your pupils and their needs
3. Ensure all pupils have access to high quality teaching
4. Complement high quality teaching with carefully selected small-group and one-to-one interventions

## 5. Work effectively with teaching assistants.

School culture as always, matters, and leadership can take the opportunity to make SEND central to school success. The same expectation applies for ITE Providers whether a HEI or a SCITT. Inclusive leadership seeks out and listens to varied voices, values expert knowledge, and enables leaders and staff to work in partnership within shared leadership structures designed to make inclusion 'work' at every level. The tools that support inclusive practices and structures are the well-documented vision, quality assurance cycles, and context-specific pedagogical practices.

As ITT Providers working with schools to support their actualising of inclusivity, there is a huge opportunity to support ongoing professional learning. Inclusivity is actually a process, a never ending search to find a better way to respond to student diversity. There is no better time to put inclusivity at the centre of ITT curriculum planning.

EEF Guidance Report. Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools (March 2020)

[Markku T Jahnukainen](#) Inclusion, integration, or what? A comparative study of the school principals' perceptions of inclusive and special education in Finland and in Alberta, Canada Disability & Society January 2015 Carter, S Leadership, Inclusion & Education for all. Australasian Journal of Special & Inclusive Education.