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Inclusive Education Reform in Queensland: Implications for Policy and Practice

Abstract

Key words: Inclusive education; Education policy; Support personnel; Professional development

In Queensland, Australia, the school system is being reformed to be more 'inclusive'. However the enthusiasm for 'inclusive education' in Queensland seems to be waning amongst practitioners, and the 'confusion, frustration, guilt and exhaustion' that has emerged with teachers and support practitioners in the UK, is emerging amongst support practitioners and teachers in Queensland. This article argues that this is happening because inclusive education reforms that intend to provide an equitable education for all students regardless of cultural, physical, social/emotional and behavioural differences, are being introduced, but these policies, procedures and structures continue to label, isolate and segregate students within schools in the way in which segregated special education facilities did in the past. As well, new policies and structures are being introduced without practitioners having the time and support to critically examine the underlying assumptions about disability, difference and inclusion that underpin their practices.

These reforms need to be reviewed in terms of their effectiveness in achieving their 'inclusive' goals, i.e. in terms of the impacts that these reforms are having on the students themselves, and on the educational practitioners who support the students.

Introduction

Recently Slee (2006) explored the history of inclusive education reform using the imagery of ‘crossroads.’ Reflecting on the paradigmatic crossroads identified over 10 years ago by Clark, Dyson & Milward (1995, p. v), Slee noted that inclusive education reform has taken a particular path that has led to a re-badging of ‘special education’ as ‘inclusive education’ in policy and educational discourses, rather than a completely different path that interrogates how educational classification systems govern a “descending order of human value” (Slee, 2006, p. 112). Baker (2002, p. 663) agrees that, rather than addressing underlying issues about difference, disability and exclusion, a “transmogrification” has occurred through which “a new eugenics” has emerged, and this continues to contribute to labeling and segregation of students.

Students with disabilities and learning difficulties continue to be identified in terms of medical or psychological deficits, as either not within the ‘normal’ range or standards of academic achievement or social-emotional control, or slow to achieve such standards. Once identified, such students are in need of intervention programs within schools in order to achieve the prescribed standards. But as Baker (2002) argues, these standards are an arbitrary construct of those who decide what constitutes ‘normal.’ For students so identified and categorised by some who adopt an inclusion discourse, an equitable education seems to equate to identification and categorisation of deficits, and educational adjustments and resourcing to address these deficits, so that students can meet standards of academic achievement and social-emotional control that the schooling system deems acceptable i.e. ‘normal’ (Graham, 2006). Baker (2002) argues that in this way a new eugenics serves to maintain the

unexamined ableist normativity¹ assumptions that underpin schooling and the continued ‘integration’ of students designated as having special needs. Unlike ‘integration’, the concept of inclusion stems from a socio-cultural view of disability in which disability does not exist within a person but is a construct influenced by the conventions of social expectations and interactions (Carrier, 1989). For socio-cultural theorists, inclusion assumes acceptance and respect of difference in school communities, and collaborative efforts to address the educational needs of all students (Allan, 2008; Norwich & Lewis, 2007). Slee (2007) argues that the adoption of an unexamined discourse of inclusion by policy makers and special educators has led to teachers, administrators and politicians claiming that there is ‘trouble with inclusion.’ For Slee (2008) addressing this ‘trouble’ requires confronting pre-conceived assumptions about schooling, and consideration by the academy, policy makers and special educators of “the impact of different forms of schooling and its constituent elements of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and organization upon different groups of students” (2008, p. 168). Allan (2008, p. 9) joins Slee to point out that many doubts have been raised about the inclusion project from special educationists, teachers, parents, and politicians in the United Kingdom, who have identified ‘territories of failure’ associated with inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools. Allan concludes that the doubts about the efficacy and effectiveness of inclusive education is a result of “confusion, frustration, guilt and exhaustion” (2008, p. 9).

As in the United Kingdom, support personnel in educational settings in the Australian state of Queensland are struggling with concerns and doubts about educational

¹ According to Baker (2002, p. 698) “ableist normativity refers to how discourses including technologies, programs, prescriptions, policies, lines of reasoning, and everyday activities constitute as normal certain ways of appearing, of accomplishing something, and of being seen as fully human.”

reforms enacted by the state government through the Department of education, Training and the Arts (DETA). These reforms are designed to operationalise inclusive education by recognising and actively addressing injustice and disadvantage, responding to uniqueness of individuals so all students can access schools and participate to achieve learning outcomes and develop skills to work and live productively and respectfully with others from a range of backgrounds, abilities and cultures.² The government inclusive education policies are outlined in the Inclusive Education Statement – 2005 (Department of Education Training and the Arts, 2005). The intentions of the Queensland government in promoting inclusive education reform are to have an education system in which difference and diversity are respected and valued.

In reality the reforms introduced in schools so far have meant that the processes of categorising students and implementing individual educational programs have been streamlined, and the roles of teachers, specialist teachers and other support personnel have been restructured and reclassified. Recent research by the author with teacher aides who are employed to support students with disabilities and learning difficulties in Queensland schools has revealed that there is still much confusion about what the discourses of inclusion in DETA policy documents actually mean. The concepts of ‘integration’ and ‘inclusion’ are still confused, and influence the ways in which teachers and specialist teachers utilize teacher aides to support students’ learning and socialization, often in ways that contribute to the stigmatization of students with peers rather than their acceptance. For many of these support personnel the impacts of reform on their working lives have been stressful. These reforms will be examined in terms of some of the “confusion, frustration, guilt and exhaustion” (Allan, 2008, p. 9)

² See statement of intent at <http://education.qld.gov.au/strategic/eppr/curriculum/crppr009/>

that has occurred with practitioners in schools in Queensland as inclusive education reforms are being implemented

Reform number 1: Restructuring roles of specialist teachers and classroom teachers

The roles of support personnel in schools have been significantly restructured over time. From a resource/remedial teacher with one-on-one withdrawal of students for individualised instruction, the specialist teacher moved to team-teaching with the classroom teacher. The nomenclature changed from remedial/resource teacher to Support Teacher (Learning Difficulties) more commonly known as learning support teacher (LST). The emphasis changed from helping the students to helping the teacher (Forlin, 2000), although LSTs continued to work with individual students. LSTs also had significant responsibility for appraisal and verification procedures in relation to enrolment and ascertainment of categories and levels of impairment for students with disabilities, and the design and implementation of individual education programs (IEPs) for the ascertained students. LSTs also advised teachers about strategies and techniques to use with students with learning difficulties, and behavioural problems, and organised inservice professional development. In 2000 Forlin warned that changes to the roles of specialist teachers would lead to LSTs assuming an advisory and consultative role and that a top-down hierarchical model would emerge. LSTs, the trained special education teachers, would spend even less time with students with disabilities, less time in class with teachers, and more time managing and developing intervention programs and training staff, classroom teachers and teacher aides, to administer them.

With the introduction and trialing of the Education Adjustment Profile process including the Beginning School Profile, and verification and validation procedures

(Department of Education Training and the Arts, 2004), classroom teachers are now case managers for the EAP process with the support of regional Validation Officers (VOs). They have been given greater responsibilities for modifying and differentiating the curriculum to meet the needs of all students in their classes.

Although IEPs are no longer required for students in regular classrooms, they can be developed and implemented if the teacher considers that an IEP would be helpful for a student.

The 'trouble' with restructuring of roles

The result for primary schools in Queensland has been that specialist teachers have been further removed from students and classrooms to organisational, co-ordination and advisory roles as Early Childhood Development education specialists and Heads of Special Education Services (HOSES) who work with schools in regional clusters (Department of Education Training and the Arts, 2008). Forlin's prediction in 2000 has proved accurate. A hierarchical model has emerged with teachers expressing concern and resentment that they are now more fully responsible for meeting the pedagogical needs of all of the students within their classes, including students with disabilities and complex learning and behavioural needs, and modifying and differentiating curriculum without readily available specialist support, except for the services of Advisory Visiting Teachers (AVTs) when requested (Forlin, 2006; Subban & Sharma, 2006; Westwood & Graham, 2003).

Although professional development packages have been designed to support restructuring of roles for inclusive education reform, these professional development initiatives have the potential to add further pressure to teachers because of the emphasis on maintaining professional standards as outlined on the departmental

website.³ Teachers in Queensland have been left feeling under-qualified, time poor, and frustrated by inclusive education reforms which add further levels of bureaucracy and managerial responsibilities to their already complex and demanding roles in large classrooms, reflecting the findings of studies with teachers in other Australian states and in the United Kingdom (Fields, 2007; Howard & Ford, 2007; National Union of Teachers in Great Britain, 2007; Subban & Sharma, 2006; Westwood & Graham, 2003).

Reform number 2: The Education Adjustment Process (EAP).

When parents enroll children who have disabilities in regular schools, the students undergo the Education Adjustment Profiling process, starting with the Beginning School Profile (BSP) if the student is in Prep. (This EAP process has replaced the former ascertainment process.) The EAP/BSP process is designed to: a) identify students (from Prep-Year 12) who meet the criteria for the six disability categories outlined by DETA;⁴ and b) report the educational adjustments they are providing to meet the teaching and learning needs of these students. Schools implement the new process by recording the education adjustments being made to assist students with disabilities in accessing curriculum, achieving curriculum outcomes and participating in school life. The intention is to identify through profiling, and respond through adjustments to school program, to the individual needs of students.

The process begins by classifying students from the six categories of disabilities recognised by DETA, through diagnoses by medical specialists. The diagnosis is then verified by DETA. After identification, and with the input of teachers, parents and

³ Professional standards for teachers at <http://education.qld.gov.au/staff/development/standards/standards.html>

⁴ These categories are: [Autistic Spectrum Disorders \(ASD\)](#); [Hearing Impairment \(HI\)](#); Intellectual Impairment (II); [Physical Impairment \(PI\)](#); [Speech-Language Impairment \(SLI\)](#) and [Vision Impairment \(VI\)](#)

health professionals, suitable adjustments to allow access for the students to the curriculum are made. These adjustments need to respond to adjustments in six focus areas requiring the completion of a seventy-four point questionnaire by the teacher/case manager, with input from health professionals, parents and the students' teachers or whoever has most knowledge of the students' needs. The student is to be involved where possible. The EAP (Education Adjustment Profile) for each student is then recorded on a database – the Adjustment Information Management System (AIMS). The EAP process also involves a set of validation procedures with a Validation Co-ordinator (VC) from central office, the principal, and the teacher/case manager, with input from specialist teachers such as AVTs and/or Heads of Special Education Services (HOSES). There are also recommendations for teachers to undertake professional development about the process, and this is available online. Details of the process and professional development are available on the EAP website at <http://education.qld.gov.au/students/disabilities/adjustment/index.html>

The 'trouble' with EAP

There is 'trouble' with the EAP process for teachers. Teachers have already expressed concern about the increased personal and professional responsibilities in their extended roles in relation to students with disabilities (Bartak & Fry, 2004; Calder & Grieve, 2004; Cochran, 1998; McNally, Cole, & Waugh, 2001; Subban & Sharma, 2006; Wood, 1998). The EAP process adds another responsibility for case management to their roles. As the DETA website admits, EAP is only one process of many with which teachers need to engage in order to meet the needs of all of the students in their classes. There is also an appraisal intervention process for students with non-categorised learning or behavioural difficulties. Release time to undertake and maintain these processes through consultation and meetings is

welcomed by teachers, but adds to the stress when lessons need to be prepared and relief teachers brought up to date with classroom organisation. Similarly release time for professional development is not very helpful, especially when it is organised arbitrarily as one off workshops or online and separated from teaching contexts (Gaudelli, 2001; van Kraayenoord, 2003), an issue that has been acknowledged elsewhere in the department through the development of the Productive Pedagogies framework for professional development ⁵.

Kershner (2007, p. 486) states that “teachers are being asked to develop skills and confidence in teaching all students successfully without specialist training, but making use of specialist services when required.” This requires even more skills and training in people management and coordination of resources across a range of organisations, added to the professional development needed for curriculum and pedagogical modification and differentiation. Kershner (2007) and Thomas Loxley (2001, p. 17) argue further that teachers are confused by the “epistemic jungle of theoretical models” about learning. Teachers are also confused about what inclusion actually means with many holding personal assumptions about including students from a ‘special needs’ deficit model of disability (Ashman & Elkins, 1998; Bartak & Fry, 2004; Cole, 2005), and a “charitable type of humanism” (Zoniou-Sideri & Vlachou, 2006, p. 390). They feel guilty about letting their students down (Allan, 2008; Harvey-Koelpin, 2006) and so adopt a passive nurturing role towards students with disabilities (Wright, 2005).

Unfortunately the EAP process tends to reinforce the beliefs of teachers about disability as deficit to be identified within the student, through its identification and adjustment process. Rather than requiring the teacher to consider whether their current

⁵ See Productive Pedagogies @ http://education.qld.gov.au/public_media/reports/curriculum-framework/productive-pedagogies/

curriculum and pedagogy provide equitable learning experiences for all students (Brodin & Lindstrand, 2007; Graham, 2006; Taylor & Singh, 2005), the process requires the teacher to focus on the specific needs of the students with disabilities or learning difficulties, and adjust and modify the 'normal' curriculum for them. Teachers are becoming complicit in the process that Slee (2001, p. 171) termed card-carrying designators of disability, a role reserved in the past for the specialist teachers. A significant difference is that the technology for performing this role has improved through the use of computerised systems, which simultaneously provide an avenue for accountability issues to be addressed through the Adjustment Information Management System (AIMS). As researchers have suggested, in the current policies of educational reform, achievement of specific standards is taking precedence over all other educational goals, and an accountability system emphasising performance is further complicating the process of inclusive education reform (Dempsey, 2002; Furtado, 2005; McLaughlin & Rhim, 2007; Woods, Wyatt Smith, & Elkins, 2005). From the experiences of the author after twenty-one years working as a teacher and Assistant Principal in schools in Queensland, it is also contributing to frustration, guilt and exhaustion for teachers, AVTs and other support personnel, who struggle to meet the often complex learning and socialization needs of all students in large classes.

'Trouble' with teacher aides

Many teachers accept the inevitability of having students with 'special needs' in their class, but have called for more support in terms of resources and personnel such as teacher aides (Cook, 2004; Subban & Sharma, 2006; Westwood & Graham, 2003). But teachers also struggle with the presence of another adult in the classroom (French, 2001; Ghore & York-Barr, 2007; Gunter et al., 2005; Howes, 2003), and are confused

about how to utilise teacher aides to support learning (Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Hunt, Soto, Maier, & Doering, 2003).

As a result there has been over-reliance of teachers and LSTs on unqualified teacher aides to support students with disabilities and learning difficulties in the past (Brown, Farrington, Knight, Ross, & Ziegler, 1999; Giangreco & Edelman, 1997; Giangreco, Yuan, McKenzie, Cameron, & Fialka, 2005). As with teachers, the solution to this equity problem offered by the educational bureaucracy has been to offer teacher aides opportunities to gain higher qualifications through certificate courses in educational support. However these courses seem to be based on the assumption that the professional development needs of teacher aides are the same as those of teachers, and that improved knowledge of curriculum and better skills training will lead to improved inclusive practice with students with disabilities and learning and behavioural difficulties.

Reform number 3: Professional development and training for inclusive education reform

There is a focus in the professional development agenda in Queensland on training of support staff including teachers, in the skills and procedures necessary for efficient implementation of inclusive education reform. This focus which is designed to train support personnel for competence in pedagogy e.g. using co-teaching strategies or the EAP process, fails to provide practitioners with concomitant opportunities to examine underlying assumptions about disability and inclusion, reflection considered essential for the development of inclusive school communities (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2004; Carrington, 1999; Carrington & Robinson, 2001; Slee, 2006). Although skills development and knowledge of procedures are necessary elements in any reform process, many researchers argue that reforming policies and practices in educational

contexts based on the notion of diversity and inclusion requires a fundamental paradigm shift because it is a social movement against structural, cultural and educational exclusion (Carrington, 1999; Slee, 2005). To achieve such reform requires organisational change, but also fundamental attitudinal change in relation to teachers' attitudes, the inclusive culture of the school, and educational platforms (Allan, 2008; Carrington, 1999; Gallagher, 2007). Fundamental attitudinal change involves examining personal belief systems about teaching and learning, but more importantly beliefs about difference and disability and how these beliefs inform teaching and learning (Carrington, 2000). This type of reflective process can only take place through a collaborative process of team building through which all members of the students' support network meet regularly to reflect on underlying assumptions and inclusive practices which ensue from these assumptions (Ainscow et al., 2004; Cremin, Thomas, & Vincett, 2005; Fox, Farrell, & Davis, 2004; Hauge & Babkie, 2006; Hunt et al., 2003; Kugelmass, 2004; van Kraayenoord, 2003).

The 'trouble' with professional development

Without opportunities for sharing perspectives about inclusion in mutually respectful and collaborative ways with all members of students' support networks there is a danger that pre-existing hierarchical power structures will control decision-making about what equals appropriate support for students with disabilities and/or learning difficulties, and the voices of significant stakeholders such as the students themselves, their parents and teacher aides will be marginalised (Allan, 2008). As well, the resulting decisions about the appropriate types and levels of support and who will provide that support will pre-determine the type of professional development that is made available and in what form it will be provided, without adequately addressing the needs of support practitioners such as teacher aides, for planning and reviewing

processes with other members of the students' support networks, and job-embedded learning experiences (Ghere & York-Barr, 2007; Groom, 2006). Research has shown that not including teachers and teacher aides in decisions about how practices will be reformed to be more inclusive leads to feelings of imposition and resentment on the part of practitioners, and therefore negative attitudes towards professional development designed to inform these changes (Carrington & Robinson, 2006; Edwards & Nicoll, 2006; Forlin, 2006; Ghere & York-Barr, 2007; Howard & Ford, 2007; Slee, 2006; Timmons, 2006).

Conclusion

Writing policy about inclusive education and actualizing inclusion in practice in schools through reform initiatives is a complicated process involving many and varied government and community agencies (Slee, 2006). Carrington and Robinson (2004) have used the *Index for Inclusion* (Booth, Ainscow, Black-Hawkins, Vaughan, & Shaw, 2000), which was developed in England, to address inclusive education reform in schools in Queensland. However they discovered that inclusive education reform is a very complex process involving unexamined personal theories and assumptions about difference, disability and schooling (Carrington & Robinson, 2006). They found examples of inclusive practice in schools where support networks work collaboratively to include all students in the learning process. However there are many schools where varying assumptions about inclusion, and the subsequent deployment of resources such as teacher aides, cause confusion and marginalize support staff and students rather than including all (Bourke & Carrington, 2007; Graham & Slee, 2008).

The process of engaging the school community in reform is further obstructed by educational personnel including teachers, specialist teachers, and educational

bureaucrats who superficially adopt inclusive education language without examining the underlying industrial age assumptions about schooling, and the power relations within schools that preclude critical examination of the existing parameters within which support for students is provided (Mansaray, 2006). As a result, students continue to be excluded even when nominally included (Carrington & Robinson, 2006). Adding to the complexity of policy/practice reform are other political agendas such as accountability and performativity (improved student outcomes) which are tied to funding considerations at a Federal level (Dempsey, 2002; Furtado, 2005; Woods et al., 2005).

While the issues remain complex, it is important for policy makers to provide the ways and means for teachers and indeed the whole school community to examine underlying assumptions about difference and inclusion as a continual process of reflection as reforms are being implemented (Ainscow et al., 2004; Carrington, 1999; Gunter et al., 2005; Hauge & Babkie, 2006; Kugelmass, 2004, 2007). It is also necessary to examine underlying concepts about the purposes and goals of schooling, (Dyson, 2005; Norwich & Lewis, 2007; Smith, 2003), and the roles of the academy, practitioners, and policy makers in reconstructing education for all (McLaughlin & Rhim, 2007; Slee, 2006, 2007; Timmons, 2006).

In Queensland there is an urgent need to review, through research with practitioners, inclusive education policies such as the EAP process, restructuring of support roles, teacher practices, and professional development policies in terms of how they influence actual support practices, their impacts on the working lives of support practitioners, and their influence on the inclusion of all students within the school learning community.

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