Preparing Teachers to Work with *Everybody*: a curricular approach to the reform of teacher education

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ABSTRACT This article reports on a curricular approach to teacher education using the ideas in *Learning without Limits* to prepare teachers to enter a profession in which they take responsibility for the learning and achievement of all learners. Key aspects of Scotland's Inclusive Practice Project (IPP) are described and the role of university-based teacher education in supporting and challenging practice-based learning in schools is discussed.

Introduction

The increasing cultural, linguistic and developmental diversity of today's classrooms, along with the pressure to achieve high academic standards for everybody have important implications for teacher education. How can classroom teachers be prepared to accept responsibility for the learning and achievement of all pupils? What role can teacher education play in encouraging the broader use of pedagogical strategies known to narrow the attainment gap between student groups? What might be done about the frequent complaint of classroom teachers who report feeling unprepared for the demands of an increasingly diverse education system? In answering these questions there are many differences of opinion about the nature of the content knowledge student teachers should learn, as well as what and how they should learn about human variability. These views range from additional information about individual needs, to critical analyses of the structures of schooling that tend to reinforce particular concepts of intelligence and pupil ability.

The debates about content knowledge have occurred while teacher education itself is also undergoing significant reform and student teachers spend more time in schools where they are expected both to conform to the status quo

and become agents of change. However, while the time student teachers spend in school has increased, the time available within university courses to cover issues of diversity and to explore alternatives to current school practices has been reduced. Arguably this shifts the balance between conformity and change in favour of the status quo, as many schools do not have staff who possess the necessary skills and qualifications to prepare student teachers on topics such as diversity, inclusion and special educational needs (Dyson et al, 2001). This mirrors a 2008 Ofsted report in England that was critical of many aspects of initial teacher education, particularly the quality of the input about learning difficulties that student teachers receive while on school placements.

In Scotland there is an expectation that all schools are potential placements for student teachers, and universities and schools work in partnership to ensure that student teachers develop the required competencies. Students enrolled on the one-year full time Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) spend 18 weeks in school experience placements supported by 18 weeks of university-based learning. While students are supported by the university course tutors to apply professional and theoretical knowledge, problems can occur when the theoretical knowledge is contested or if it is inconsistent with practice in schools. For example, the reliance on ability grouping as a school-based organisational strategy can be a barrier to more inclusive approaches that do not rely on such groupings. This article describes the development of a university-based course that attempts to challenge ability grouping and fixed notions of ability while continuing to work in partnership with schools that rely on such strategies.

The Inclusive Practice Project

The University of Aberdeen's Inclusive Practice Project (IPP) was funded by the Scottish government (2006-2010) to develop an approach to initial teacher education that would ensure new teachers had greater awareness, understanding and skill in responding to the many problems that can affect children's learning. At the time the IPP was initiated, a new Scottish Framework for Professional Recognition/Registration (General Teaching Council for Scotland, 2007) had established standards for initial teacher education (SITE) that required the development of competencies in inclusive education and coincided with the introduction of a new national Curriculum for Excellence, which emphasised more inclusive approaches to teaching and learning and a strong commitment to social justice.

A key concern during the development phase of the IPP was that the content knowledge contained in supplementary or optional courses on 'social inequality' 'additional support needs' or 'inclusive education', would add to, rather than change, much of the existing university-based course content. There was also an awareness that attempts to 'infuse' additional knowledge into existing courses had not led to changes in teaching practice. The gap between what teachers 'know' as a result of their courses, whether supplementary,

optional or infused, and what they do in their classrooms, clearly suggested that a new approach to teaching about how to respond to human difference and diversity was needed. To this end, the IPP team worked with colleagues from across the School of Education, local authority representatives, classroom teachers and recent course graduates to consider the different ways in which practising teachers and schools have become more inclusive of children who might have found learning and participation difficult in the past, so that a shared understanding of these teachers' practice could be built into a new course. It was agreed that issues of individual difference should not be decontextualised from the broader (mainstream) pedagogical and curriculum imperatives that trainee teachers have to learn and be able to use when they begin teaching.

In considering the different ways practising teachers had become more inclusive so that a shared understanding of these teachers' practice could be built into a new course, a new curricular approach emerged, based on a deep respect for and understanding of how experienced teachers respond to student diversity (McIntyre, 2009). This was supplemented by research on achievement and inclusion in schools that challenged the wide-spread belief that the inclusion of pupils with difficulties in learning holds back the progress of others (Black-Hawkins et al, 2007; Zumeta, 2009), as well as research that explored the craft knowledge of teachers who were able to sustain inclusive practices with diverse pupil groups over time (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

As the IPP team began to articulate what teachers need to know and be able to do as they are preparing to enter a profession that accepts responsibility for the learning of all students, we began to identify the key ideas associated with the development of what we called an inclusive pedagogical approach. Initially the approach was described as 'an accommodation of individual differences within the structures and processes that are available to all learners' (IPP, 2007). It was argued that the accommodation of individual differences should be thought of as an ordinary part of a teacher's response when students experience difficulties, and that such a response required new ways of working with others. The task was not to defend the need to accommodate learner differences by the provision of something 'different from' or 'additional to' for some learners, as defined in the Additional Support for Learning Act, 2004 (Scottish Executive, 2005), but to extend what is 'generally available' to others of similar age. Over time, an integrated focus on extending what is generally available to all learners, as an alternative to providing for 'all' by differentiating for 'some', emerged as a core idea. This led to a theoretical stance that required replacing some long-standing notions about learning and learners, such as those perpetuated by 'bell curve' thinking (Hart, 1998; Fendler & Muzaffar, 2008), with ideas that do not impose such limits (Hart et al, 2004). However, not everyone teaching on the new course agreed with this stance. In re-structuring the PGDE, therefore, deliberate decisions were made to teach about issues of diversity and social justice in education at the beginning of the course in order to make the point that difference is part of the human condition. *Learning without*

Limits was adopted as a core text to replace notions of fixed ability with the idea of *transformability*, which Hart and her colleagues use to assert the principled belief that 'children's capacity to learn can change and be changed for the better as a result of what happens and what people do in the present' (Hart et al, 2004, p. 166). The professional studies element of the PGDE was redesigned to reflect three themes that aimed to promote the idea that real equity in learning opportunities 'becomes possible when young people's school experiences are not organised and structured on the basis of judgments of ability' (p. 3).

Inherent within the three themes that underpin the professional studies element of the PGDE are challenges to many of the existing beliefs and practices that students may encounter when working in schools. The first theme, 'Understanding Learning', is based on the principle that difference must be accounted for as an essential aspect of human development in any conceptualisation of learning. Such a view challenges fixed ability views of children and educational practices that are based on assumptions of a normal distribution of intelligence.

Secondly, the theme of 'Social Justice' places expectations on teachers that they are responsible for the learning of all children: a stance that requires them to conceptualise difficulties in student learning as dilemmas for the teacher, rather than as shortcomings in the pupils. This approach requires that teachers reject notions of inclusive practice that are based on provision for 'most' alongside something different for 'some'; instead it requires them to extend what is ordinarily available for all learners (creating a rich learning community).

The third theme, 'Becoming an Active Professional', requires teachers constantly to seek new ways to support the learning of all children. A key tenet of this principle is finding ways of working with and through others to enhance the participation and improve the learning experience of everyone in the community of the classroom. This presents a challenge to traditional divisions between 'mainstream' teachers who are responsible for the learning of most students and 'specialists' who work with some children who have been identified as having 'special needs'. Instead it suggests that adults work together to find better ways of supporting all children.

Challenging 'Bell Curve Thinking'

One of the course aims was to explore how ideas of determinism (or 'bell curve thinking') have been normalised in education (Fendler & Muzaffar, 2008), and to challenge the related processes of ability labelling as a way of supporting teachers in understanding their own role in taking individual and collective responsibility for students' experience of schooling. From the outset, social justice was explored within the Scottish context; the course considered the dilemmas of access and equity inherent in education systems that rely on bell curve thinking. For example, the practice of comparing and classifying learners of similar age on specific criteria such as ability, or the occurrence of certain conditions or impairments for educational purposes was questioned in keynote

lectures and associated activities at the beginning of the course. Student teachers were shown how, as a structural feature of the school system, these sorting practices set the points at which individual students' educational needs are defined as 'additional' or 'special'. Issues of social justice were overtly linked to notions of inclusive education because learners with disabilities, English language learners and others with patterns of behaviour commonly associated with educational difficulties, are particularly vulnerable to the marginalisation that can occur as a result of certain organisational and educational practices. These learners are sometimes excluded from access to mainstream education on the grounds that attention to their additional needs will interfere with the progress of other learners. In this regard inclusion was understood as a process of meaningful participation in the learning community of the school. Issues of teacher professionalism, professional identity, the work of the school in the broader social and political context were also examined. Further details are available in Florian & Rouse (2009), Florian & Linklater (2010), Florian et al, (2010), and Florian & Spratt (forthcoming, 2013).

Embedding the theoretical ideas into the course reform heightened awareness of the contested nature of the ideas that underpinned the reform (these are discussed in Florian et al, 2011). Doing so also reinforced the practical decision recommended by McIntyre (2009) to draw upon practice-based studies of experienced teachers in shaping the course. The study of the course reforms (Florian et al, 2010; Florian, 2012; Florian & Spratt, forthcoming, 2013; Young & Florian, 2012) adopted a mixed methodological approach to data analysis that permitted a deductive exploration of how the theoretical reforms were operationalised along with an inductive interest in what we could learn about them that might lead to new insights. These studies explored the extent to which the theoretical concepts of inclusive pedagogy were embedded in the course, but there was also a strong interest in understanding how they were enacted in practice. Florian & Spratt (forthcoming, 2013) provide a detailed account of this process and demonstrate how probationer teachers drew on the principles of the PGDE course as a framework for approaching the particular issues and challenges associated with ability labelling in their own varied classroom contexts. Six of the seven programme graduates we followed were using an inclusive pedagogical approach in their practice, but structural barriers to the enactment of these practices remain in all school environments. This was particularly evident in schools that required the use of setting for some subjects. However, because the inclusive pedagogical approach was presented as a problem-solving approach, and the student teachers understood the negative effects of 'bell curve thinking' in educational practice, it was possible to document how they used this understanding both proactively in their planning (for example, using alternatives to ability grouping where possible), and reactively as a way of conceptualising solutions when children faced difficulties in learning (for example, using available specialist support to enhance pupil participation in

classroom activities). They believed they were capable of teaching all students even when additional support was needed.

Discussion

Given the increasing diversity of Scottish schools, concerns about growing social inequalities, the contested nature of the concept of inclusion and the many interpretations of inclusion as practice, the IPP approach was based on the view that university-based experiences must be structured in ways that support students to acquire a critical view of some school practice and to consider alternatives to practices based on 'bell curve thinking' in the development of their own practice. University-based learning opportunities that focus on the general insights of inclusive education in the practical context of classroom teaching play an important part in developing student teachers' capacity to extend what is generally available to everyone. By building on and making links with practices in school, university-based teacher education can fulfil its obligation to work in partnership with schools in ways that both respect and challenge current practice. Opportunities to explore the connections between what student teachers learn in school, and the challenges to school practices represented by the alternatives to bell curve thinking they learn in the university are an important aspect of professional learning and development. As current policy on teacher education privileges the idea that students become teachers by working in schools, university-based courses must engage constructively with the learning that occurs there in ways that both respect and challenge the status quo. The IPP reflects a curricular approach based on a critique of bell curve thinking in favour of an inclusive pedagogical approach underpinned by the ideas contained in *Learning without Limits*. It provides an example of how a university-based course can encourage students to engage in critical and reflective practice, adopting alternatives to ability grouping where possible, while simultaneously maintaining respect for the practices and traditions they were learning in school placement, particularly when those practices were inconsistent with the ideas they were learning in the professional studies course. In this way, the IPP demonstrates how it is possible for universities and schools to work in a genuine partnership that supports the learning and achievement of all.

Acknowledgement

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