Seminar: Action Research for Inclusive Classrooms and Schools

What is Inclusive Practice?

Firstly let us begin by reviewing the key essentials for inclusion, which are that:

• all children attend their local school as far as possible. They stay in the ordinary classroom with appropriate support for most of the school day.

• all teachers in a school take responsibility for all student’s learning, with appropriate resourcing and opportunities for professional development.

• schools need to rethink their values and how they affect the structure of their organization. They need to restructure their curriculum and assessment arrangements to represent a wider group of students. They need to remove barriers to learning and allow full participation in school activities; and to develop a range of teaching strategies to include a full range of students in their school and in their community

Inclusion is an ideal state towards which a process of action is planned and implemented. It represents the belief that students with disabilities should be included in ordinary classrooms whether or not they can meet traditional curriculum standards. The process of inclusion focuses the responsibility on schools to adapt and change in order to accommodate all students.

Often the first place to begin a process of change is through the action research process. But there must be a focus for the research

Perhaps a critical starting point for our purposes today, is the review of the values within the school and making possible changes for all students to learn regardless of their individual differences. It is through positive acceptance of students and accommodation to their needs, that everyone learns from the example of schools that are changing their practice through inclusion; as a consequence, in a subtle process, attitudes are made more positive, in the school and for all involved.

Implications and Issues of Inclusive Practice

❖ Will there be a continuing role for special schools?
❖ Is it possible to place all children in the local school?
❖ Is the notion of a resourced school more appropriate, (i.e., schools equipped with special resources for accepting children with special needs strategically placed in a local area)?
❖ Is monitoring of the school’s efforts for inclusion possible?
❖ What are the implications for changing teaching practices and building resources when students are included?

Regardless of the macro issues referred to above there is a more concrete micro level where the practice is changing attitudes and values in schools and communities. This prompts the critical question:
Who is involved in inclusion and who is making it happen?

Is it?

- All teachers in ordinary and in special schools?
- Associated professionals in Psychology, Health, Social and Care support?
- Parents and families, friends and community?
- Are all collaborating to make inclusion a success?

How are teachers, professionals and parents contributing to the successful inclusion of students in education? Through what processes are they achieving the aim of inclusion and how is it being monitored? Developing successful practices for inclusion demand attention to the detail of school and classroom interaction that expose the values inherent in the situation. Successful teaching of all students may require a change of focus, style and materials. Reviewing existing teaching practice is critical to gauge whether they are inclusive, and an important starting point for action research (often called the reconnaissance phase).

Some Important Questions for Review:

- Are lessons accessible to all students, i.e., teaching style, curriculum materials, media, and language?
- Do teachers build on experience beyond the school?
- Do curriculum materials include the background, language and culture of all students who attend the school?
- Are gender free curriculum materials used?
- Are second language children encouraged and allowed to develop their first language, both in an oral and written context?
- Do students contribute to their own assessment when decisions are being made about promotion/demotion to another class, school change or placement?
- Are there alternatives to writing employed?
- Is IT used with the support of other specialist aids?
- Are staff fully aware of the needs of their students with SEN and the difficulty they may experience in basic skills like reading/writing, e.g., the need for more time to complete tasks, and locational/spacial and technical needs related to visual and hearing difficulties?

The evidence gathered through an initial review can provide a basis for diagnosing the problems to be addressed and deliberating about possible action strategies. The most critical questions in which are:

- Are student’s social and emotional needs being met in the classrooms?
- Do they feel ‘at home’ in their classrooms?

This is a theme which resonates with an action research project, John Elliott has been leading with teachers on the pedagogical dimensions of ‘student disaffection’. He
claims that research carried out collaboratively with teachers has exposed the fact that it is not only the truants and disruptive students who fail to feel ‘at home’ in classrooms. There are also large numbers of passively disaffected students who are ‘really here in name only’ (RHINOs). Classrooms in which all students feel socially and emotionally at home are also high quality learning environments since they establish the conditions in which students are able to take risks and learn from their mistakes.

**Staff Co-operation**

It only takes one student to begin the process of inclusion in a school. The process may begin with teachers creating support materials for the student that can then act as an archive for other students who may come to be included in the same school. Sharing learning resources with each other enables teachers to build up a shared school teaching archive. But they should be resources which have been shown to work in classrooms through a process of action research.

To ensure the success of inclusion, staff co-operation is critical for the development of teaching and learning strategies through action research e.g., co-teaching, collaborative creation of support materials and discussion of teaching methods and styles. Teachers must have the opportunity, time and space to share/discuss their curriculum and teaching problems in school.

Teachers may need to experiment to find out if any of the following strategies would be helpful to them when teaching students with additional learning needs:

- Physical re-organization of the classroom
- Differentiated teaching to suit individual learning styles
- Formative assessment and the creation of student work portfolios recognizing physical, personal and affective development
- Students involvement in assessing each other’s learning and in setting their own individual goals
- Collaborative learning, student-student, peer teaching/learning, students supporting each other in classrooms
- Teachers supporting each other and collaborating in teaching, teacher-teacher, peer teaching/learning, co-teaching
- Providing opportunities for independent learning
- Schools’ effective use of the services of outside agencies for the facilitation of better student learning

Although an overview of the critical factors for inclusive practice are developed above, no perfect solution can be found to the best way of achieving it. An action research process is valuable for making changes in different contexts. An action research approach individualizes the change process for students and allows a ‘tailored’ approach to meet their needs in an evolving process of parallel learning – where both student and teacher learn together. Collaboration and a team approach to problem solving when planning an appropriate curriculum experience for all students, lessens the pressure on individuals to meet students’ curriculum needs on their own.
Books/articles etc. can help to *suggest* strategies that may be helpful, but in reality the context is the most important aspect in success. Where the student is placed, the ethos of the school, the personal characteristics of the teachers, the social setting of peers and the attitudes, values and commitments of all those involved are what really matters in whether or not inclusion is successful.

Every school is different, every student is different and has different needs, therefore the adaptations and support that are made in response to students is also individual and different.

**The Action Research Cycle**

However, we need to explain further how the action research process can support inclusive practice.

The action research process is developed around the following cycle:

![Action Research Cycle Diagram]

The cycle normally begins with a problem which needs to be solved, in our case it is:- How can we best develop the successful inclusion of all students in mainstream schools? In particular the focus is on two key questions, which were discussed and developed in the seminar:

- How can the right social and emotional atmosphere be created to make students feel relaxed and ready to learn?
- How can we make our educational values transparent?

However, before we can answer these questions, we need to outline the key characteristics of an action research process.
• It has a pedagogical aim which embodies an educational ideal, and which all those who participate are committed to realizing in practice e.g., the inclusive classroom can be viewed as such an ideal.
• It focuses on changing practice to make it more consistent with the pedagogical aim of promoting more inclusive classroom environments.
• It gathers evidence about the extent to which practice is consistent or inconsistent with this aim.
• In identifying and explaining inconsistencies between aspirations and practice (such explanations may lie outside the classroom in the broader institutional, social, and political contexts of teaching), it problematizes the assumptions and beliefs (theories) which tacitly underpin traditional classroom practice.
• It involves teachers in a process of generating and testing new forms of action for realizing their aspiration, and thereby enables them to reconstruct the beliefs which guide their practice.
• It is a pedagogical process characterized by reflexivity. From an action research perspective teaching is a form of research and vice-versa.

Good action research is oriented by the values that practitioners want to realize in their practice. These values become clearer as teachers reflect and deliberate about their concrete practices, for they define their educational values through their actions. ‘Inclusive practice’ refers to an ideal form of relationship between the content or objects of learning, teachers and learners. Terms like ‘understanding’, ‘inquiry’, ‘discovery’, ‘autonomy’, ‘independence’, ‘co-operative learning’ all specify qualities of inclusive practices. Good action research is educational, namely it is a form of reflective inquiry that enables teachers to better realize such qualities in their practice. The tests for good action research are therefore pragmatic ones.

Firstly does it improve the quality of the transactions between teacher and learners in ways which constitute a more inclusive learning environment? Good action research might fail this particular test if it generates evidence to explain why improvement is impossible in the circumstances; in which case it justifies a temporary tolerance of the status quo. A decision to wait until the time is ripe and circumstances open new windows of opportunity is sometimes wiser than repeated attempts to initiate change unsuccessfully.

Another point to keep in mind is that action research defines what actions constitute quality in teaching rather than accepting ‘fixed’ and ‘predefined’ indicators uncritically.

A good curriculum design not only specifies good practice but also guidance on how to realize it in the form of action hypotheses to test. Action research deconstructs and reconstructs the way the inclusive curriculum shapes up in particular contexts and practice.

Good action research generates evidence to support judgments about the quality of teaching. But it must always be evidence about the pedagogy. In being reflexive it must involve reflecting on one’s own actions. Evidence of student learning in abstraction from learning processes does not constitute evidence for teaching quality. Other kinds of evidence need to be collected before the contribution of teaching can be judged.
In conclusion, action research and the development of inclusive classroom practice is an integrated process. Every school faces different challenges and problems in the development of inclusive education, and through a process of action research they can find a means of organizing the problem, investigating it in the context in which it occurs, and evaluating action strategies designed to overcome it.

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