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Bridging the gap between inclusive policy and inclusive culture in secondary schools

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Organisational support from a number of levels needs to be in place if schools are going to achieve success in developing an inclusive school culture. Support at policy level is frequently in place, however the gap between policy and practice is a continuing challenge. In this in-depth study of a secondary school Suzanne Carrington and John Elkins offer insights into the culture of an inclusive school and the processes of translating inclusive policy to inclusive practice.

Introduction

Personnel who visit a range of schools frequently comment on the variation in atmosphere or culture of different schools. These differences exist because in each school organisation there is a defined group of people who interact in regular and structured ways. School staff and students have collective social understandings that influence their actions and these have developed over time. This article aims to discuss the translation of inclusive policy to inclusive practice in a secondary school. A case study of an inclusive school is presented with the intent of characterising its culture, policies and practices so that the reader can see 'beyond the surface policy rhetoric to what is actually going on within [the] classroom' (Clark, Dyson, Milward and Robson, 1999, p. 173). The authors make recommendations for the development of inclusive culture in schools that may assist school administrators and teachers to bridge the gap between policy and practice.

Inclusive school culture

Inclusive education signifies much more than the presence of students with disabilities in regular classrooms. It has developed from a long history of educational innovation and represents school improvement on many levels for all students (Skrtic, Sailor and Gee, 1996). It is about celebrating difference in dignified ways (Barton, 1997). Above all, it is about a philosophy of acceptance where all people are valued and treated with respect. Indeed, one author has argued that inclusion is unending, so that there is no such thing as an inclusive school (Ballard, 1995).

School culture can be defined as:

... the underground stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals that has built up over time as people work together, solve problems, and confront challenges. This set of informal expectations and values shapes how people think, feel, and act in schools. This highly enduring web of influence binds the school together and makes it special.

(Peterson and Deal, 1998, p. 28)

School culture includes collective understandings among members that are related to their particular roles, while individual perspectives direct specific behaviours. It is evident that the culture of a school affects the manner in which schools operate and the way in which the problem of translating inclusive policy into inclusive practice is solved (Ainscow, 1996; Carrington, 1999; Carrington and Elkins, in press; Dyson, 1992; Sebba and Ainscow, 1996).

In the past, researchers have made suggestions about what is needed for schools to respond effectively to the needs of diverse learners. Some of these ideas have been incorporated into four themes for discussion in this paper: collaborative problem solving; inclusive beliefs; commitment to reflection, vision, and change; and planning and teaching for diverse learners. A field-based example will be used to present data to report on the implementation of inclusive policy in one secondary school, reflecting the four themes.

Collaborative problem solving

With the current focus on inclusive schooling, opportunities for staff to solve problems collaboratively have emerged when students have not experienced success in school. An interest in providing better learning opportunities for these students may assist teachers in understanding how the school curriculum and school organisation can be improved to benefit all members of the class.

Time and opportunities for formerly separated general, special and other educational and community-based staff to unite and collaborate in problem solving has been argued to be the most effective remedy for the organisational challenge of creating an inclusive school (Fullan, 1991; Glasser, 1990; Villa, Thousand, Nevin and Malgeri, 1996). The opportunity to discuss programmes, assessment practices, resources and organisation of activities with other teachers in similar situations ensures good ideas are shared, and increases the probability that solutions may be found to difficult problems encountered in teaching a diverse group of students. Collaboration is essential because the invention of new ideas requires reflective problem solving through discourse (Skrtic et al., 1996). However, new organisational practices may not be consistent with teachers' beliefs, knowledge and skills in teaching (Carrington, 1999).

Inclusive beliefs

It has been suggested that teachers working in successful inclusive schools have an explicit value base that provides a platform for inclusive practices (Carrington, 1999; Salisbury, Palombaro and Hollowood, 1993; York-Barr, Schultz, Doyle, Kronberg and Crossett, 1996). In an inclusive school, an inclusive philosophy will be evident in school documents such as the school prospectus. In addition, classroom teachers will believe that exceptional students belong in the regular class and have confidence that they will learn in that situation (Porter, 1995).

Results from some studies suggest that educators have strong beliefs regarding inclusive practice that do not reflect a commitment to the inclusive education movement (for example, Forlin, Douglas and Hattie, 1996). It seems that approaches to teaching and learning encompass a polarised conceptualisation of children with diverse educational needs that affect the beliefs and attitudes of those who interact with the children. These theoretical perspectives can be described as extremes of a continuum. The perspectives have been given a number of names and can be categorised under the headings: the traditional (medical) model; and the inclusive model. 'These two approaches derive from different paradigms, each of which defines students and defines teacher responsibilities in different ways' (Ballard, 1995, p. 1). The language of the paradigms creates different kinds of human relationships and teaching practice so that inclusion cannot be achieved by simply modifying traditional and exclusionary ideas and organisational strategies. It has been argued that the two paradigms are so different that they cannot coexist (Ballard, 1995). Teachers' positive or negative attitudes towards inclusion will affect practice (Bender, Vail and Scott, 1995; Forlin and Cole, 1993) and school culture (Carrington, 1999).

Commitment to reflection, vision, and change

An inclusive school culture must also be committed to the improvement of strategies, programmes and use of available resources (Porter, 1995). The factors described here as necessary for an inclusive approach are similar to the characteristics of a 'moving school', which are explained by Rosenholtz (1989). A moving school is continually seeking to develop and refine its responses to the challenges it meets. The theme of reflection, vision, and change is also evident in a model described by Dyson (1992). In Dyson's model, a role for the learning support coordinator is described as an 'Organisational Inquirer'. Questions such as 'What are we doing?', 'How effective is it?' and 'Why are we doing it?' are the focus of this kind of approach. This enables opportunities for teachers to question existing practice, review performance, encourage experimentation and work across boundaries.

Planning and teaching for diverse learners

Inclusive schooling will require significant innovation and change in daily instructional approaches so that students' educational priorities will need to vary. A single instructional method is not effective for all students and teaching environments. With the need to teach a diverse group of students, the learners rather than the 'content' become the focus of teacher planning.

One example of a changing perspective on instructional practice encourages teachers to draw on a range of instructional approaches and provide opportunities for choice in tasks and activities, so that learning will be enhanced (Mercer, Lane, Jordan, Allsopp and Eisele, 1996). These transformations in educational approaches are consistent with paradigm-level changes in how we pursue, organise, and utilise knowledge (Skrtic et al., 1996) so there will be a need for flexible objectives and multiple methods for students to access and express knowledge and skills (Giangreco, Dennis, Cloninger, Edelman and Schattman, 1993; Stainback and Stainback, 1989). The instructional arrangement selected by the teacher can influence the opportunities available for students to demonstrate their abilities (Udvari-Solner, 1996). Examples of these arrangements include: whole class instruction; teacher-directed small class instruction; one-to-one teacher-student instruction; peer tutors; cooperative learning groups; and independent learning.

Students at all levels should have opportunities for meaningful involvement in class activities where there is multi-level instruction and choices in materials and tasks.

An activity-based curriculum where students can actively participate in learning experiences can focus on process and content. An active approach to learning provides opportunities for students and teachers to engage in discussion and collaboration.

A field-based example

The notion of 'the school' is complex and therefore a school cannot be described as 'any one thing' (Clark et al., 1999). However, to facilitate discussion, the school in this case study has been described as inclusive in organisation. The study focused on Yorkton Secondary School (fictional name), a coeducational high school in Australia. The case study data reported in this paper were collected within the context of a larger research project.

Initial contact was made with a group of secondary special education teachers (approximately 20) at a regional in-service session led by the first author. The content of the session focused on the changes in special education and models of support for students and teachers. Plans for the current study were discussed at the seminar and a number of special education teachers expressed interest at this stage. After visiting schools and speaking with special education staff and principals, Yorkton was chosen due to the characteristics relative to the phenomena under study (inclusive model of support). The following reasons also influenced the choice of school:

- the principal was interested in the project and gave the researcher unlimited access to the staff (as long as participation by individual teachers was voluntary)
- the location of the school meant that the researcher could spend extended time in the school.

The Yorkton community consists of a diversity of socioeconomic, ethnic and cultural backgrounds and the school prospectus reports that approximately 12% of students come from non-English speaking countries. The school offers a wide range of subject offerings in both the senior and junior school, which includes vocation-oriented subjects such as English communication, computer studies, hospitality practices, tourism, industrial skills, and trade and business mathematics. Present student numbers are approximately 500 and there are 40 teachers in the school. The community is very supportive of the school, with parents involved on all committees.

At the time of this study, the school had a range of students in the school who required assistance in learning. Some of these students had English as a second language and others had difficulties with the regular secondary school curriculum. The school also had what the special education

teacher described as a 'small group of special needs students'. This group of students included two students who had been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome and three students who had an intellectual disability. The special education teacher also described a group of students who had been identified as having reading difficulties, who were receiving special support. By contrast, the principal also described a group of students who were high achievers in the school.

Data collection and analysis

The researcher attended the school for one day a week for four months so that trust and rapport was built with the respondents and so there was sufficient opportunity to develop conceptions and interpretations. The principal, the special education teachers, and four teachers were interviewed to gain information about the school, the population of students and staff. Detailed information was gathered on the model of service delivery for learning support from both the principal and the special education teachers. The participants were also asked questions regarding their personal views and the collective values of the school in relation to inclusive schooling. A semi-structured format was used in all interviews so that participants were able to speak about issues that were perceived as important. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Observation of teachers in the classroom and in the school environment presents a means of manageable analytical observation of classroom and school processes and interactions, while allowing some validation of information collected through interviews. The four teachers at this school were observed teaching four forty-minute lessons (16 lessons). For this study, the researcher took the role of privileged observer (Wolcott, 1988), where the observer did not assume the role of a participant, but had access to the activities and practices in the school and classroom setting. The aim was for the researcher to be less threatening to the teacher in the classroom. The researcher had the opportunity to develop some rapport with the teacher in the teaching context so that examples of class practice in assessment, programming and communication with staff and parents were utilised in exploring key issues that were discussed in a second interview with the four teachers. For example, in the second interviews, the researcher was able to recall certain events or conversations to use as a catalyst for obtaining further information. In addition, informal observations and interactions with staff and students in a variety of situations (staff rooms, staff morning teas, classrooms) across the school environment enabled the researcher to better understand the culture of the school. The researcher maintained a diary of notes and informal observations during the study period at both schools. All observational data were recorded for later analysis.

The method of constant comparison advocated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) was used in the analysis of the interviews and the observations in the study. This strategy combines inductive category coding with a comparison of all data and incidents. Interview and observation data were imported into Q.S.R. NUD*IST (Non-numerical, Unstructured Data Indexing, Searching and Theorising) (Richards and Richards, 1994), a software program which facilitates this type of analysis. Findings are discussed under the four themes: collaborative problem solving; inclusive beliefs; commitment to reflection, vision, and change; and planning and teaching for diverse learners.

Evidence of collaborative problem solving

Shared experiences and discussions were taking place at Yorkton Secondary School, not just about the students who had disabilities and learning difficulties but about the full range of students and their learning needs. The special education teacher had facilitated this process by initially focusing on the needs of students who were achieving at a higher level. She organised seminars for the staff, where they considered different learning styles of students and planned for choice in learning tasks and assessment activities. Staff were provided with time away from their regular teaching duties to be involved in these professional development opportunities with colleagues.

Inclusive models of supporting students with learning difficulties rely on in-class support for students, rather than withdrawal of students from the regular classroom. The special educator at Yorkton worked with regular teachers in classrooms where the teachers needed her expertise or help. Sometimes she demonstrated strategies such as group work, or she taught collaboratively with the teacher. She planned with teachers and encouraged them to consider different learning styles and abilities and she advised on choices in assignment tasks. This support seemed to be

flexible on a needs basis, allowed for more collaboration between regular teachers and special education staff, and enabled all students to benefit from the collective expertise of the teaching staff.

The special educator had regular meetings with members of the administration team including the heads of subject departments. The principal saw this as a way of ensuring information was passed to the teaching staff of the school. He explained:

We have regular meetings with the special education teacher, the deputy principal and the heads of departments. Teachers are indirectly supported there because they actually meet the head of department regularly and talk about the student needs, and talk about the strategies they may employ.

It was evident that regular collaborative meetings and planning sessions with teaching staff were organised by the special educator and were supported by the administration of the school. Funding, release time for teachers, acknowledgement and support from the principal, and collaboration between special education and regular education at Yorkton are the same key issues that were suggested by the University of Kansas Center for Research in Learning as being critical in the development of an inclusive model (Tralli, Colombo, Deshler and Schumaker, 1996).

The principal's support for the teachers at the school was evidenced by the provision of release time to support the development of new teaching techniques and curriculum modifications. The principal stated:

I think that teachers are very aware of the mix of cultures, abilities and backgrounds of their students and their classes and attempt to cater for all of those and in doing that obviously need assistance.

Teachers were pleased with the release time provided by the administration to plan units of teaching that acknowledged the diverse needs of the students in the school, and requested more of this type of assistance to collaborate and plan with the special educator who was guiding this process.

The special educator aimed to achieve better learning outcomes for all students at the school by collaborating with a range of staff on professional development issues. In fact, an important role for this teacher in the school was the organisation and running of professional development activities. She elaborated on this topic as follows:

I probably have done most of the in-service that the staff have had ... either delivered or organised over the last three years. From behaviour management through to ... in-class support for teachers for showing them strategies ... learning style issues, multiple intelligence issues, things about thinking, Bloom's taxonomy, and assessment issues, and differentiating instruction.

Because some of the teachers at Yorkton were not working in isolation but were collaborating on teaching and discussing views on learning styles, teaching and assessment, teachers had opportunities to see that there are multiple ways of knowing, and appreciated perspectives that were different from their own (Harrington, 1994). Through these types of experiences, teachers reflected on their own teaching practice. The common language used in collaboration makes it easier, then, for teachers to speak about their own views on teaching and learning. The importance of using appropriate language that recognised the rights of all people was noted in one section of an interview with the special education teacher:

We tend to talk about them [the students] as if they're nincompoops because they can't do something and I wanted to open that up to have a look at the kind of language we use here.

This was an issue the special educator was particularly aware of and she had raised it previously with the staff for discussion. The language that people use in society contributes to the social construction of disability and is an important consideration in the creation of an inclusive school.

Evidence of inclusive beliefs

Data indicated that staff were slowly accepting the changing focus of the school, from a strong academic and meritocratic focus, to a school that provided an appropriate education curriculum to meet the needs of all of its students. It seems that the diverse multicultural and home backgrounds of the students at Yorkton Secondary School required teachers to think differently about their expectations in teaching and learning. One teacher stated in her first interview:

I think that the attitude should be to say, times are a' changing. Parents have different expectations and so they should, we are out of the dark ages now, we are about to go into the 21st century, these students are coming in and our job is to then push higher, to address those [issues].

Evidence of a change in attitudes and beliefs is also evident in this quote:

I think the staff attitude is changing over the last few years towards much more acceptance of these kids and much more acceptance of the courses they do. I am pleased to say that you can teach old dogs new tricks by the fact we are looking at the staff coming around to that type of thinking. Previously we would still be deluding ourselves to trying to push the academic nature of the school. I think it has just been forced upon us.

These statements indicate that there have been some changes for teachers and students. It seems that the school used to be quite academic in focus in earlier days but is now shifting towards catering for a diversity in abilities and cultures. One teacher provided evidence of her inclusive beliefs in the following way:

I think it works, I'm a bit of an advocate for inclusion because I think that the other students need to know that there are a variety of people in the community, and that everybody has to interact socially with everyone else, so it is important for students.

Inclusive beliefs were also evident in the principal's words:

We have grown to believe that we are an example of a public school and all students regardless of their ability or backgrounds have the right to be here and to be taught to the best of our ability.

Our major values [are concerned with] parents and the support of all students. We have tagged the school with 'Encouraging Excellence' and we go to great lengths to define what we mean by excellence, as every student achieving to the best of their ability and enjoying learning. That is our aim, so our values are that all students, regardless of their ability, are given every opportunity to achieve to their potential.

All of the class teachers in the study believed that they were responsible for all of the students in their class. This was an important value that emerged at Yorkton Secondary School and influenced the teaching and support model in the school. The teaching staff realised that the current educational curriculum needed to be modified to meet the needs of their diverse student population. The staff were committed to finding creative ways to develop a unique approach. They were obviously satisfied with their progress so far, but realised that there was still much work to be done to move forward.

An inclusive philosophy was evident in the school prospectus of Yorkton Secondary School. For example, the school is described in the school prospectus as a community of students, teaching and non-teaching staff, parents and friends. The prospectus states that the school cannot function without the full cooperation and participation of all those who are part of it. More specifically, the school prospectus states that school members are required to support values and beliefs which include:

Responsible membership of society - students should be aware of their rights and responsibilities in our society. They should show tolerance and respect for others. Teachers, parents and community members should accept that they are role models.

The way teachers receive and react to school policies will obviously affect teaching practice and school culture. These factors will influence the way students with different learning needs receive their education in the school environment.

Evidence of commitment to reflection, vision, and change

Opportunities for special education staff and regular teachers to work together, reflect on practice and evaluate personal views on social justice issues indicated that the school was a `moving

school', as described by Rosenholtz (1989). The principal drew attention to the focus on reflection, vision, and change in the school:

We are always trying to do better but we are trying to find out how. If [the special educator] goes to a professional development exercise and comes back with some new ideas, if we can support it, we are very happy to do so and a new process comes in.

Because staff were working together to solve problems and provide better ways of working with students, they evaluated teaching practices and school organisation and often considered the curriculum and organisation for all students and staff in the school. Ainscow supported this idea by saying:

It is through shared experiences that colleagues can help one another to articulate what they currently do and define what they might like to do. It is also the means whereby taken-for-granted assumptions about particular groups of pupils can be subjected to mutual critique (Ainscow, 1998, p. 17).

The special educator at the school could be described as an 'Organisational Inquirer' (Dyson, 1992) because she was questioning current practice and looking for opportunities to encourage experimentation and work across the boundaries. Her future plans were clear in the following quotes:

I suppose what I'm really wanting teachers to do is to look at using the strategies a little more ... Most of the things they do are just giving [students] a bit of extra assistance in class or they might modify something as they go, so we need to really nurture that next step ... How are we going to plan to meet this diverse group and ... how we move on to that next step.

It was evident that staff at Yorkton Secondary School were committed to the improvement of strategies, programmes and use of available resources and, in addition, could be described by Weick (1985) as the type of people who are confident and who have the skills to convince themselves and others to adopt new practices that introduce change in an organisation. The values and beliefs embedded in new ideas and practice helped create new possibilities for staff and students. Porter (1995) suggested that this commitment to improvement and progress was necessary in the establishment of an inclusive school.

Evidence of planning and teaching for diverse learners

Some staff were already using a range of effective strategies for teaching diverse learners in the regular classroom and it was evident that some teachers were working together with a shared vision for change in educational practice for the school. The model of support for students with different learning needs at Yorkton Secondary School included a broad range of flexible alternatives for students and teachers. These included teacher aide support in class, streamed classes, non-streamed classes with class teacher support, in-class support from a special educator, and small tutor groups. Some students missed a subject so that they were able to access extra support, and many students were able to enrol in vocational subjects that have been described previously. It was interesting to note that there was no 'resource room' or 'learning support centre' at Yorkton Secondary School. The special educator and the teacher aide who provided support for the students were based in a regular staff room with a range of teachers in other subject areas. If students and staff needed to work together, they worked in a spare classroom along the corridor. The fact that there was no identifiable special education centre where students were withdrawn meant there was no stigma of being a 'special kid'. Dyson (1990) suggested that as long as special needs departments exist in schools, they will generate the perception of a group of children as special and as someone else's responsibility. The flexibility of support and variety in teaching approaches to meet the needs of students and teachers at Yorkton Secondary School ensured that more help was available to all students. More specific examples of the range of strategies observed and described will now be discussed.

Three out of the four classroom teachers suggested that they considered the range of student needs in planning their lessons, and were observed using a range of strategies associated with effective teaching for students with diverse learning needs. This is a major step towards inclusive schooling, when teachers are considering the needs of the students in their class in the planning stage. Mercer et al. (1996) stated that if teachers can plan to use a range of instructional

approaches and provide opportunities for choice in tasks and activities, then learning will be enhanced.

The four teachers at Yorkton were observed providing literacy support for students in their classrooms. This included a range of strategies that enabled all of the students to access the curriculum. For example, the class teacher organised for confident readers to read aloud sections from a text instead of expecting all students to silently read the text in class. This enabled all of the class to follow the text or listen to the book. All students could participate in the discussion about the characters or the content because all students had engaged with the text. Teachers frequently used the blackboard to highlight key vocabulary or drew diagrams to make explicit links between concepts. Supporting resources were frequently used in the classroom to assist with learning.

There was evidence in some classrooms to suggest that instruction was differentiated to meet the needs of students who have different learning needs. However teachers realised that they could be doing much more to assist students. Some teachers were already modifying the curriculum to suit the ability and interest of students, and other teachers spoke of the need for time to plan for alternative activities and assessment tasks. The teachers and the special educator had planned a choice of assessment tasks that would cater for different students' needs and learning styles, and there was little focus in the interviews on formal examination-style assessment. The researcher observed the offering of choices in assessment in a number of lessons, where teachers provided explicit information and suggestions of appropriate resources for each assessment choice. Students were then encouraged to choose an option and were encouraged to consider the way they learnt best. This range of holistic assessment reflects the constructivist learning theory because students are encouraged to be involved in constructing the learning process. This type of approach is compatible with a learner-focused curriculum because acquisition of knowledge is built on prior knowledge and students' abilities and interests (Eichinger and Downing, 1996).

Conclusion

The teachers in this school had a broad range of students in their classes and many of the teachers had accepted the need to modify and adapt the regular curriculum for each grade level. Because the focus in this school seemed to be on helping each student obtain success rather than on the delivery of the curriculum, the needs of students with different learning needs were acknowledged and the teachers accepted that it was their responsibility to provide an appropriate education for all students. In addition to this, role definitions for staff and associated interactions between staff influenced the nature of the organisation and its development. The principal believed that the school had a special type of character 'that transformed into acceptance of any form of difference'. It is evident in this school that students with diverse learning needs have provided a challenge for teachers to learn about the limitations in current practice, which has led to the creation of new knowledge and skills needed to teach all students effectively.

Although a school organisation is influenced by social structures, as an organisation it has emergent properties of its own, and is able to develop in response to its own internal dynamics (Dyson, 1992). The culture of a school may change when ambiguities in practice and policy are resolved by confident, forceful, persistent people who manage to convince themselves and others to adopt new practices which introduce change (Weick, 1985). Thus it is possible for staff to reconstruct the organisation of a school to meet the needs of the students within it. This will require staff to communicate, solve problems, and have respect for each other and their students. Teachers will need to move out of the boundaries of traditional school organisation and practice. It is evident that the teachers in this study have responded positively to the challenge of bridging the gap between inclusive policy to inclusive practice and culture, even though they are aware that more needs to be done.

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