Inclusion: Culture, Policy and Practice: A Queensland Perspective

Robyn M. Gillies and Suzanne Carrington

Abstract
Schools are currently undergoing a process of reconstructed educational thinking and practice in Queensland. They are being challenged to review their organisational structures, the curriculum they teach and their pedagogical practices with the intention of transforming their structures, curriculum and pedagogies to ensure that all students are truly included in the school community. This paper reviews the background research that has informed the inclusion movement and the role schools play in developing inclusive education and outlines the specific initiatives that have been undertaken in Queensland, Australia.

Background
The inevitable presence of difference among students means that schools need to become more comfortable with building inclusive communities that value diversity. In Barton's words, "difference is now to be viewed as a challenge, a means of generating change and an encouragement for people to question unfounded generalisations, prejudice and discrimination" (Barton, 1997: 235). This will require a reconstruction in school organisation and curriculum so that the school becomes a supportive community that educates all children. This changing paradigm assumes a different set of beliefs and assumptions that demand different practices in schools (Carrington, 1999). Inclusion involves all students having the right to be truly included, to actively participate with others in the learning experiences provided, to be valued as members of the school community and to have access to a system that delivers a quality education that is best suited to their unique competencies, skills and attributes (Ainscow, 2000; Farrell, 2000; Fisher et al., 2002).

Inclusive education is about listening to the voices in a school community and empowering all members to develop an approach to schooling that is committed to identifying and dismantling actual and potential sources of exclusion (Slee, 2003a). Above all, it is about a philosophy of acceptance where all people are valued and treated with respect (Carrington, 2000). Indeed, Ballard (1995) argues that inclusion is unending, so that there is no such thing as an inclusive school.

According to this notion, all schools can continue to develop greater inclusion whatever their current state (Sebba and Ainscow, 1996). It is evident that inclusion has developed from a long history of educational innovation and represents school improvement on many levels for all students (Skrtic et al., 1996).

Theories dealing with the democratic community (Dewey, 1916) provide opportunities to rethink how we can improve acceptance of difference and create communities inclusive of all members of society (Turner and Louis, 1996). For example, an inclusive learning community should foster collaboration, problem solving, self-directed learning and critical discourse (Skrtic et al., 1996). Separation or stereotyping of differences creates divisions and status systems that detract from the democratic nature of the community and the dignity of the individual. Communities in inclusive schools cooperate and collaborate for the common good of all (Apple and Beane, 1995). In these schools "difference is recognised, respected, and represented" (Slee, 2001b: 387). In essence, inclusive education is about 'the politics of representation' (Slee, 2001a: 116) or how students can be given a 'voice' in the construction of their own unique identities (Trueba et al., 1997).

Inclusive schooling demands "reconstructed educational thinking and practice in regular schools for the benefit of all students" (Slee, 2001b: 120). This involves realigning the system and all the component parts so that "assessment, curriculum, instruction, professional development, program
evaluation, governance, and accountability . . . work synergistically to ensure meaningful, sustained school improvement" (Smith, 1998: 163). Rather than a 'fix it' orientation that has tried to fix the different component parts - the teachers, the curricula, the schools - Smith believes the focus is now on the system and how it can be changed so that policies and programs are aligned with expectations. In this sense it is about reforming schools and many of the principles that underpin school reform are identical to those that provide the foundation for inclusion (Fisher et al., 2002).

**Principles of Inclusion**

The UNESCO Salamanca *Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* (1994) articulated the underlying principles on which inclusive education is based. These are that:

- every child has a fundamental right to education;
- every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs;
- education systems need to accommodate this diversity in the student population;
- those with special education needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child centred pedagogy capable of meeting these needs; and
- regular schools with an inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all.

Moreover, it argued that inclusive schools provide an effective education for children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system.

**Schools Play a Key Role in Inclusive Education**

Schools are being challenged to avoid traditional labels attached to specific groups (e.g. learning disabled, slow-learner) or, as Biklen (2000) observes, resist static understandings of categories and recognise that there is a wide diversity in the student population and there are different patterns of achievement and social contribution that fit the various cultural, ethnic and gender differences that students bring to schools. The challenge this poses needs to be acknowledged as schools transform their practices to accommodate the needs of all students. In formal terms, schools are being asked to move away from 'a deficit model' where the problem essentially was located within the individual to a 'social model' that recognises that disability is created through social institutions that have oppressive, discriminatory and disabling practices (Mittler, 2000; Lindsay, 2003).

Schools are being challenged towards developing a pedagogy of inclusion which Ainscow (1997) believes is "not about making marginal adjustments but rather about asking fundamental questions concerning the way in which the organisation is currently structured" (p. 5). The aim is to transform mainstream schools in ways that will increase their capacities to respond to all learners and not just children with special education needs. It is really about creating and finding contexts that will enable children to experience success and feel competent (Biklen, 2000).

Schools have to be more flexible in the way they are organised so that teachers can work together in problem-solving teams to develop responses to even the most problematic of their students. In this way, teachers can learn to construct the meaning of inclusion for themselves, learn to adopt new ways of teaching and interacting with students as part of the overall cultural transformation of their schools (Clark et al., 1999; Ainscow, 2000; Peters, 2002). In fact, an inclusive approach to schooling requires that "the perspective must be enlarged to all teachers, all policies, all strategies for student assessment, and so on" (Ferguson, 1998: 148). This process is not easy and Clark et al. (1999) predict that it will be halting and problematic simply because schools are complex organisations where different structures, cultures and processes intersect and interact to challenge the reality of inclusion in its fullest sense. However, as Corbett and Slee (2000) suggest, "it requires continual proactive responsiveness to foster an inclusive educational culture" (p. 134) and teachers play a key role in this process. By developing an inclusive pedagogy, teachers are able to connect individual learners and their own way of learning to the curriculum and the wider school community (Corbett, 2001).

Students, too, need to feel accepted and valued within their school. When they feel they are part of the school community, they are less likely to disengage or become alienated and are more likely to want to participate and be included (Finn, 1989). When teachers are willing to connect on a personal
level with students who are potentially at risk of dropping out or becoming alienated, they can make a difference in reversing this trend and preventing student failure (Schlosser, 1992). These teachers, whom Schlosser called 'high-impact teachers,' were able to have a positive effect on students because they ensured that that they discussed children's home and community lives and made an effort to connect these experiences with the classroom curriculum. While Gale and Densmore (2000) believe that teachers' pedagogy needs to be informed by knowledge of students' background experiences, they also argue that teachers need to be prepared to interrogate the power structures within schools that serve to reproduce injustices both within and outside this environment. Part of this interrogation includes examining pedagogical practices to find those that enhance or restrict student engagement or as Slee (2001c) says, "Who's in? Who's out? How come? Who decides? Who benefits from this? Who loses? And inevitably: What are we going to do about it?" (p. 175).

It is in response to these developments in educational research and the challenge they pose to school structures, curriculum and pedagogy that Education Queensland (the state education authority) has undertaken a large number of initiatives in the last three years that have been at the forefront of reforming schooling in Queensland, Australia.

Inclusive Education in Queensland

A commitment to inclusive education in Queensland involves ongoing "reforms to the deep structure of schooling, namely the organisation of schooling, pedagogy, assessment and curriculum" (Slee, 2003b: 11). This deep reform is necessary because recognition, legitimisation and representation of difference and diversity lie at the heart of the inclusive school (Slee, 2003a). The Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (Lingard et al., 2001) "reaffirmed that exclusion is not simply a matter of the characteristics or problems that students bring with them into the classroom. Exclusion is generated from the interaction between student diversity and curriculum, pedagogy and the organisation of schooling that is unable to cope with difference" (Slee, 2003b: 11).

The goals of Queensland State Education - 2010 are to improve the quality of educational experience for all students in Queensland state schools and to increase the proportion of young Queenslanders who complete 12 years of schooling by the age of 24 years. These goals will only be achieved if public education provision in Queensland is able to successfully enhance the presence, access, participation and achievements of those students who for reasons of social and economic disadvantage, cultural diversity or disability tend to be over-represented among those young people who underachieve and/or leave school early. Destination 2010 is the Action Plan to implement Queensland State Education-2010 to ensure that there is commitment across all sectors of the organisation to maximise presence, access, participation and achievement of all students in education and especially students at educational risk.

Inclusive education is about all students in Queensland schools (Slee, 2003a). Research linked to key initiatives has enabled Education Queensland to identify and dismantle barriers to achieving an inclusive approach to schooling. This reform is evident in the Education Training and Reforms for the Future (ETRF) initiative, the Middle Phase of Schooling Action Plan, Productive Pedagogies, the New Basics Curriculum Project, and the Literate Futures project - initiatives that Education Queensland has embarked on in recent years. In addition, Education Queensland is responding to particular needs of students through the Seven Point Plan for Students with Disabilities, Partners for Success (initiatives designed to assist indigenous students), programmes to support culture and linguistic diversity, and students living in rural and remote locations. These initiatives are briefly outlined below.

The Education and Training Reforms for the Future

The ETRF represents a commitment to having a stronger focus on preparation for school through the early years of education, more information and communication technologies for teachers and students, the development of engaging and challenging middle years of schooling, and more students completing Year 12 or qualifications in training or further education. The ETRF aims to ensure that a variety of flexible structures are in place to ensure a seamless transition for students across the different phases of learning from early childhood education to the post-compulsory schooling years with the intention of ensuring that all young people complete their education and training requirements. Queensland the Smart State - Education and Training Reforms for the Future: A White Paper was released in November 2002 after five months of consultation. It is a landmark
package of proposed education and training reforms. Trials of some of the reforms have commenced, with full implementation, informed by the trials, to be completed by 2006. Historic legislation has been passed by Parliament that will allow young people aged 15-17 years to make choices and follow a learning path that meets their needs in innovative and flexible ways. The Youth Participation in Education and Training Act 2003 will affect students in Year 10 in 2006. The new laws:

• make it compulsory for young people to stay at school until they finish Year 10 or have turned 16 years of age, whichever comes first;
• requires young people to then participate in education and training for
  - a further two years, or
  - until they have gained a Senior Certificate, or
  - until they have gained a Certificate III vocational qualification, or
  - until they have turned 17 years.
• provide an option to enter full-time employment after completing Year 10 or having reached 16 years of age.

For more information visit: http://education.qld.gov.au/etrf/faq.html#legis. These areas of reform are described in more detail on the website: Getting ready for School (Preparatory Year of School), Middle Phase of Learning (Years 4-9), Getting Ready for Work and Information and Communication Technologies for School and Work. For more information visit: http://education.qld.gov.au/etrf/.

The Middle Phase of Schooling Action Plan

The middle years of schooling (pre-pubescence and early adolescence years) are critical for students' engagement with learning and, ultimately, their long-term success with schooling. The ETRF White Paper signalled the need for action in the middle years of schooling. Wide public consultation and the report by the Ministerial Advisory Committee for Educational Renewal indicated a need to address:

• curriculum and policy issues associated with adopting a Middle Phase of Learning;
• innovative ways to improve student achievements in the middle years;
• the provision of continuous support to students through different phases of learning;
• specific strategies for students at risk of leaving school early; and
• stronger links between primary and secondary schools.

More information on the middle years of school initiative can be obtained from: http://education.qld.gov.au/etrf/pdf/midaction03.pdf.

Two major initiatives, Productive Pedagogies and The New Basics Curriculum Project, help focus teachers' attention on their teaching practices and the curriculum they teach. Productive Pedagogies (Hayes et al., 2000) is a balanced theoretical framework enabling teachers to reflect critically on their work by asking questions such as: Are all the students I teach, regardless of background, engaged in intellectually challenging and relevant curriculum in a supportive environment? How do my teaching and assessment practices support or hinder this? What opportunities do I have to critically reflect upon my work with colleagues? This professional development process recognises the achievements of teachers and school support workers in lifting the level of intellectual engagement in the classroom, ensuring the relevance of curriculum content, representing diversity in the selection of approaches to teaching and curriculum and guaranteeing a supportive classroom for all students.

The Productive Pedagogies strategy also provides a catalyst for reflection. This is particularly important given that research indicates that if teachers are to be encouraged to transform their teaching practices, they need to reflect on the benefits of the proposed change for themselves while receiving ongoing support from their colleagues for any transformation they may contemplate (Reys et al., 1997).

The New Basics Curriculum Project aims to prepare students better for the future by consideration of: new student identities; new economies and work places; new technologies; and, diverse communities and complex cultures (Education Queensland, 2000a). The New Basics Curriculum Project is about improving the learning outcomes of our students. It allows community members, teachers and students to work together to ensure that the richness and relevance of students'
academic and social growth is enhanced. Schools throughout Queensland are presently involved in a
four-year trial of this project with the intention of extending it to other schools in future years. The
New Basics Curriculum Project and the Literate Futures strategy (Education Queensland, 2000b)
provide new models of curriculum that prepare students better for the future. The aim is to move
beyond "a curriculum pile-up where each new problem and topic is added as content and outcome
statement to the teachers' job." (Slee, 2001b). In contrast to an additive approach to curriculum, new
approaches to curriculum involve rich tasks (i.e., the conceptually sophisticated and challenging
tasks discussed below) that students are required to complete. These tasks are organised around four
content organising questions:

1. Who am I and where am I going? [Life pathways and social futures].
2. How do I make sense of and communicate with the world? [Multiliteracies and communication
   media].
3. What are my rights and responsibilities in communities, cultures and economies? [Active
citizenship].
4. How do I describe, analyse and shape the world around me? [Environments and technologies]
   (Education Queensland, 2000a).

Rich tasks challenge students to display their understanding, knowledges and skills through
performance on transdisciplinary activities that have an obvious connection to the wide world. They
are the assessable and reportable outcomes of a three-year curriculum plan that prepares students for
the challenges of living in new and changing times (Education Queensland, 2000a).

The Literate Futures Project is responsible for implementing the recommendations of Literate
Futures: Report of the Literacy Review for Queensland State Schools within Education Queensland
across the following priority areas:

- student diversity
- whole-school planning and community partnerships
- the teaching of reading
- future literacies.

Central to the Education Queensland curriculum reform agenda is the requirement that all schools
have in place a strategy for action to improve all students' literacy learning. To support schools’
engagement in whole-school literacy planning, 20 Learning and Development Centres (LDCs)
(Literacy) were established in 2001 and the Literate Futures Project was established. The LDCs were
set up to provide teachers throughout Queensland with learning and development opportunities in
literacy and to trial resources produced and published by the Literate Futures Project team. Additional
information on this initiative can be found at: http://education.qld.gov.au/curriculum/learning/literate-
futures.

The Seven Point Plan

This plan is designed to support inclusive education for students with a disability. The Plan includes a
Ministerial Taskforce on Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities, an Action Plan on
Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities 2003-2005, a Summit on Inclusive Education
(2002), establishment of a Staff College, Inclusive Education to address professional development and
learning for teachers and other school personnel, a five-year Capital Works Facilities Plan to establish
better standards for schools, and the development of a Certificate in Post Compulsory Schooling for
Students with Disabilities. This plan has required realignment within Education Queensland to ensure
that inclusive curriculum practices for students with disabilities are promoted and enhanced.

Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

The English as a Second Language (ESL) Program operates according to the Commonwealth
Guidelines for Schools, under an agreement between Education Queensland and the Department of
Education, Training and Youth Affairs (Australian Commonwealth Government Department). Commonwealth funding is provided through the Commonwealth Targeted Assistance Programmes for
the 2001-2004 Quadrennium: English as a Second Language - New Arrivals Program and the Strategic Assistance for Improving Student Outcomes Programs, and is supplemented by additional state funds. ESL programs within Education Queensland schools focus on the English language, literacy and cultural demands of the curriculum and the student's current capacity to meet those demands.

Partners for success is Education Queensland's key strategy for the continuous improvement of education and employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (indigenous Australians) in Queensland. The strategy, initially trialled in 38 Queensland state schools, has now been reinvigorated and extended to include all state schools in Queensland. The Partners For Success Action Plan 2003-2005 Executive Summary and Partners For Success School Information Kit 2003-2004 outline a three-year implementation strategy that reflects a growing body of evidence, builds on a range of existing initiatives and responds to the priorities and directions of Government. The Executive Summary and School Information Kit present priority action areas to drive and deliver improvement, key targets to measure progress, information to help schools address indigenous education issues locally, school planning processes and strategies for celebrating and sharing success. Through the Schools Annual Review and Operational Plan (SAROP), schools must plan, monitor and report on outcomes pertaining to all students. The Schools Improvement Accountability Framework is the mechanism to ensure that school liability is transparent and standardised and is the avenue from which the performance targets associated with the Partners for Success strategy will be monitored and reviewed. Information on these initiatives is available at: http://education.qld.gov.au/students/je/venture/atsi/success/index.html.

Queensland's size and sparse population pose challenges for the provision of education services to rural and remote areas. Almost one-third of the state's school students live outside urban and regional centres and attend schools in diverse locations termed rural or remote. Two-thirds of Queensland's annual economy is derived from these areas. Rural and remote schools offer some of the state's most exciting, innovative and caring learning environments. A Rural and Remote Action Plan is currently under development.

The Staff College, Inclusive Education

A distinctive feature of Queensland State Education - 2010 is an investment in professional development of the workforce to facilitate improvements in outcomes for students through the continuous improvement of teaching and learning. The underlying assumption is that the "quality of the teaching force is at the heart of the reform" (Slee, 2002: 16). The Staff College, Inclusive Education in Education Queensland coordinates learning and development opportunities to enhance the capacity of school and community personnel to support students with diverse learning needs. The models of professional development are innovative, incorporating a cognitive-reflective component along with elements of staff dialogue and peer coaching through a networked approach to engagement (i.e., e-mail discussion groups, video-teleconferencing). A range of professional learning activities have been developed to address issues such as racism, bullying and teaching strategies for student diversity. The inclusive learning community at the Learning Place (http://www.learningplace.com.au/sc/inclusiveeducation) reports on current learning projects, advertises conferences and workshops and provides information on resources and personnel who support the development of inclusive schooling.

Another resource that is facilitating the development of the democratic community by informing school planning and review and by engaging staff and parents in professional conversations about issues of exclusion and inclusion in schools is The Index for Inclusion (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). Education Queensland employs an Education Advisor, Inclusive Education to facilitate the implementation of the Index process in schools throughout the state. This process of using the Index is not mandated but informal feedback from teachers and parents has been very supportive of its use because it provides a framework that enables them to consider the key indicators of an inclusive school - its culture, policies and practices and the processes to consider in becoming more inclusive.'

Conclusions

Schools are currently undergoing a process of reconstructed educational thinking and practice in Queensland. They are being challenged to review their organisational structures, the curriculum they
teach and their pedagogical practices with the intention of transforming their structures, curriculum and pedagogies to ensure that all students are truly recognised, respected and represented in the school community. Many school communities in Queensland have embraced the concept of inclusive schooling. Examples of the innovative work in the development of inclusive culture, policy and practice were demonstrated in the recently successful Inclusive Culture and Practice in Schools Conference, Brisbane, July 2003. For more information visit http://www.learningplace.com.au/deliver/content.asp?pid=10771.

The Staff College, Inclusive Education along with the project staff in the described initiatives, and senior officers in Education Queensland continue to support inclusive school development, while promoting excellent practice in school communities. National and international visitors to Queensland comment on the fact that there is a common language, reflecting an inclusive perspective that permeates policy and expectations of practice in Education Queensland. This language ensures that inclusive education is 'core business' and not just an 'add-on initiative'. Obviously, there is a need for ongoing reflection, evaluation of outcomes and improvement to ensure that all students achieve the targets indicated in Destination 2010.

Transforming schools is not easy because it requires simultaneous proactive initiatives such as being prepared to: (a) interrogate the power structures in schools that reproduce injustices, (b) address innovative curriculum change, (c) adopt a variety of pedagogical practices to cater to the different learning styles of students and (d) review assessment and reporting practices. Schools and teachers in Education Queensland are required to make curricula and pedagogy accessible to all learners and reduce barriers for learning. These types of opportunities provide the basis for developing a wider intellectual and practical foundation for more inclusive practice in educational organisations.

1Information included in this paper has been summarized from Education Queensland’s website http://education.qld.gov.au

References


