
What Makes an Inclusive Teacher? Can Fish Climb Trees? Mapping the European Agency Profile of Inclusive Teachers to the English System

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ABSTRACT This article examines whether or not teachers working in an inherently exclusive education system can in fact be 'inclusive teachers'. The author draws on work done over the past three years in a pan-European Teacher Education project highly committed to notions of social and educational cohesion and equity, and challenges both fixed and hierarchical notions of ability, valuing all learners equally. The development of a pan-European Profile of Inclusive Teachers serves as an indirect challenge to the legitimacy of politicians and executive bodies in England for lack of cohesion and failing to establish some kind of equity and inclusion for young people.

*Everybody is a genius, but if you ask
fish to climb trees, they will feel stupid.*
Albert Einstein [1]

Teacher Education for Inclusion: the European Agency project

This article is informed by three years' international work with the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (EADSNE) on the Teacher Education for Inclusion project (TE41)[2]. The project was concerned with the way that 'all teachers are prepared via their initial teacher education to be inclusive'. The project set out to identify the essential skills, knowledge and understanding, and the attitudes and values needed by everyone entering the teaching profession, regardless of the subject, specialism or age range they will teach or the type of school they will work in. This research was concerned with the inclusion of *all* children and the relationship of inclusion to achievement in

the classroom. The *Profile of Inclusive Teachers* (EADSNE, 2012)[3] is a clear statement of the importance of initial teacher education and the quality of teachers as crucial elements in the reform of teacher education and of teaching in schools. Its central aim was to develop teachers who were fully professional in their outlook and subject knowledge and who are also able to understand and deal effectively with a diverse range of concerns such as gender, disability, ethnicity, socio-economic conditions, and civil and human rights. The Profile is a seedbed for developing discussion with respect to the professional identity and status of teachers, 'inclusive competences' and new curriculum designs. The project itself addressed the following key questions:

1. What kind of teachers do we need for an inclusive society in a twenty-first century school?
2. What are the essential teacher competences for inclusive education?

It is not a prescription for Initial Teacher Education (ITE) course content but is concerned with the development of professional core values and competencies. It raises some serious questions and challenges. For example, 'How can a teacher be inclusive in a society and education system that accedes to fixed ability thinking and is endemically exclusive?'. Or, 'How does a teacher maintain a principled professional approach when teacher education is in danger of becoming no more than a rite of passage?'. Currently the aims of education in the United Kingdom (UK) are often spelt out solely in terms of economic utility and relevance (Pring & Pollard, 2011). The *Profile of Inclusive Teachers*, underpinned by notions of social and educational cohesion and equity, explored the way teachers are educated in order to be able to promote social and educational inclusion.

This article describes the application to teaching and teacher education of this broad, international model of inclusive teachers in terms of ideology (driving a progressive movement) and value-orientation. In contrast, it outlines endemic problems in the UK education system such as competition for 'glittering prizes' (Raphael, 1976) and deterministic assumptions of ability. Two seemingly opposite ideologies (the 'universal standards-raising' political and executive lobby versus ideological inclusionists) seem to be the cause of understandable and increasing tensions in the system. Strangely, they both see their opposing political and ideological positions as 'panaceas' to solve broad social problems. Ideological notions of inclusive practice associated with this pan-European model (valuing all learners equally) are compatible with many teachers' own instincts and the needs of young people, but incompatible with fixed and hierarchical notions of ability. The argument throughout the article is that continuing to rely on tired and out-dated industrial models of education directly contributes to inequalities and conflict in a post-industrial society.

Inclusion and Inclusive Teachers – not a soft option

A key issue raised in the European Agency project country reports (EADSNE, 2011a) is that of terminology and how to acknowledge the complexity of the notion of inclusion as 'a principled approach to education and society' (Ainscow et al, 2006). Inclusion policies have been associated with broad values and principles such as access and quality; equity and social justice; democratic values and participation; and a balance between unity and diversity in the community of learning. Haug (2003) suggests that there are two levels of definition – one concerning ideology and value-orientation and a second dealing with how these influence educational practice (that is increasing fellowship, participation, democratisation and providing benefit for all). Inclusion, then, concerns issues of gender, ethnicity, class, social conditions, health and human rights encompassing universal involvement, access, participation and achievement (Ouane, 2008).

There is an increasingly diverse range of students in schools today. Yet it seems that the culture of fixed ability standards is constantly being resurrected. This culture is forcing many teachers and teacher educators into making difficult and sometimes unwelcome choices. Culturally, for many educators 'diversity' may exclusively be referring to linguistic and cultural diversity and high-performing students (De Vroey & Mardulier, 2010). Operationally, inclusion is defined as good education for *all* children and this includes all those who are at risk of exclusion and in need of a higher level of support, for a variety of reasons, including mental health, emotional difficulties, learning disabilities or social disadvantage. In 2011, a European Parliament Hearing 'Young Views on Inclusive Education' (2011b) (involving 31 delegations of young people from 27 countries) gave some interesting, often sophisticated and occasionally surprising perspectives from students themselves:

Inclusive education is a wide approach; it is not only about good grades, it is about good social contacts and relationships. School is more than learning from books – it is about social relationships. Inclusive education is not just about school, it is also about the wider community. (Bethany, Gemma, Sophie)

I am in a 'normal' class and my life at school is adapted to my needs. I benefit from a computer, a bigger table and transport to go to school and come back home. I have been very lucky with my teachers. But some teachers don't want to understand; if it is not in the curriculum, they don't want to help and adapt the programme. (Lise)

Children are labelling each other for being in a special programme. A problem of inclusive education is connected with all social problems. (Ingre)

Bullying is a problem in mainstream, as well as a lack of acceptance.
(Leanne)

Teachers have to be open to understanding what the student wants
and how to support him. (Nana-Marie)
You can be good at one subject and bad at another one, but the
criteria should not stop you studying certain areas. (Daniel)

A useful description sees 'inclusive education' as the core of the international movement 'Education for All' (EFA) (Operti, 2010). It includes notions of equity, being about ensuring access to primary education, but goes further in the UNESCO statement:

The re-orientation of education systems towards more inclusive and just societies, therefore, requires addressing exclusion in its diverse manifestations, while simultaneously taking a departure from deeply held assumptions about education and society.
(UNESCO, 2012, p. 1)

The World Declaration on Education for All, adopted in Jomtien, Thailand (1990), set out an overall vision of universalising access to education for all children, youth and adults, and promoting equity. The key word here is 'equity', meaning fairness in a system that gives young people a fair and equitable chance no matter what their background. Inclusion is about transformation of education systems at large, not just about individual schools or classrooms, or even university teacher education programmes or curricula. It holds that equity and quality go hand in hand; lifelong learning, sustainable development and equal access to learning are among its main aspirations. This sets up a challenge within an 'exclusive', competitive and hierarchical education system such as ours. It speaks of the type of society we want to live in, and that the curriculum will develop according to that decision. Therefore it is a political discussion.

Problems, Principles and Shifting the Status Quo

There are four cornerstones to the EADSNE project (in the *Profile of Inclusive Teachers*, 2012). The following section of this article gives a brief account of each.

Personal Professional Development

Teaching is a learning activity and teachers take responsibility for their own lifelong learning. Initial teacher education is seen as a foundation for on-going professional learning and development, based on a principled, rights-based approach to education, underpinned by a number of central and professional values and

attitudes that can be upheld in the face of challenges in the classroom and in society. (EADSNE, 2012, p. 15)

The development of the *Profile of Inclusive Teachers* (EADSNE, 2012) has concerned itself with the 'authority' of teachers as learners themselves and with the notion that teachers' continuing professional development is absolutely vital to establishing and extending their professionalism and expertise. This is in direct contrast to superficial 'training' designed to help new teachers 'survive' their first year in school and fit in with the particular school culture they encounter. Schools are almost becoming like football clubs with short-lived managers in the invidiously competitive situation of maintaining a position in the league tables. Valuing forced high performance in the short-term and keeping up to a minimum of 'average' in limited national assessments force new teachers into instrumentalist short-term activity. In doing so teachers are often asked to sacrifice longer term principles that establish their knowledge and authority. In Denmark, 'Relational Competence' (Juil & Jensen, 2002) has become a way to work with inclusive education. It is the ability to 'see' the child on his or her own terms and adjust behaviour in accordance therewith, without giving up the leadership, authenticity and the ability and willingness of the adult to take full responsibility for the quality of the relationship.

In the UK, there appears to be a lack of political will to share a dynamic vision of professional development that balances theory with practice (Northcott, 2011). This severely limits the kinds of learning and teaching experienced by student teachers. Whilst the practical skills and competencies of teaching are important, theoretical knowledge and broad understanding are key to teachers' ability to solve problems based on their own confident understanding of the nature and context of teaching and learning. Teacher 'education' (not just 'training') should give teachers the underlying knowledge (philosophy, history, sociology and psychology of education) that enables professionalism and a proper understanding of the basis of learning. They should have time to understand the place of school in history and society and engage with their own fundamental philosophy of teaching and learning to see them through their teaching experiences. In the Standing Committee for the Education and Training of Teachers (SCETT) response to the coalition government's White Paper for Schools (November, 2010), Hayes (2011) points to the lack of a political and social perspective that amounts to a de-contextualising of teacher education:

Though many are unaware of it, there is little left of what traditionally constituted teacher 'education' in initial teacher training. Teacher education once meant studying the field of knowledge that constituted education as an academic subject involving the study of the distinct disciplines of philosophy, history, sociology and psychology of education. (Hayes, 2010, p. 19)

Valuing Learner Diversity

Differences between learners are considered as a resource and an asset to education. Teachers need to understand and be competent in their conceptions of inclusive education and their view of differences in learners. (EADSNE, 2012, p. 10)

The pan-European consensus on valuing learner diversity, achieved through the profile development, challenges the current ethos and pressures on schools when competing for league table positions. A teenage secondary pupil recently said to me that she felt like a statistic, only there to pump up the league table results; she also felt pushed into decisions about which subjects to take at GCSE. Valuing learner diversity has practical consequences for schools. Children are excluded for a variety of reasons but amongst them is their effect on the school statistics. Young teachers need to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the system – not just accept the status quo – if they are to reach and motivate pupils experiencing disadvantage or deprivation. They need a solid foundation of professional ethics based on respect in social relations with all pupils and concern for the presence (access to education), participation and engagement (quality of the learning experience) and achievement (processes as well as outcomes) for all learners.

Pushing for uniformity, rather than attending to diversity, is driven by the fixed ability ethos. Ability labelling and grouping by ability immediately reinforce the feeling of value or worthlessness in a significant proportion of young people (OECD, 2010). These practices restrict the range of learning opportunities to which individual pupils are exposed and encourage schools and teachers to privilege psychometric knowledge of young people over the knowledge acquired through day-to-day classroom interaction (Hart et al, 2004). They perpetuate the limitations and biases built into existing curricula which have become overloaded and dysfunctional, and fail to meet the needs of many young people (Pring & Pollard, 2011). Traditional methods and competitive standards often focus on exposing and remedying deficits and expose some pupils, particularly those in difficult socio-economic circumstances or with diverse abilities and backgrounds, to a pattern of failure.

Teachers do a great job in often very difficult circumstances to meet the needs of all their pupils ... Teachers must also have the freedom to respond adequately to the needs of children and young people at whatever level they are learning. Currently the National Curriculum can act as a barrier against such freedoms. (Blower, 2010)

Supporting All Learners

Teachers need high expectations for all learners' achievements and to be competent in promoting the academic, practical, social and emotional learning of all learners. (EADSNE, 2012, p. 12)

The current ethos of instrumentalism, typified in the UK by a behavioural checklist of teachers' standards, appears to esteem only 'what works' and enforces conformity rather than knowledgeable discourse. This perspective is limited to a technical view of what teachers must do and is also de-contextualised. It is in direct contrast to both the EADSNE (2012) model and the views of teachers themselves (ATL, 2012):

The teaching profession is a learning profession, continually developing deep knowledge of: learning; how the brain works; subjects and the relationships between them; pupils, as individuals, and their interests; and the broader context (political, economic, technological, social, cultural and environmental).
(ATL, 2012, p. 1)

Fixed ability thinking legitimates a narrow view of curriculum, learning and achievement. The hierarchy of vocational and technical courses as low level, and academic ones as high level, establishes and rationalises the idea of an educational class system. The *Profile of Inclusive Teachers* proposes a wider vision of education that respects and rewards the practical, as well as the academic, the informal and experiential, as well as formal learning, and that draws upon the wide range of expertise within the community. This vision is in keeping with the broad view of inclusion proposed earlier and is more likely to reward hitherto excluded groups of young people. Working with teachers on their professional development over many years, it has become clear that they feel less able to foster progress with a diverse range of pupils due to the constraints of the system.

Starting teachers need to learn effective teaching approaches in heterogeneous classes. In terms of teachers' skills, attitudes and knowledge, there is a complex underpinning of attitudes, beliefs and skills that form part of the teachers' professional identity (Cornwall & Walter, 2006). For example, recognition of social as well as academic learning; enabling learners to be active decision-makers; recognising parents and families as an important resource for all learners; teaching and learning as a partnership not a power relationship; understanding child development patterns of all kinds linked to recognising and applying different models of learning. In addition to this, developing autonomous learners; recognising that learners' abilities are not fixed and all learners have the capacity to learn and develop; having both theoretical and practical knowledge to engage in curriculum reform as appropriate to students experiencing learning difficulties. Finally, professional attitudes of teachers should encompass fundamental beliefs in the school community as a social environment for young people and the importance of each learner as an autonomous decision-maker whose learning depends on a personalised assessment of his or her strengths, not an emphasis on failures and weaknesses.

The work of Kosnik and Beck (2009) outlines seven key elements of pre-service preparation for teachers which includes: programme planning, assessment, classroom organisation and community; inclusive education; subject

content and pedagogy; professional identity and vision for teaching. The current standards based competitive agenda that schools must follow undermines teachers' expertise in curriculum, assessment and pedagogy and is a feature of political prescription of teacher practice (ATL, 2012). The current culture of limited, prescriptive behavioural (so-called 'hard') targets is causing disaffection and fragmentation of the system. The pejoratively labelled 'soft' targets are in fact the glue that holds both a classroom and a society together. The frameworks of entitlement to public education should reflect broader aims, such as understanding of the physical, social and economic worlds; practical and economic capability; moral understanding and development; a sense of community, collaboration and justice; satisfaction and fulfilment in learning and motivation to continue learning even into later life.

Working with Others

[This] involves collaboration and teamwork. Essential approaches for all teachers and the areas of competence within this core value relate to working with parents and families and working with a range of other educational professionals. (EADSNE, 2010, p. 14)

A teacher's professional identity is crucial to his or her effectiveness. It is not all 'taught' directly. It is also absorbed from the sociopolitical culture in which ITE exists and which schools are subject to. Student teachers study in the context of a failed political ideology. Despite the minimal raising of standards, there is still a 'normal distribution' of scores, albeit shifted slightly towards higher 'scores', and thus still the same spread of winners and losers. High scores mean a lot to individual young people at the top but little in the wider scheme of things, especially for those in the middle or bottom. Based on sociological research identifying poverty and lack of education as a vicious cycle needing to be broken (e.g. Sparkes, 1999; Hobcraft, 2000; Murray & Phillips, 2001), politicians of all colours have consistently pushed the notion that education is the key to opportunity. But this has been largely ineffective because it ignores the social context and reinforces failure. It is mostly based on the needs of industry, and not to do with individual achievement and growth, equity or social cohesion (Gillard, 2005).

While educators may understand that not all learners are the same, and that their needs are diverse, few teachers and teacher educators in England currently feel confident in accommodating these differences in their classrooms and within an ITE curriculum of competing priorities (Richards, 2010).

In *Education for All*, a publication with many challenges to our existing education system, Pring & Pollard (2011) point to a series of facts that illustrate the failure of the 'push' model of social change and the promise of opportunity through increasing so-called standards. People from ethnic minorities now number 5,000,000 and the more disadvantaged (socially, economically or linguistically) a child, the lower the level of educational attainment. The

percentage of 17 year olds in employment has reduced from 60% to 30% in 15 years and 10% of young people suffer from psychiatric disorders; 60,000 are in care, 40,000 are teenage mothers, and 3000 are in penal custody. Half the prison population do not have the skills required by 96% of jobs. Educational failure can often be related to home contexts and to the need for greater support for parents

Working with parents and families involves respect for cultural and social backgrounds and establishing good communicative and interpersonal abilities to maintain effective learning support. Working with a range of other educational professionals entails recognising that inclusive and effective professional practice cannot be achieved in isolation and that collaboration and professional dialogue are vital. Looking beyond the confines of one classroom or one school means that teachers can utilise the whole community of learning through collaboration with other professionals and also by applying theory through research and shared evidence bases. The former does not happen effectively yet; the latter is now being downgraded and threatened by simplistic social and emotional measurement and out-dated academic curricula.

Can Fish Climb Trees?

This question, based on words popularly attributed to Einstein, is a way of conceptualising the problems that teachers have in trying to reconcile the unrealistic and oppressive sociopolitical demands with the daily round of teaching children and young people. Inclusive teachers are people who have deeply held beliefs about the nature of education, the nature of children's learning and an understanding of historical and social perspectives and political influences on their work. Inclusive teachers will also demonstrate a deeper ability to undertake challenging tasks and a maturity that may not always be present after only three years of an initial degree, at 21 years of age. There are good arguments for adopting the Finnish model, in which teachers are not considered fully educated until they have completed a Master's Degree independently designed and monitored by the universities. They are given time to assimilate the required knowledge and experience over a five year period. This is done with full government support, but without interference or fixed ability testing in schools. The quality of their education system testifies to their success.

Pan-European figures (OECD, 2010), showing the correlation of wide income differentials and lack of social mobility across countries in Europe, indicate that the 'push' model of raising fixed standards is not an educational panacea for all of society's ills. The United Kingdom falls well below the OECD 'average' and is 39th out of 65 OECD countries in a table dominated by South Asian and Scandinavian countries. Britain is amongst the most unequal of developed countries, it is also one of the most socially stagnant. Conservative and Labour politicians have been claiming to foster the aspirations of individuals at all levels of society for three decades and yet social mobility is

actually declining and lower than in much of northern Europe (Green, 2009). No wonder many teachers feel like fish climbing trees.

Over many years, teaching has been influenced by renowned theorists who have investigated the different methods learners use to conceptualise ideas and proved the argument that individuals do not learn in the same way or at the same pace. Consequently, contemporary education has been given a foundation to radically change instructional practices, the fixed curriculum and the ways that assessment and progress are measured. There is now a massive evidence base to justify a movement in this country towards what is proposed in the *Profile of Inclusive Teachers*. The pan-European consensus on how to develop teacher education with this inclusive purpose should be seen as an irresistible stimulus to radical change in the English education system.

Notes

- [1] The quotation is popularly attributed to Albert Einstein in a number of books (e.g. Reavis & Garamella, 1940; Kelly, 2004) and very widely on the Internet, but there's no apparent evidence that he ever said it. However, it does express neatly the sentiments of this article.
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Kelly, M. (2004) *The Rhythm of Life: living every day with passion and purpose*, p. 80. New York: Fireside.
- [2] Further information on the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (EADSNE) and the Teacher Education for Inclusion project (TE41) can be found by visiting <http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/teacher-education-for-inclusion>
- [3] The *Profile of Inclusive Teachers* is now available to download in 22 languages from the EADSNE website - <http://www.european-agency.org/publications/ereports/te4i-profile/teacher-education-for-inclusion-profile-of-inclusive-teachers>

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