

Steps to inclusion in schools



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Inclusion is a major challenge for schools around the world. Put simply, it is concerned with the question: How can schools develop ways of providing an effective education for all of their children? Internationally, this theme is a central focus of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which commits countries to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education, and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

In this paper I suggest five interconnected steps that schools should take in order to move in a more inclusive direction. In so doing, I start from the idea that inclusion in education should be seen as a journey of improvement, starting from where your school is at present. I also emphasise the importance of all members of the school community – teachers, students, families and members of the wider community – taking part in the journey.

Moving forward

The steps I propose are based on the experience of schools in different parts of the world that have made progress on their inclusive journey. In what follows, I suggest questions that need to be considered.

Step 1: Be clear about the direction you want to take.

The word 'inclusion' can be confusing since it may mean different things to different people. This is a particular problem when you are trying to move forward with other people - particularly in schools, where everybody is so busy. If you do not share a common idea of the direction you want to take, progress will be more difficult.

Sometimes people think that inclusion is only about particular groups of students thought to be most vulnerable. So, for example, they might be thinking about students from poorer homes; those whose families speak a different language; or others with some kind of impairment. For me, it requires a very different way of thinking, one that sees inclusion as a principled approach to education. This means that the definition of inclusion I recommend involves the following elements:

- **Inclusion is a process.** That is to say, inclusion is a never-ending search to find better ways of responding to student diversity. It is about learning how to live with difference, and, learning how to learn from difference. In this way, differences come to be seen more positively as a stimulus for fostering learning among children and adults.
- **Inclusion is concerned with the identification and removal of barriers.** Barriers may take different forms, some of which are to do with the way schools are organised, the forms of teaching provided, and the ways in which children's progress is evaluated.
- **Inclusion is about the presence, participation and achievement of all students.** 'Presence' is concerned with where children are educated, and how reliably and punctually they attend; 'participation' relates to the quality of their experiences whilst they are there and, therefore, must incorporate the views of the learners themselves; and 'achievement' is about the outcomes of learning across the curriculum.
- **Inclusion involves a particular emphasis on those learners who may be at risk of marginalization, exclusion or underachievement.** This indicates the moral responsibility to ensure that those groups of students that are statistically most at risk are carefully monitored, and that, where necessary, steps are taken to ensure their presence, participation and achievement within the school. At the same time it is necessary to be vigilant in watching out for learners who may be overlooked.

Experiences in schools in various parts of the world indicate that a well-orchestrated debate about these elements can lead to a wider understanding of the principle of inclusion.

Question to consider:

Do you and your colleagues have a shared understanding of what is meant by inclusion?

Step 2: Make use of existing skills and knowledge.

The overall approach to inclusive development that I am recommending is based on the idea that schools know more than they use. In other words, there is always good practice that can be built upon. Therefore, the logical starting point is with an analysis of existing ways of working. This allows effective practices to be identified and shared, while, at the same time, drawing attention to ways of working that may be creating barriers to the participation and learning of some students.

Usually, **teachers who are effective in responding to student diversity use a range of teaching approaches, from which they choose those that they judge to be appropriate for a particular lesson.** These decisions take account of a range of inter-connected factors, such as the subject to be taught, the age and experience of the class, the environmental conditions of the classroom and the available resources.

Much of this planning goes on incidentally as teachers go about their day-to-day business. Indeed, final adjustments may still be made as the teacher enters the classroom and judges the mood of the class. It is also essential to recognise that planning does not conclude when the lesson commences. Indeed, often the most significant decisions are those that are made as the lesson proceeds, through a process of improvisation, which requires teachers to think on their feet. In schools that make progress on their inclusive journey, teachers help one another to improve their skills in improvisation. This involves sharing practices and working together to find better ways of reaching hard to reach learners.

Beyond improvisation and thinking-on-the-feet, a feature of lessons that are effective in encouraging student participation is the way available resources, particularly human resources, are used to support learning. In particular, there is strong evidence of the potential of cooperation between students for creating classroom conditions that can both maximise participation, whilst at the same time achieving high standards of learning for all members of a class. Furthermore, the use of such practices can be an effective means of supporting the involvement of those students who are new to a class, children from different cultural backgrounds, and those with disabilities. However, it is important to stress the need for skill in orchestrating this type of classroom practice. Poorly managed cooperative group work usually involves a considerable waste of time and, indeed, presents many opportunities for increased classroom disruption.

Question to consider:

Do teachers in your school share practices with their colleagues?

Step 3: Develop a shared language of practice.

As I have indicated, much of what teachers do during the intensive encounters that occur in classrooms is carried out at an intuitive level. Furthermore, there is little time to stop and think. This is why **having the opportunity to see colleagues at work is so crucial to the success of attempts to develop more inclusive practices. It is through such shared experiences that teachers can help one another to articulate what they currently do and define what they might like to do. In this way, a language of practice is developed with which colleagues can talk to one another about detailed aspects of their practice. Without such a language, teachers find it difficult to experiment with new possibilities.**

This raises questions about how best to make this happen. Here a helpful approach is that of **lesson study, a systematic procedure for the development of teaching** that is well established in Japan and some other Asian countries. The goal of lesson study is to improve the effectiveness of the experiences that teachers provide for all of their students. **It involves a collaborative process of professional learning carried out by a small group of teachers, usually trios, which is focused on a particular lesson. These are called research lessons and are used to examine the responsiveness of the students to the planned activities. Members of the group work together to design the lesson plan, which is then implemented by each teacher in turn, with their colleagues observing how the students respond. Post-lesson meetings are arranged to facilitate the improvement of the research lesson between each trial.**

Lesson study can be conducted in many ways. It may, for example, involve a small group of volunteer teachers, or be carried out through departmental or special interest groups. It can also happen across schools and is then part of a wider, managed network of teachers working together. The collection of evidence is a key factor in the lesson study approach. This usually involves observation of student responses. Emphasis is also placed on listening to the views of students in a way that tends to encourage questioning and creativity within the discussions that take place.

Question to consider:

Do teachers in your school have opportunities to observe one another working?

Step 4: Promote a respect for difference.

There is not one single model of what an inclusive school looks like. What is common to highly inclusive schools, however, is that they are welcoming and supportive places for all of their students, not least for those with impairments and others who experience difficulties. This does not prevent these schools from also being committed to improving the

achievements of all of their students. Indeed, they tend to have a range of strategies for strengthening achievement that are typical of those employed by all effective schools, and the emphasis on supporting vulnerable students does not appear to inhibit these strategies. The key factor is the emphasis placed on tracking and supporting the progress of all of the students.

When schools are successful in moving in a more inclusive direction, there is usually a degree of consensus amongst adults around values of respect for difference and a commitment to offering all students access to learning opportunities. Whilst this consensus is unlikely to be total, it is indicative of the growth of a culture of inclusion. In addition, there is likely to be a high level of staff collaboration and joint problem-solving, and similar values and commitments may extend into the student body, and amongst families and other community stakeholders associated with the school. These schools are also likely to be characterised by forms of organisation (such as specialist support being made within the ordinary classroom, rather than by withdrawal) and practices which could be regarded as participatory by definition (such as cooperative group work).

Question to consider:

To what extent does your school have a culture of inclusion?

Step 5: Share responsibility for leadership.

Schools with an inclusive culture are likely to be characterised by the presence of leaders who are committed to inclusive values and to a leadership style which encourages a range of individuals to participate in decision making. There is also a recognition that the development of inclusive practices is likely to challenge the thinking of those within a school. This means that school leaders have to be skilful in encouraging coordinated and sustained efforts around the idea that changing outcomes for vulnerable groups of students is unlikely to be achieved unless there are changes in the behaviours of adults. As I have suggested, central to this is the need to foster an inclusive culture within schools, one that welcomes and respects differences amongst the student population.

All of this means that traditional hierarchical structures are replaced by a school community that is characterised by agreed values and hopes, such that many of the control functions associated with traditional forms of school leadership become less important or even counter-productive. This requires new thinking and practices amongst senior members of staff. In order to encourage movement in an inclusive direction, they have to: challenge the status quo of traditional approaches to teaching; inspire a clear mutual vision of what the school should and could be; lead by example, using cooperative procedures and taking risks; and encourage staff

members to persist and keep striving to improve their expertise. They must also place a strong emphasis on the building of cooperative teams and the use of inquiry to stimulate experimentation with new ways of working. In addition, it is important that they build close relationships with partners beyond the school gate, based on a shared commitment to inclusive values.

Question to consider:

How far is leadership shared within your school?

Concluding thoughts

In summary, then, **the steps to inclusion in schools I recommend are as follows:**

- 1: Be clear about the direction you want to take;**
- 2: Make use of existing skills and knowledge;**
- 3: Develop a shared language of practice;**
- 4: Promote a respect for difference; and**
- 5: Share responsibility for leadership.**

What connects these five steps is the need for people to work together in finding better ways of reaching out to all the children within a school. In taking this challenging agenda forward, readers may find it helpful to use the recently published resource pack, *Reaching Out to All Learners*, that I developed with colleagues at the International Bureau of Education-UNESCO. It is available free at:

http://www.ibe.unesco.org/sites/default/files/resources/ibe-crp-inclusiveeducation-2016_eng.pdf

The resource pack is intended to be used flexibly in response to contexts that are at different stages of development and where resources vary. Extensive use is made of examples from different parts of the world to encourage the development of new ways to reach out to all learners within a school.