

## **The Modus Operandi of Special Education: Teachers' Ability to Analyse Student Needs and Apply it to Classroom Planning**

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### **Abstract**

The contemporary debate about quality education for children with disabilities and impairments has continued to focus on mainstream schools, and, more recently, the emphasis on inclusion considers the reproduction of exclusionary practice within school structures. While the socio-cultural construction of disability is recognised as disabling, this paper argues that a constructive approach to policy implementation can be accomplished by drawing on 'insider' information constructed by teachers involved in inclusive practice.

Victorian schools face major challenges within the changing landscape of the schooling system and education (Beare & Slaughter, 1993), where there is an increasing responsibility given to schools for social, economic and cultural change (Lingard, Ladwig, Mills, Barh, & Chant, 2001). Within this context schools are required to cater for the varied needs and future directions for a diverse range of student cohorts. Included in this dimension is the process of 'integration', now known as 'inclusion', of disabled students into regular classroom settings that is perceived as a major task within the multiple dilemmas confronting schooling systems and the current work of teachers. Although the contemporary discourse of disability is replete with notions of social justice and equity, this action still remains problematic for regular school (Ainscow, 1991; Fulcher, 1993; Slee, 1993a; Kortman, 2001).

The Report of the Ministerial Review of Educational Services for the Disabled (1984), was instrumental in changing both the policy and practice of education for students with disabilities within the Victorian education system, (Marks, 1993; Fulcher, 1989). In principle, this Report was a powerful determinant in the restructuring of the school system to permit access of students with disabilities into mainstream schools; it also required teachers to be able to translate this change into both whole school and child related programs (Clarke, Dyson, & Millard, 1998; Clarke, Dyson, Millard, & Robson, 1999).

As an outcome of the Review, the rhetoric of human rights and increased placement of students in inclusive settings appear to be overwhelmingly positive regarding the policy enactment of the inclusion of disabled students within Victorian mainstream education however, progress has been painfully slow and disconcerting given the ground-breaking policy in 1984. Slee (1996) states although 'it may appear that the legislative and bureaucratic preconditions for 'inclusive schooling' have been meticulously established' enactment has not been unproblematic.

‘Apparently, this wave of legislative and bureaucratic reform, consistent with greater concerns for equity in Australian schooling (Connell, 1993), heralds a new era of ‘inclusive’ schooling for disabled students in Australia. One ought to feel assured that this backdrop signifies considerable progress for disabled students and that inclusive schooling describes the practice as well as the rhetoric of Australian education. This is not the case’ (Slee, 1996, p. 20).

The promotion and adoption of this changed focus by schools and teachers and the advancement of strategies that contribute to inclusion are still problematic where contemporary research (Barton, 1997; Jenkinson, 1996; Slee, 1993b; Slee, 1996) is replete with the predicament the of re-construction of exclusionary practice and the segregation of disabled students within in inclusive setting.

This paper foregrounds some of the difficulties in redefining education for disabled students around the notions of integration and inclusion, to provide an indication of the need to examine the current complexity underpinning this process and turn the ‘gaze’ towards critical components for future action. The social construction of disability within Australia, the professional world of teaching and the systematic structures of school life are acknowledged as significant components that have contributed to the contestation that has occurred towards inclusion. However this paper calls for a systematic approach that addresses education policy, policy action and processes within the workplace environment, which is combined with the social reality for all stakeholders, particularly the education policy actors in classrooms. In this way individuals and groups of individuals would be established as ‘definers of knowledge’ within the process of providing imperatives for future policy action.

### **Social construction of disability in Australia**

Theoretically, inclusion is a value that needs to be expressed by teachers in the way they conceptualise and promote the development of all children within the schooling system. Inclusive programs need to maximise the accommodation of all children within the general education curriculum where there is an emphasis on change that contests the socio-cultural construction of schooling systems that have advocated exclusion and marginalisation of different and disadvantaged groups.

After almost a decade of policy implementation, research by Lewis (1993) indicated that integration had created a new of category of marginalisation in the form of ‘the integration student’, where there was simultaneous struggles over the circumstances of inclusion and exclusion from schools (Slee, 1995; Fulcher, 1989). Furthermore, Young (1990) identifies inclusion as ‘an ensemble of policies and resources’ where it is of concern... of the failure to interrogate the constitution of special and regular schools that places students at risk’ (p. 2). Further research by Slee (2001) expands on this theme of the problematic and reductionist outcomes of ‘inclusion in practice.’

Slee (1996) argues that there has been considerable theoretical and operative slippage where reductionism has remained unacknowledged within the Victorian education system and cultural and institutional arrangements, along with pedagogy and curriculum choices, have escaped the diagnostic gaze of schools as disabling structures.

Slee (1993, 1995, 1996) and Fulcher (1989, 1993) have devoted considerable energies to the critical analysis of special education, integration and inclusion within all its' contested constructions, in what seems to be a quest for the development of some alternative construction of the pre-conceptions of and response to individual difference. Skidmore (1996) refers to the shortfall of this particular orientation of critique and deconstruction of practices within inclusive education as reductionist in itself, where the analytic tools of inquiry lend themselves to an ever more refined critique, which almost becomes an end in itself.

Within this framework, discrimination, oppression and exclusion are confined to the causal factors of social institutions such as schools, and this provides the focal point of research activity. Contemporary commentators provide a wealth of literature that is positioned towards this end (Skrtic, 1991, Villa & Thousand, 1995; Slee, 1995; Ainscow, 1994), where there is the concept of the need to analyse what schools are actually like and how they need to be organized to embrace the principles of social justice, equity and inclusion. The flaw that is inherent in this approach is the notion of the need for ideal types and ideal models rather than the realities of individual schools and the life-worlds of key stakeholders (Lingard, 1996).

However, the identified limitations of political reductionism and the socio- cultural construction of schooling as disabling structures, that provide a pretence and public image of inclusion that is non-exclusionary, are important components to be considered within the theoretical framework of inclusion. This aspect when juxtaposed with the re-emergence of the notions of deficit based assessment, training and evaluation of students, as a legitimate answer to teacher skill, that represents the historic discourse of student 'blame' and non-inclusive action cannot be ignored.

(Clarke *et al.*, 1999) state:

Students' difficulties in learning, ....., arise not out of deficits within the students themselves, but out of inappropriate responses that are made to those students by their schools (p. 2).

Given this situation, 'educational disablement' of the schooling system has emerged as the core business of many researchers, such as (Skrtic, 1991; Skrtic, 1995) and (Ainscow, 1994; Ainscow, 1997), where the discursive alliances of the political reductionism of inclusion draw a parallel with the historic discourse of special education as a convenience for managing failure. In this sense analysis of policy action does not focus on the appraisal of institutional arrangements and pedagogy, or the reduction of the social construction of special education around disablement, but on the reproduction of a deficit-based discourse (Skidmore, 1996). Nor does it focus on teachers' work, as a deliberate site of a collective agency, which is needed to address the complex challenges posed by inclusion.

Furthermore Clarke refers to the 'conflict perspective' within schools that is also recognized widely by educational research (Slee, 1996; Ball, 1997; Vlachou, 1997) as a factor that adds to the complexity of educational policy development and effective policy implementation regarding equity and inclusion. Slee (1996) argues that such conflict of interests often explains why the rhetoric of inclusive commitments are confounded and result in non- inclusive practice.

Undoubtedly the substantial volume of work dedicated to the construction of disability within Australian schools has provided new challenges to the field where the concept of individual deficit and categories of deficit are further explicated as undesirable and replaced with a vision for system change within political and institutional structures. However educational policy and policy action through the re-organization of structures that challenge the historical nature of and social process of marginalisation and exclusion of difference in schools are not the automatic trigger for dramatically new practices or overcome dilemma of 'commonality verses difference' (Clarke *et al.*, 1999). One aspect that is often unexplored is the skills required by the policy actors – the actual educational workers- and the democratic organization within schools that can promote a more efficacious approach to inclusion.

### **Voices of education policy actions**

Inclusive practice has been acknowledged repeatedly as a complex process (Gow, 1990; Mousley, Rice, & Tregenza, 1991; Dyson & Millard, 1997), that places further demands on teachers – the policy actors- that are paramount to successful inclusion. Teacher change and skill was identified by the 1984 Review as a major component for successful integration and this has been confirmed in consecutive Reports of the Victorian Auditor General's Report, known as the Cullen and Brown report (1992), and also the Meyer Report (2001). However effort to this end has not been a visible factor within policy action.

Cullen and Brown state that:

'It is apparent that the Department has not developed appropriate policies and strategies to ensure that integration teachers and regular teachers who teach students with disabilities receive an adequate level of professional development. Such inaction will ultimately impact upon the quality of the education provided to participants in the Integration Program' (1992, p. 61).

Consistently the conceptualisation and response to this dimension of policy enactment, where attention was turned to the enlightenment of teachers through guidelines for action such as the Integration Support Group Procedures (1989, 1995) and stop-gap measures of resources to employ teachers' assistants, overlooked or disregarded the difference that individual teachers can make in responding to individual need in classrooms.

At the core of effective implementation is the need to view of the importance of teachers' work as a vital contributing factor to successful inclusion where there is a need to encapsulate and revalue the knowledge and expertise of educational policy actors involved in institutionalised planning and practice. This position is supported by Lingard *et al.* (2001) in a longitudinal study of Queensland Education Reform that identifies the challenge to build on the thinking and planning of an authentic pedagogy for all students. However this notion is once again distorted and reduced to the reorganisation of structures of curriculum planning and edicts of preferred positions of school practice in a response by Slee (2001), Education Queensland that states:

Together with a new framework for curriculum planning across its schools, Education Queensland is attempting to move beyond a curriculum pile up where each new problem and topic is added as a content and outcome statement to the teachers' job. The preferred position is where schools decide on important knowledge that connects with the world of the students and their future. Such critical engagement with knowledge and the world has the potential to be enabling for diverse communities. In other words the leadership for inclusive schooling may not find itself located in new resource management systems but in changing approaches to teaching and learning for all' (p. 395).

The framework for curriculum planning, in this sense, has the capacity to be another 'technocratic script' for teachers that fails to engage in the planning of an authentic pedagogy. This issue is side stepped even further with another 'how to do it guide,' calling for schools to decide on 'the important knowledge' that students need. The bell tolls even more loudly of the return of an 'expert' approach to deciding on 'limited and limiting curriculum' of the past, unless the importance of the complexities and multiple realities for teachers is examined to enable an analysis of what is actually going on within inclusive classrooms, that can provide future directions for 'authentic pedagogy' and consequential effective policy action.

In the field of inclusive education, literature relating to the calls for educational reform has been unyielding in theorising and connecting systemic change, pedagogy and classroom strategies to the enactment of inclusive policies within the current educational discourse, alongside the pledge of equity and quality. But what is the actuality? Coinciding with the view taken by Dyson and Millard (1997), who reflect that it appears this effort has been with the anticipation that with changed social circumstances 'difference' may simply disappear, and the provision of additional resources also appear to anticipate that the system will change if funding is set in place.

Instead of thinking about additional resource driven arrangements (Abberley, 1987; Oliver, 1990) and guidelines that uphold inequality through the dominant forces of social reliance, the agency of teachers provides the opportunity for productive or authentic pedagogies to be developed to meet the needs of diverse learners that attains a different way of thinking about individual learning and learners (Ainscow, 1994; Ainscow, 1997; Rouse & Florian, 1996).

Consequently, there is an imperative to promote the need to understand the processes of inclusion that operates within classrooms and for education workers to be an 'active voice' in identifying knowledge and practice that promotes policy action and implementation through a process that is collaborative and democratic.

### **Research direction for inclusion**

This emphasis calls for new directions in educational research relating to 'inclusivity'. My own reflection, at this point in time, advocates a collaborative approach to meeting educational needs of differentiated student populations, and considers this dimension within the process of school change and educational reform that is

explored through the communicative action, described by Habermas (1970, 1987, 1996) and the individual life-worlds of teachers.

One example of the realisation of this process is the method of action research. In taking this stance, Ainscow (1998, 1999) reflects on the need to gain a deeper understanding of the nature and outcomes of individual educational contexts and given situations. He states that there is a need for:

‘....an exploration of forms of inquiry that have the flexibility to deal with the uniqueness of particular educational occurrences and contexts; that allow social organizations, such as schools and classrooms, to be understood from the perspectives of different participants, not at least the pupils; and that encourage teachers to investigate their own situations and practices with a view to bringing about improvements, (Ainscow, 1999, p. 148).

This form of action research refers to the process of research delineated by Kemmis and Mc Taggart (1988) that acknowledges the strength of educational inquiry that is undertaken by practitioners within their own workplace. However the limitations of action research that aims for improvement, but does not address the political and administrative constructions implicit in the principles of reform, remains a questionable, moot point. Research within this paradigm can also be limited to ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’ team knowledge and the gaze of the outside expert tends to emerge in a circuitous way that can be a possible a Machiavellian approach.

Reflecting back to my own proposition of collaborative educational reform, critical social science and the work of Habermas have tremendous potential for examining this present dimension and the reality of the discourses of disability and inclusion. At the heart of this approach is the ‘insiders’ driving the knowledge that shapes the mechanisms for educational reform (Habermas, 1984).

With a historical background of the wide-spread failure of what Habermas terms ‘civil society’, in this case the schools, to implement inclusive policy, there is a need to re-consider the process of policy action.

Civil society is composed of those more or less spontaneously emergent associations, organizations, and movements that, attuned to how societal problems resonate in the private life sphere, distill and transmit such reactions in amplified form to the public sphere. The core of civil society comprises a network of associations that institutionalizes problem-solving discourses on questions of general interest inside the framework of organized public spheres. The ‘discursive designs’ have an egalitarian, open form or organization that mirrors essential features of the kind of communication around which they crystallize and to which they lend continuity and permanence (Habermas, 1996, p. 367).

Within this dimension Habermas (1996) provides a ‘box of tools’ relating to political theory, civil society and communicative action and life-worlds of policy actors to investigate future action. As such he relates the failure to the tradition of the

philosophy pertaining to the subjectivity {in this case inclusion} and the incorrect partisanship of how to achieve the goals.

‘...groupings of civil society are indeed sensitive to problems, but the signals they send out and the impulses they give are generally too weak to initiate learning processes or relevant decision making in the political system in the short run’ (ibid, p. 373).

For Habermas (1985), the path forward for social and cultural change relates to inter-subjectivity and the theory of communicative action:

‘...where community reason is directly related insofar as acts of mutual understanding take on the role of the mechanism for co-ordinating action.’ (p. 196).

Healy (1997) relates to this an approach in emancipatory terms that:

‘....in positing the ideal of a society characterised by free and open communication and by rational and participatory decision making, his theory has the decisive emancipatory advantage of providing an important political yardstick with references to which distortions in current practices can be readily diagnosed and corrective action set in train’ (p. 4).

Habermas’ contemporary work turns toward a theoretical framework that actively promotes the achievement of a ‘leaning or civil society’, that provides a suitable framework for the theoretical orientation as a way to move forward in ‘inclusive’ education research (Habermas, 1996).

The Harbermasian civil society encourages active citizenship and communicative action through the life-worlds of the key actors (in this case the teachers). In this way the social action and individual agency of teachers is captured within in a given ‘moment’ and not generalized through political and systemic imperatives. Although this approach is nonetheless accompanied by questions of disproportionate power, that prevent consensus due to the power internal to communication, Schon and Rein (1994) discuss resolution in terms of independent and consensual criteria, mutual comprehensibility and a view of segments of reality within different frameworks. Correspondingly it pre-supposes being able to say the same thing in different ways where the idea of morality and ethics recognises shared features and unity of reason, (Pellizoni, 2001).

The method of critical social science put forward by Habermas and the associated methodological framework, does allow for the identification and construction of a pool of professional knowledge that provides a lens of opportunity for a sustained analysis of individual and organisational agency that that is informed and shaped by the actual policy actors. This has not been a central component of the deep-seated restructuring of education for inclusion, in Victoria, where changes have not necessarily been related to improvement of the fundamental and historic discursive social construction of difference, although relocation has been put into practice.

### **Concluding comments: reality from the field**

This paper calls for the pressing need for theories of social justice and inclusive education to account for, and identify teachers' practices, and professional skills if inclusion is not to become another form of educational disablement for students with a disability. This view implies that if the gaze is shifted to teachers in order to listen and understand inclusive pedagogy, as part of their everyday work, there is the opportunity to bring together the areas of educational theory and practice. Hargreaves (1994) emphasises that for those seeking to generate change in schools it is necessary to give people, who are the actual change agents, a sense of ownership and involvement at all stages of the change and to develop a high level of engagement and reciprocal development.

Teachers both individually and collectively have needed to make sense of the reform, interpret and change practices, and consider the consequences for teaching and learning and this has not been recognised sufficiently within the boundaries of system theory or the political agendas associated with this reform process of inclusion. This individual and collective agency provides the potential for constructive policy action where the communicative infrastructures within existing institutions (schools) and the (agents) teachers who come together to formulate issues and professional directions are assembled within the notions of social action (Habermas, 1984).

Reform requires the capacity for self –reflection and a sense of the collective action (Hargreaves, 1994). The exploration of how teachers actually challenge, question and work with theory and policy agendas within institutional practices, that are often discursive in nature, is also part of the complexities to be identified.

Accordingly, this moves beyond the realm of theorising teachers' actions and organization within the static boundaries of individualised problem based research endeavours that can also be discursive in nature and practice for disabled 'participants'. It moves on to examine the change process inclusion presents for teachers, how teachers acknowledge needs of included students and how they met the needs of these students within the classroom context.

Although this proposal aims to clarify legitimate teacher knowledge, need and support, beyond the realm of funding, as an area that is crucial if schools are to exemplify good practice that promotes quality learning within an inclusive framework, it does not embrace a 'technicist' approach of prescriptive package solutions. Rather it envisages the scope for diversity and strength based action for individual teachers and school settings.

Research on the background of policy implementation identifies that teachers' existing expertise and their professional development needs have not been a key focus of policies directed at sustaining the changed political, cultural and social construction and discourse required for inclusive education.

Teacher education needs to explore new forms of knowledge about identity and difference and suggests new questions that invite students to consider the pathologies of schools that enable or disable students (Slee, 2001, p. 174).



There is a need for educational research to attach importance to this focus and subsequently concentrate on teacher's knowledge and learning communities with the intention to identify substantiated dimensions of teacher knowledge and skills that are pivotal factors within the process of successful implementation of inclusive education. However this does not embrace a set of pre-determined assumptions for teacher training but rather the focus on teachers' work as a deliberative site of collective agency that is needed to address the complex challenges of inclusion rather than political expediency to solve the problem [students].

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