

Recognising the Impact of Personal Attitudes and Values on Inclusion: A European Project Based in Three Countries

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Abstract

This paper was written by two UK members of a European project team involving teacher trainers in Spain, Greece and the UK. The aims of the three year project were to increase awareness of special educational provision in partner countries, extend the knowledge, skills and expertise of the in-service trainers, and disseminate good practice through the delivery of new courses in partner institutions. The project gave partners the opportunity to learn from policy makers, teachers, pupils and parents through visits to diverse educational settings. The trans-national team shared resources, problems, experiences and expertise, culminating in the development of an internationally relevant module which has been accredited and successfully delivered from foundation to doctorate level. The presentation considers the central importance of the deepening of individual understanding of inclusion, much of which has come through a commitment to modelling inclusive values within the operation of the trans-national group. The challenges faced as a democratic and collaborative group in the context of diversity provided a micro context for learning. Reflective diaries, independent observation and analysis of sample trans-national and steering group meetings and questionnaire evaluations from participants provide evidence that it is the personal experience of the challenges of inclusion which are central to the development of a deeper understanding of, and commitment to, inclusive practice in education.

“Being included is an interactional event between people who value each other”
(By John Visser, quoted in the Certificate in SEN Management keynote seminar)

Introduction

This paper stems from a European project undertaken by a group of teacher trainers from Greece, Spain and the UK over a three-year period, from 1999 to 2002. The project aims were to increase awareness of special educational provision in partner countries, extend the knowledge, skills and expertise of the in-service trainers, and disseminate good practice through the delivery of new courses in partner institutions. The project gave partners the opportunity to learn from policy makers, teachers, pupils and parents through visits to diverse educational settings. The trans-national team shared resources, problems, experiences and expertise, and together developed a module for practising teachers, ‘Promoting Achievement Through Inclusive Practice’, which has been accredited and successfully delivered from foundation to doctorate

level in the different participating countries. A year after the completion of the project, two of the UK participants who work within two different educational institutions delivering in-service training for teachers have come together to consider the impact of the experience on their own learning and perceptions of inclusion.

There has been no attempt to conform to conventional research methodology in the production of this paper. The discussion does not encompass the views of other participants in the project, hence ownership of the observations and conclusions is indicated through use of the personal pronoun. Despite the unconventional approach adopted, we believe that the processes and learning outcomes are valid and may be of interest to others. Moreover, we feel that the process of discussion and reflection undertaken mirrors the learning model of many practicing teachers in schools who talk to a valued colleague on a day to day basis in order to analyse critically and develop their philosophy and practice.

Much of the current literature highlights the importance of **collaborative teamwork, appropriate leadership and personal attitudes** in the creation of inclusive contexts. This was borne out by our visits to a range of schools in each of the host countries as part of the project. However, it was the experience of working within the trans-national group itself that had the most significant impact on our learning through our attempts to translate inclusive philosophy into practice. The challenges faced within a democratic and collaborative group in the context of diversity provided a micro-context for learning as each participant attempted to model inclusive values within the operation of the group. Our discussions confirmed the importance of both a leader who could be an inclusive role model, and a supportive team with whom we could risk genuine exchange of views. We were also surprised to discover an additional factor not generally identified in the literature: the importance of **on-going challenges to the group's philosophy** and cohesion. We agreed that it was the combined impact of these experiences that facilitated the personal understanding of inclusion issues that is central to the development of a deeper understanding of, and commitment to, inclusive practice in education.

Although the paper focuses primarily on inclusion, the observations made may be of interest to those contemplating international collaboration. There are also obvious parallels between with the experience of teachers and others working with groups that encompass diversity.

Group diversity and collaborative teamwork

The European project group was, by definition, a culturally and linguistically diverse one. But there were additional differences: a gender imbalance of nine women to one man, disabled and non disabled team members, participants of different sexual orientations, team members working in academic contexts and those working within regional educational authorities in positions of different status, as well as wide differences in educational experiences and philosophy. In order to realise our project aims, we needed to be successful in two focus areas:

1. in achieving task objectives related to the project aims; and
2. in maintaining group identity and commitment to these aims.

Both aspects needed to be addressed in the context of the inclusive philosophical background of the project: if we were to advocate inclusive practice to teachers, we

needed to operate as an inclusive group! We were aware of the need to relate theory to practice in planning for courses and dissemination at every level.

To assess the two aspects of group operation identified above, and the specific inclusive strategies being employed by the group, an observer used the UNESCO resource pack, 'Special Needs in the Classroom', as an evaluative tool at a series of trans-national meetings in the final year of the project. The observer noted a number of useful strategies being used by the group which related to both focus areas:

- **group identity:** the focus in initial trans-national meetings was on re-establishing the group (UNESCO 1.1);
- **ground rules:** the project leader introduced and reinforced ground rules about waiting for translations to be given before proceeding, only one person speaking at a time and the importance of using names in discussion (UNESCO 1.1, 5.3, 5.8);
- **documentation:** progress summary sheets were prepared so that team members had a clear idea of where they had come and where they were going in relation to the project aims; this documentation was presented in written and in 'mind map' form to accommodate different learning styles; this documentation also enabled absent colleagues to update themselves on project progress (UNESCO 2.1, 3.1, 4.8);
- **positive feedback:** this was provided consistently by the project leader in relation to progress made against targets and in response to the use of inclusive practices in the operation of the group;
- **communication:** delegates were encouraged to learn and use greetings and simple phrases in the languages used by other national teams during the project, including sign language (UNESCO 5.6); and
- **teaching and learning styles:** a variety of teaching and learning methods were used by the project leader and delegates: brainstorming, informal lectures, school visits, display, literature samples, group work and problem-solving involving a photographer. The range of activities reflected the inclusive approaches suggested in the UNESCO Resource Pack.

Through constant refining of our personal and collective understanding of inclusion we were able to expand our range of approaches to overcoming the inherent challenges of differences in language and culture and at the end of the project successfully planned and delivered a week's international course in Madrid for delegates from all over Europe. This amply evidences our achievement in relation to maintaining our group identity and the realisation of our project aims.

However, it would be wrong to suggest that this was easily achieved. The diversity of the group enriched and informed the project but it also created areas of tension. When challenges to the group's ethos and codes of behaviour emerged, it was often the project leader who enabled us to move forward again together.

Appropriate leadership and personal attitudes

Our analysis of the project highlighted the pivotal role of the project leader in creating an inclusive ethos and culture within our trans-national group. The inclusive atmosphere was not established or sustained easily. It was achieved through the vision and hard work of the leader putting inclusive values and structures into place

and maintaining them. This strong leadership and management modelled the project's philosophy and vision. On reflection, we concluded that factors which characterised the leadership of the project echoed features of the practice we had observed in the management of the most inclusive schools seen on visits as part of the project.

Some of the characteristics of inclusive leadership were:

- high expectations of all group participants and the group as a whole
- flexibility and a self-effacing, relaxed style
- an openness to challenge
- an encouraging rather than punitive approach
- good organisational skills
- careful agenda-setting in meetings to maintain progress towards project aims
- strength and consistency in commitment to a vision of inclusion
- an ability to engender commitment to inclusion in others

The project leader quickly established codes of behaviour and practice that reflected our inclusive values and these were consistently reinforced throughout the three years of the project. An example of this was the sensitive chairing of group meetings. Group members had different first languages: Greek, Spanish and English. This meant that we all had to take account of the impact this had on the speed of business, allowing time to pause for translation and checking for understanding before we moved on. The project leader made certain that we always took time for this and also ensured that the most confident speakers in the language of business did not dominate. This process of pausing and waiting for translation enabled access for others who were new to the project, slower to process information, or who needed clarification from peers. There are parallels with the classroom situation where the pace of lessons can sometimes be dictated by those with the most advanced skills. Our reflections on the trans-national group context reminded us of the value of peer mentoring and group work within lessons as opportunities to enhance learning for all.

The project leader also consistently valued contributions from all group members, whatever stage of understanding they were at, and thereby facilitated individual progress, allowing participants to take risks in a supportive atmosphere and enabling a genuine exchange of views and a sense of belonging for everyone. When inter-personal difficulties occurred, the leader maintained a neutral stance and kept us focused very firmly on our vision for inclusion and the need to reconsider our responses which were often based on cultural assumptions and misunderstandings. Despite frustrations and setbacks on organisational and personal levels she remained a model of equanimity, respected by all group members for her skills in fulfilling this difficult role. It was sometimes this respect for her sensitivity and judgement which enabled group members, including ourselves, to overcome their frustrations in the short-term, giving sufficient time for more considered reflection and a new perspective to emerge.

The importance of challenges to inclusive philosophy

Like all other democratic teams, challenges emerged to the group ethos and codes of behaviour. Our responses to these challenges as individuals and as a group tested

our personal attitudes and values and the philosophy of the project. Barriers to inclusion within the trans-national group came in a variety of guises. They related to:

- personal attitudes and values
- cultural insensitivities
- barriers to communication
- poor inter-personal skills
- differences in professional status and perceptions of power
- motivation and expectations

One example of such a challenge arose on the second occasion the UK hosted the trans-national meeting. Visits to a range of local schools were organised. Although the visits were very useful, a number of issues were highlighted. On our visit to a special school where many of the pupils had significant physical and learning difficulties, one member of the trans-national team patted the head of a child using a wheelchair. Although this was felt to be appropriate by participants from one culture who saw this as a way of positively communicating across language barriers, it was felt to be offensive, inappropriate and patronising by other team members from other cultures. Moving on to a mainstream primary school, the head teacher asked that team members did not take photographs in school. However, on being shown round by a different member of staff, a team member began to take photographs causing a degree of conflict.

Another example of a challenge to the project arose at a trans-national meeting in Madrid, where, in a meeting with senior representatives from the host country, one team member spoke to the meeting from a perspective of assumed superiority in educational practice; this was not only inappropriate but ill informed, no doubt offending the host country.

On another occasion a participant from a country who was hosting a trans-national meeting opted out of the final farewell social event, without explanation to other team members, leaving the group puzzled and disappointed at what should have been the conclusion to a successful and productive visit.

It was interesting to note that these issues occurred outside of chaired meeting times and were thus difficult to respond to as a group. The issues were discussed by us as individuals within trust relationships, but it felt too threatening and uncomfortable to debate them in the wider domain. One issue was dealt with directly by confrontation. In other cases perhaps we could not see alternatives to confrontation at the time and therefore avoided addressing the issues directly. It is difficult to determine whether these responses were right or wrong, but the passage of time has radically changed the way we have interpreted these situations.

Our initial discussions about the project categorised experiences as ‘positive’ or ‘negative’; on further analysis they were not so easily defined. Some of the ‘negative experiences’ lead us to a much deeper understanding of inclusion. We came to realise that challenges, both individual and collective, were vital to our project. They tested our philosophy, our practice, and our sense of humour! We realised that the individuals who had been the most challenging for us personally were those who had probably gained the most from the project and that the source of the

conflict had often been lack of understanding of the other person's context and motivation.

We now realise that some of the strategies we discussed in relation to inclusion in the classroom could have been usefully re-interpreted for our group context. For example, a primary school we visited in the UK used a 'king / queen for the day' strategy in circle time to enable the whole class to get to know each individual at a more personal level through a 'question time' session. It might have been useful to adapt strategies such as this for use in meeting sessions to formalise social exchange and promote relationships in a more structured way, given the linguistic and cultural barriers facing the group. Although social time was built into the programme during trans-national meetings, this may not have provided sufficient structured opportunities for individuals to deepen their understanding of all other group members and maintain 'the valuing of the individual' highlighted as a pre-requisite for inclusion in the introductory quotation from John Visser. This also indicates the dynamic nature of inclusion; in order for groups to establish and maintain inclusion, on-going activities that promote understanding and respect in a structured and on-going way need to be considered.

Conclusion: what have we learnt from the inclusion project?

We have both learnt much from our involvement with the project. We have observed a variety of excellent practice in schools in each of the participant countries and extended our knowledge of the literature relating to inclusion. However, the greatest challenge for both of us has been at the personal level in processing knowledge, skills and experiences and translating an evolving philosophy into our inter-personal relationships and our professional practice.

