

Inclusive Pedagogy: A transformative approach to individual differences but can it help reduce educational inequalities?¹

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ABSTRACT

The 2014 SERA Lecture provides an overview of the concept of inclusive pedagogy, a distinctive approach to classroom teaching offering an alternative pedagogical approach that has the potential to reduce educational inequality by enhancing learning opportunities for everyone. Inclusive pedagogy focuses on improving the quality of mainstream education by reducing variability in practice. It was developed from studies that focused on understanding the expertise of teachers who are able to work with diverse student groups and achieve good academic attainment results for all students, including those who have been identified as having additional support needs. As an alternative approach, inclusive pedagogy offers a partial response to three interrelated problems of educational inequality: (1) those that are associated with organisational and pedagogical strategies based on bell curve distributions; (2) the identification of additional support needs; and (3) the disproportionate statistical representation of certain minority groups in special education.

INTRODUCTION

In his address to the inaugural meeting the British Educational Research Association (BERA), Scottish educationalist, John Nisbet (1974, p.13) noted:

...a primary function of research in education is to sensitise - to make people aware of problems. Also, in assessing the achievements of educational research, we have to consider its effect on the attitude of those who teach. Vigorous research activity or, to use a less pretentious title, investigation into teaching and learning, sharpens

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thinking, directs attention to important issues, clarifies problems, encourages debate and the exchange of views, and thus deepens understanding, prevents ossification of thinking, promotes flexibility and adaptation to changing demands

As SERA marks its 40th anniversary year, it seems fitting to *direct attention to important issues, clarify some problems, and encourage debate* about the role that certain approaches to teaching and learning contribute to educational inequality. In so doing, the aim of this paper is to present the concept of inclusive pedagogy that has emerged from studies of the practices of mainstream classroom teachers who are committed to the achievement of all students, including those with additional support needs (ASN). As will be argued, inclusive pedagogy is an alternative pedagogical approach that has the potential to reduce educational inequality by enhancing learning opportunities for everyone. It is a distinctive approach to teaching and is not synonymous with the terms inclusive education and inclusive practice.

Inclusive education is a contested concept that defies precise definition (Göransson and Nilholm, 2014). Although there is a broad understanding that it involves 'a *process* of increasing participation and decreasing exclusion from the culture, community and curricula of mainstream schools' (Booth and Ainscow, 2002), it is contentious because not everyone agrees that it is possible to educate all children together, and even where there is agreement, there are debates about how this can and should be achieved (Warnock and Norwich, 2010). Moreover, the process of inclusive education can take many forms and little is known about the detail of practice at the classroom level.

Inclusive practice varies widely: from the very specific, for example, including children with disabilities in mainstream schools by relocating specialist provision from special to mainstream schools; to a very broad notion of responding to diversity among learners without regard to categorical differences. Both the relocation of specialist provision and the disregard for approaches based on categorical differences between groups of students raise questions about what constitutes good practice, and what counts as evidence of such practice.

The starting point for inclusive pedagogy is an acknowledgement of the contested nature of inclusive education and the consequent variability in practice. In spite of this variability some teachers are able to work with diverse student groups and achieve good academic attainment results for all students, including those who have been identified as having additional support needs while others find this difficult or impossible. Such variability raises important questions about the nature and quality of provision in schools. How schools as organisations, and individual teachers within those organisations, respond to students identified as having ASN is affected by the culture of the school, including its admissions, behaviour and exclusion policies and practices. It is also reflected in the approaches that teachers take and the responses that they make when students encounter difficulties in learning. Yet many teachers report feeling that the research literature does not fully address their professional apprehension about how to enact a policy of inclusion in their classrooms.

Inclusive pedagogy focuses on improving the quality of mainstream education and the role that schools can play in reducing inequality in attainment outcomes by reducing variability in practice. It addresses three interrelated problems of

educational inequality: (1) those that are associated with organisational and pedagogical strategies based on bell curve distributions; (2) the identification of additional support needs; and (3) the disproportionate statistical representation of certain minority groups in special education. Each is discussed below.

The bell curve.

Because schools are organised by grouping pupils according to commonly agreed categories, and the utilitarian principle of the greatest good for the greatest number, what is ordinarily provided will meet the needs of most learners, while some may require something 'additional' to or 'different' from that which is ordinarily available. A bell curve model of distribution, which assumes 'that most phenomena occur around a middle point while a few occur at either high or low extreme ends' (Fendler and Muzaffar, 2008, p 63) underpins many educational practices and is widely used as an organisational principle. Sorting students by ability is one example of how this model operates; the use of norm-referenced tests is another. Both of these practices are part of the pathway by which judgements about students' learning capacity are determined and by which some students become eligible for additional support. As a structural feature of the school system, these sorting practices often set the points at which individual students' educational needs are defined as 'additional' or 'special'. Consequently the idea that some students will need something 'different from' or 'additional to' that which is generally available to others of similar age is taken for granted. In other words it has become normalised in educational thinking and is accepted without question. Indeed it guides the definition of additional support in many countries.

Bell curve thinking implies that what is ordinarily available will meet the needs of most learners while some *at the tail ends of a normal distribution*, may require something additional or different. This positions the *centre* of the distribution as the *ideal* place where schooling occurs and marginalises that which is outside of it. Such thinking is associated with inequality in education, and as Fendler and Muzaffar have argued: the naturalization of the bell curve as a structural feature of schooling is inherently unjust because it perpetuates the inevitability of failure' (p. 65). After all, the laws of the bell curve require that nearly 50% of students will be below average. Of course bell curve thinking in education does not mean there are not other reasons why some children struggle in school, but the idea of additional support for some compared to others of similar age is an example of how it shapes responses to difference. The problem is that identification of additional support needs is often accompanied by a lowering of expectations about what can be achieved.

Identification of additional support needs.

When students who encounter difficulties in learning are identified as having special or additional support needs, an intractable cycle is formed: students are assigned membership of the group because they are judged to possess the attributes of group membership, and they are believed to have the attributes of the group because they are members of it. The problem is that identification of special

or additional needs can also lower a teacher's expectations about what it is possible for a student to achieve.

One example is that of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). For this rapidly growing group, identification depends on a clinical assessment of a 'triad of impairments' associated with difficulties in social communication, social understanding, and flexibility of thought and imagination (Wing and Gould, 1979). The National Autistic Society (NAS) in the UK defines ASD as:

An autism spectrum disorder is a complex lifelong developmental disability that affects the way a person communicates and relates to people around them. The autism spectrum includes syndromes described by Kanner and Wing but is wider than these two subgroups. Many people have a mixture of features from these two syndromes but do not fit neatly into either. The whole spectrum is defined by the presence of impairments affecting social interaction, communication and imagination, known as the triad of impairments. This is always accompanied by a narrow repetitive range of activities. (NAS, <http://www.autism.org.uk/About-autism/All-about-diagnosis/Jargon-buster/Glossary-of-terms-a.aspx>)

Clearly this definition describes a condition that contains many sources of variation. As the definition itself specifies, '*many people have a mixture of features... but do not fit neatly into either*'. Here, variation between the individuals within the ASD group suggest that there will be degrees of difference between members with regard to the many characteristics thought to affect learning. And yet, tacit judgments are often made about learners based on assumptions that they possess all the characteristics of group membership to the same degree. Moreover, the identification of the difficulties in learning associated with ASD is often assumed to require specialist teaching. Questions about the nature of such teaching are often answered with information about ASD itself, including what learners on the ASD spectrum cannot do by virtue of their impairments, rather than focusing on the learning that might be possible. In this way, the categorisation of ASD, and the assumed cognitive impairments that are associated with it, arguably put a ceiling on learning and achievement.

As this example shows, a focus on learner types is problematic because of the many sources of variation within and between identified groups of learners that make educationally relevant distinctions between them difficult to observe and judge. Thus, whatever can be known about a particular category of learners will be limited in the educational purposes it can serve, because the variations between members of a group make it difficult to predict or evaluate provision for individuals in it.

Disproportionality.

A further problem of inequality is the unintended consequence of disproportionality. Disproportionality refers to the over representation of certain minority groups in special education, usually those who have been historically excluded from mainstream education, for example African-American students in the US, Roma children in the Czech Republic, and so forth. As Dyson and Kozleski (2008) point out:

Although students from any social group can be and are identified as in need of special education, members of some groups are more likely than others to be identified. Groups whose members tend to do badly in the general education system supply more students to the special education system. These are, moreover, precisely the groups which do least well in terms of a whole range of social indicators – health, employment, income, encounters with the penal system, and so on (pp. 170-171).

School-equity experts have pointed out that large numbers of struggling minority students are being identified as in need of additional support services. For example, a 2013 Department for Education report in England (Strand and Lindsay, 2013) found that Chinese, Black African, Black Caribbean, Black Other and Bangladeshi pupils were all substantially more likely to have identified Speech Language and Communication Needs than their White British peers. Many of these students are also disadvantaged by poverty and have lower educational attainment levels than children from middle class backgrounds (Strand and Lindsay, 2009). In Scotland, children living in poverty are less likely to do well on measures of literacy and numeracy (Sosu and Ellis, 2014). Disproportionality raises equity questions, partly because of exclusion from the opportunities afforded by the ideal centre, and partly, as noted above, because of the lowering of expectations that comes with the label ‘in need of additional support’.

To summarise, there is a problem with the use of bell-curve distributions in education that marginalise that which are outside of it and perpetuate the inevitability of failure. Stephen Jay Gould summed up this structural problem of inequality in schooling most eloquently in his 1981 book, *The Mismeasure of Man*:

...we pass through this world but once. Few tragedies can be more extensive than the stunting of life, few injustices deeper than the denial of an opportunity to strive or even hope, by a limit imposed from without, but falsely identified as lying within (p. 28).

Clearly the limitations and problems of bell curve thinking in education, the identification of difficulties in learning as deficits within children, and the unintended consequence of disproportionality that effect disadvantaged groups suggest that alternative approaches are needed. The huge literature that discusses both disproportionality and special or additional education provision as justice issues and many sociological and educational theories explain and problematize this state of affairs but few solutions are offered. The inherent bias in systems that are designed for most students on the grounds that something different can be available to some tend to pathologise linguistic, cultural, cognitive and other kinds of difference and disproportionately effect ethnic minority children who are often more likely to be living in poverty than other children. The problem of injustice, as Gould noted, is when achievement gaps associated with social and structural deprivation are attributed to a learning deficit within the child.

INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGY

As noted in the introduction, the inclusive pedagogical approach was developed in part to help reduce variability in the quality of current provision. In so doing, it takes as its starting point a concern with addressing the problems associated with the limitations described above. Inclusive pedagogy sets out to replace traditional

approaches to teaching children identified as having additional or special educational needs that are based upon the argument that such children necessarily require something 'different from' or 'additional to' that which is ordinarily available, and that what is needed can be matched to learner characteristics. While it does not deny individual differences between learners, it assumes that differences are an ordinary aspect of the human condition.

The studies that led to the articulation of inclusive pedagogy (e.g. Black-Hawkins, Florian and Rouse 2007; Florian and Black-Hawkins 2011) were concerned with how teachers committed to raising the achievements of all learners, were also able to support those who were vulnerable to exclusion and other forms of marginalisation. These studies combined classroom observations with interviews to enable the teachers, with whom we worked, to articulate in detail their craft knowledge of inclusive practice. Our analytical interest was in finding a way to represent this craft knowledge so that it would have meaning for, and be supportive of, the professional learning and practice of others.

The concept of teachers' craft knowledge has been used by educationalists for many years as a means of recognising, valuing and exploring the complexity of teachers' daily work. Grimmer and Mackinnon's (1992) review of craft knowledge in the field of education specifies that 'craft knowledge is essentially the accumulated wisdom derived from teachers' and practice-orientated researchers' understandings of the meanings ascribed to the many dilemmas inherent in teaching' (p.428). This resonates strongly with an exploration of inclusive practice, in that it highlights the complexity of classroom life and the dilemmas that teachers face as part of their everyday work as they set out to support the participation and achievement of all children in their classes. As a methodological lens, this permitted a focus on how teachers as creative and flexible problem-solvers respond when learners encounter difficulties.

In addition, studying the craft knowledge of teachers who are able both to sustain their commitment to inclusive education and to engage in practices that support the learning and participation of all children offers valuable insights into these matters. The variability in practice where some teachers are able to work with diverse student groups, including children who have been identified as having special or additional support needs while others maintain they cannot, suggests that there is still much that can be learned from those teachers who are able to sustain a commitment to inclusion in their classrooms.

Since the over-riding aim of our studies was to examine teachers' craft knowledge of their inclusive practice, it was essential that the research be based in schools and classes where such practice was likely to take place. Therefore, we selected schools in which the headteachers and other staff had already strongly articulated their support for inclusive policies and practices, and their commitment to supporting the achievements of all students. Furthermore, the schools were highly inclusive in terms of the diversity of their student intake, with open admission policies that explicitly welcomed all children onto their rolls, regardless of whether they had been identified as requiring additional support for learning. The classrooms in which observations took place included, for example, children with physical and sensory disabilities, social, emotional and behavioural needs,

significant cognitive impairments, English as an additional language (EAL), as well as other children who, at times, experienced some difficulties in their learning.

The theoretical framework for the conceptualisation of inclusive pedagogy was based on Alexander's (2004) notion of pedagogy as involving 'what one needs to know and the skills one needs to command in order to make and justify the many different kinds of decisions of which teaching is constituted' (p. 11). This decision-making is shaped not only by the professional knowledge and skills of teachers, and the actions that they take, but also by the values and beliefs that they hold about children and the nature of teaching and learning, as well as wider social processes and influences. Two overarching questions shaped the data collection and analysis.

- What teaching strategies help to increase the participation and achievement of *all* children, including those identified as having special educational needs or requiring additional support for learning?
- How can examples of inclusive pedagogy in action be articulated in ways that are useful to other teachers and supportive of their practice?

A careful exploration of the craft knowledge of individual teachers who are committed to developing inclusive practice in their classrooms supported us in addressing both these questions (for a detailed report of these findings, see Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2010; and Black-Hawkins and Florian, 2012). A challenge for the research was to allow the complexity of classroom practice, including the dilemmas and difficulties that teachers regularly encounter to remain central. This corresponds to the purpose of 'capturing' detailed examples of teachers' craft knowledge of their inclusive practice in ways that would be recognisable to other teachers and supportive of their professional learning. The emergent theoretical understanding of inclusive pedagogy prompted us to study more fully: how teachers respond to differences between children so as to avoid the stigmatising effects of marking some children as different; what teachers do (and why) when learners experience difficulties; how teachers include learners in, rather than exclude them from, what is ordinarily available in the daily life of the classroom.

A key finding from these studies suggested that teachers engaged in what we have come to call *inclusive pedagogy* work out what they can do to support the learner while maintaining a commitment to *everybody* (Hart, Dixon, Drummond and McIntyre, 2004), and avoiding situations that mark some students as different. This does not rule out the use of specialists or specialist knowledge but it does not require the identification of special educational need *within* individual learners. While this may happen as a result of seeking support, it is often because administrative rules require such identification rather than because of a teacher attribution of a 'problem' within the learner. Where specialists are consulted, it is in support of the teacher's effort to ensure that the learner is meaningfully engaged in the community of the classroom. The phrase 'community of the classroom' is used purposefully to avoid the idea that the approach is merely advocating whole class teaching. It is in the *ways* that teachers respond to individual differences, the *choices* they make about group work and *how* they utilise specialist knowledge that differentiates inclusive practice from other pedagogical approaches.

TABLE 1

CONTRAST OF ‘ADDITIONAL NEEDS’ AND INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES

Additional needs approach to Inclusion	Manifest in terms of inclusion	Manifest in terms of exclusion	Inclusive pedagogical approach
	Most and Some		Everybody
A student with dyslexia needs specialist support to develop literacy skills. A multi-disciplinary team that includes a psychologist, a reading specialist and a speech and language therapist assesses her and make recommendation about the type and amount of support that is needed.	The student is included in selected classroom activities that do not require literacy skills.	<p>The student receives additional support in a ‘base’ classroom where she can receive specialist support to develop literacy skills.</p> <p>The student is marked as different because she is getting special treatment.</p>	<p>The class teacher takes account of the individual needs of all students in the classroom and plans a lesson with differentiated options that will ensure that each student will be able to participate in the lesson. However, while the class teacher takes account of differences between learners, he does not predetermine the learning that is possible by assigning students to different options. Instead he allows the students to direct the course of their own learning through choice of activities.</p> <p>The student with dyslexia remains a part of the community of the classroom. By making choices available to everybody, individualised support is provided to her in a way that does not stigmatise her as ‘less able’.</p>

Focusing on how teachers extend what is generally available in a classroom lesson or activity, offers an alternative perspective from which to consider inclusive educational practice to those of traditional approaches to teaching children, identified as having special educational needs, that are based upon the argument that such children necessarily require something ‘different from’ or ‘additional to’

that which is ordinarily available. This is illustrated above in table 1 where the inclusive pedagogical approach is contrasted with a special additional needs approach to inclusive practice. While this approach, also referred to as the 'additional needs' approach to inclusion, focuses only on the student who has been identified as in need of additional support, the inclusive pedagogical approach focuses on everybody in the community of the classroom.

As is shown, inclusive pedagogy is defined not in the *choice* of strategy but in its *use*. The first three columns of Table 1 illustrate how the traditional additional needs approach to individual differences can include as well as exclude, while the final column shows a representation of the inclusive pedagogical approach, drawing on our analysis of teachers' articulation of their craft knowledge of inclusive practice. Here, the problem of marginalisation that can occur when some children are treated differently is avoided by incorporating a response to difference in the ordinary activity of the lesson. The opportunity to learn is enhanced by taking account of individual differences when planning lessons without predetermining learning outcomes in advance.

CONCLUSION

Inclusive pedagogy is concerned with redressing the limitations on learning that are often inadvertently placed on children when they are judged 'less able'. It does not deny differences between learners but seeks to accommodate them by extending what is ordinarily available to all rather than by differentiating for some. Here there is a shift in focus away from the idea of inclusion as a specialized response to some learners that enables them to have access or participate in that which is available to most students. Extending what is ordinarily available to all learners, taking account the fact that there will be individual differences between them is a subtle but profound difference in approaching teaching and learning for all that is the hallmark of inclusive pedagogy.

Inclusive pedagogy offers an alternative to the bell-curve thinking that underpins traditional approaches to providing for all by differentiating for some. Its transformative potential lies in its power to reduce the inequality of opportunity to learn that occurs when performance expectations are lowered as a result of the identification of additional support needs. Inclusive pedagogy extends opportunities to learn by reducing the marginalisation that can occur when some students are treated differently to others.

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