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Inclusive school community: why is it so complex?

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This paper addresses the question: why is it so hard for school communities to respond to diversity in learners, staff and parents in inclusive ways? The authors draw on theory and recent professional experience in Queensland, Australia, to offer four guiding principles that address traditional assumptions about learning that result in inequality of opportunity and outcomes for students. The authors suggest these principles to support the development of a more inclusive school community: (1) develop a learning community incorporating a critical friend; (2) value and collaborate with parents and the broader community; (3) engage students as citizens in school review and development; and (4) support teachers' critical engagement with inclusive ideals and practices. The authors describe how the principles can work in concert in a school community.

Introduction

At the 5th International Special Education Congress at the University of Manchester, UK, in 2000, an African teacher taught us a valuable lesson about inclusive education. After sitting through yet another presentation about British policy and resourcing models for inclusive schooling, he commented: 'You make it all so complex! In our community school, we all work together. It is simple. We value and respect each other'.

How can we learn from this observation and ensure that inclusive school communities are achievable?

It seems that for many years, researchers and practitioners in education settings (e.g. Clark *et al.*, 1995; Booth & Ainscow, 1998; Thomas *et al.*, 1998; Slee, 2001; Robinson & Carrington, 2002) have attempted inclusive school development through processes of educational reform, to break down mind-sets or understandings, which Senge (2000) describes as *industrial-age assumptions about learning*. Senge contends that while most educators would publicly disagree in principle with these assumptions, 'the system seems to embody these assumptions, and everyone acts as if they were correct - even if they would prefer to act differently' (p. 35). Our experience in schools tends to confirm Senge's assertion.

The first assumption described by Senge is *children are deficient and schools fix them*. This is driven by the focus on conformity as a core value of the industrial age (Senge, 2000). As a consequence of this assumption in play, our school systems can be weighed down with discourses of deficit and disadvantage manifested in categories used to sort children. Categorized labels:

that have deemed the universe of educational exceptionality are formal explanations of educational success and failure that are institutionalised in important ways in the practices that separate the more or less successful students from each other.

(Carrier, 1989, p. 212)

These cultural constructions of difference, school success and failure are represented in personal beliefs, attitudes and values and shape how educators interact with students (Carrington, 2000). Inclusive education assumes a different set of beliefs and assumptions that demand different practices in schools (Carrington, 1999).

The second assumption is *learning takes place in the head, not in the body as a whole*. The pedagogical implications for this assumption result in students placed as passive recipients of so-called knowledge. Some learners in schools are described as passive and disengaged (McIntosh *et al.*, 1993) which could be due to a lack of engaging pedagogy and curriculum designed to meet students' learning needs. The primary mode of instruction in some classes may still be teacher directed to a large group, so many of the students are not actively engaged in the learning process. This passive style of learning allows some students to get through the school day with minimum difficulty (Broze, 1990) but also with little accountability and respect for their learning.

The third assumption is *everyone learns, or should learn, in the same way*. While most educators would not espouse this assumption, teaching and assessment may not reflect the alternative. The one-size-fits-all approach to teaching and assessment continues in some schools despite the plethora of research reporting on child and adolescent development, learning styles, multiple intelligences, cooperative learning, authentic learning and assessment and rich tasks to name just a few.

The fourth assumption is that *learning takes place in the classroom, not in the world*. This belief influences the way learning in the classroom is connected to the real world and student prior knowledge. In addition, this assumption influences teachers' respect for learning and skill development that occurs outside the classroom.

The fifth and final assumption, *there are smart kids and dumb kids*, is described by Senge (2000) as the cumulative effect of the above assumptions. This is because the dominant group in our society defines the features of the culture that differentiate those who can and those who can not (Turner & Louis, 1996). Knowledge and understanding of school success and failure and of ability and disability need to be considered as cultural constructions (Carrier, 1990) that are reflected not only in the beliefs and attitudes of people, but also in the behaviour of individuals in organizations.

The match or mismatch between values, school culture and practice and these five assumptions may be explored further by considering what Kagan (1992) described as 'educational platform'. In the school context, the components of educational platforms may not be well known and discussed. That is, teachers tend to be unaware of their assumptions, theories or educational beliefs and the implications of these for behaviour and practice (Carrington, 2000). Sometimes educational leaders and teachers adopt components of a platform that seem right, that have the ring of fashionable rhetoric or that coincide with the expectation of certain others, such as teachers they admire or groups with whom they wish to affiliate. For example, 'publicly they may say one thing and assume that their classroom behaviour is governed by this statement but privately or even unknowingly they may believe something else that actually governs their classroom behaviour' (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1988, p. 363). Therefore an educational platform exists at two levels. What educators say they assume, believe and intend (their espoused theory) and the assumptions, beliefs and intent as evidenced by their behaviour or their uses of discourses (their theory in use). Espoused theories are generally known to the teacher, however, theories in use are generally not apparent to the teacher but can be elucidated through observation of teacher behaviour and discourse (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1988, p. 366).

This incongruence between espoused beliefs and theory in use can be observed within the current inclusive education movement. For example a specialist teacher who was working in an Australian secondary school to support refugee students in her school community, stated in exasperation, 'These girls! They have such limited life experiences!' She did not understand that her white middle class beliefs about difference and expectations for schooling were influencing

(in a destructive sense) her plans for an inclusive approach in the school. This may be an example of someone who has power and is unknowingly emphasizing the beliefs valued by their group, while espousing an inclusive approach in their work in schools (Smith, 1999).

In a second example, a school principal of a large secondary school in Australia indicated in an interview that he was supportive of inclusive schooling and spoke of the benefits of this approach. However, he continued to drive a heavy focus on high achievement and standards for each grade in his school. This meant that if students were not able to meet the high expectations, then opportunities were provided for them to complete modified work or complete the set work with specialist support. Time and effort were frequently spent on the development of alternative resources and modified teaching programs that were often taught away from the 'normal' teaching program for that grade. By ignoring responsibility to provide active and successful learning experiences for the learners in each class, staff at the school continued to reinforce the deficit perception of learners who were not responding 'appropriately' to the set curricula.

These examples are not intended as criticism of teachers and principals but have been selected to highlight the challenges of working towards a more inclusive approach in schools. The question is: How can school leaders, students, teachers and parents work together to create more socially just school environments? In addition, how can we increase the social capital and connectedness which are 'the features of social life, networks, norms and trust, that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives' (Putnam, 1996, p. 1).

Building an inclusive community of parents, teachers, school leaders and students working and learning together

School communities that value and respect members and provide a safe learning environment for everyone to express their views, build awareness and develop capabilities together are more likely to be inclusive. This outcome is specifically dependent on leaders facilitating teachers to engage in constructive and critical learning, and adjust their beliefs and practice to meet the needs of diverse learners within an inclusive school culture. The authors suggest four guiding principles to support the development of a more inclusive school community: (1) develop a learning community incorporating a critical friend; (2) value and collaborate with parents and the broader community; (3) engage students as citizens in school review and development; and (4) support teachers' critical engagement with inclusive ideals and practices. These guiding principles can work in concert, as members of a school community challenge how things are, and dream about what could be.

The following discussion draws on our professional experience: Suzanne Carrington was seconded from Queensland University of Technology in 2002-04 to establish and direct the Staff College, Inclusive Education for Education Queensland. In her role as Principal of the Staff College, she led professional learning for Education Queensland staff who taught students with diverse learning needs. At the same time, Robyn Robinson was seconded to the position, Education Advisor-Inclusive Education for Education Queensland. Robyn supported staff in schools and district offices throughout Queensland in their learning about inclusive education. More specifically, Robyn advised staff in school review and development processes using *The Index for Inclusion* (described in more detail below). We will now discuss each guiding principle in turn.

Development of a learning community incorporating a critical friend

Professional learning for teachers could offer a wider array of opportunities to consider their own beliefs in a collaborative environment. In a process of developing an understanding of their own

'educational platform', teachers can assume the role of learners as well as teachers, and develop meaningful links between theory and practice. A critical friend from outside the school can provide focus, guidance and encourage processes that uncover the deeper aspects of thinking needed for reform. The role of this 'outsider' is to facilitate, observe and challenge interactions between stakeholders (for a detailed description of how this could work, see Robinson & Carrington, 2002). A critical friend can confront oppressive and exclusionary behaviour and discourses in a constructive manner by establishing an environment of intellectual reciprocity. The critical friend, teachers and students can act as interrogators, thus challenging the discursive circumstances within which they all operate. In this process, it is vital that stakeholders have time and ongoing support to learn new meanings and implement new practices because they have all been immersed in the status quo and built their understandings and expectations of schooling from earlier experience (Crebbin, 2004). This process can provide a framework to challenge and change the values and assumptions, as well as the practices in an education system. Achieving deep change requires investigation of official discourses operating at all levels in a school community with a particular focus on involving students in the process. This context of a learning community is where the five *industrial-age assumptions* can be confronted. What would classrooms look like, sound like, feel like if students were actively engaged in learning and people were treated with respect.

Value and collaborate with parents and the broader community

This is an approach reflected in a range of school reform initiatives. For example, the Australian federal educational policy, titled the *National Safe Schools Framework* (2003):

recognises the need for sustained positive approaches that include an appreciation of the ways in which social attitudes and values impact on the behaviour of students in our school communities.

(p.4)

Some school principals are adopting values based planning to achieve whole-school teamwork, shared decision making and a positive nurturing school culture. The key focus is on developing a sense of belonging for all members of the school community alongside coordinated review, planning and action:

Values are deeply held views of what we find important. Values are intangible, not something we do or something we have. Values describe how we operate. Values are reflected in the culture of the organisation and how the organisation approaches its work. Values underlie the decisions an organisation makes.

(Noble & Zimmerman, 2001, p. 7)

Charmaine Driver (personal communication, 2003), a school principal in Queensland, describes the problems of relying on a more traditional school planning process rather than values-based planning:

The traditional approach seems neat and tidy, and is in many ways similar to behavioural planning processes. Basically it relies on a gap-analysis to define how schools can overcome problems, or redress costs or inefficiencies. It could be said there is a focus on deficits rather than strength thinking. Many teachers and school communities have not engaged enthusiastically with these processes, leaving small groups of compliant players and those officers who enjoy documenting strategies and plans to work through the processes to meet systemic obligations. Many teachers report that they find these processes and products irrelevant and unacceptable, and in many schools there is considerable evidence that nothing really changes for students, families, staff, schools or the system despite engagement with and documentation of plans and publication of glossy reports.

In contrast, values-based planning involving parents and the community, can be used to develop a school's vision (dream about what could be), the school's mission (the fundamental reason for the school's existence), and strategic planning processes (how are we going to get there). This requires an understanding of the value platform for a school culture through developing relationships between staff, staff and students, and staff and parents/community.

A tool to support the values-based approach to school review and development is *The Index for Inclusion* which was developed in Britain at the Centre for Studies in Inclusive Education (CSIE) in collaboration with the University of Manchester and University of Christ Church College, Canterbury (Booth *et al.*, 2000). *The Index for Inclusion* provides a framework on three interconnected dimensions of school life: School culture, policy and practice; and encourages the widest scrutiny of everything that makes up the life of the school. Each dimension of the Index is divided into a number of indicators representing 'statements of aspiration against which existing arrangements can be compared in order to set priorities for development' (Booth *et al.*, 2000, p. 11). Following each indicator, there are a number of questions, which encourage thinking about the issue at a deeper level. The Index process enables school communities to engage in a deep and challenging exploration of their present position and the possibilities for moving forward. *The Index for Inclusion* (Booth *et al.*, 2000) provides an authentic process for involving parents in the school community. For example, a parent at one of our partner secondary schools described the process of participation:

The parents have been made to feel wonderfully involved in this whole process and our guidance is requested and the principal encourages us to be oppositional, if we need to be. We haven't had any failings out, but we're not just here to rubber stamp anything that the school administration says. We are equal partners in it.

Valuing relationships with parents and the broader community is also important. This means respect for the full range of contributions made by these groups, rather than the traditional notions of parent help or community sponsorship. Schools frequently refer to parents as partners in the educative process but the nature of the involvement of families is, in many schools, superficial. Indeed while it is generally accepted that parents play a vital role in children's education, in some schools, parents are seen to be more part of the problem than the solution (Fullan, 2000).

With the structure and make-up of families changing, there is a need for a wide range of ways in which parents and carers can contribute meaningfully to schools. McConchie (2004, p. 2) cautions that 'parents and families are treated as homogeneous groups of social equals, with similar beliefs, attitudes and skills'. In an inclusive school where there is genuine respect for all groups, opportunities could exist for a variety of contributions that are valued. Staff in schools sometimes need to be reminded that, 'irrespective of socio-economic status, education level, cultural background or family structure, parents want their children to do well in school and can contribute constructively to the work of the school' (McConchie, 2004, p. 12). While considering respect for the range of family contributions, we are also reminded of Ballard's (2003, p. 2) question 'where did all the children go?' Keith reminds us that we are speaking of 'the invaluable complexity, wonder and joy that is the child'. Continuing this theme, have we forgotten that children come from families? If learning is accepted as a social process originating in the meaning-based relationship that begins in the home, valuing the full range of contributions is not only an obligation but a means of tapping into a rich resource.

Ainscow (2001) considered parent contribution as a way of mobilizing under-used resources and suggested that an inclusive school community could build positive partnerships in education that move beyond token parental involvement. Listening to parents can lead to meaningful

participation in resolving collective problems. This connectedness between school and families is a positive factor for educational success (Lim & Renshaw, 2001; Blair, 2004; Hamilton, 2004) and further constitutes social capital that facilitates achieving goals linked to education reform.

When contemplating the contribution of families to a school, it is valuable to consider an inward and outward perspective to transform a 'school' to a 'school community'. For example, inclusive education can be described as inward directed participation in an education system that includes a focus on changing school culture through reconstructed curriculum and pedagogy. However, inclusive education can also promote and direct social inclusion in society. This is in contrast to a past society which has been 'constructed as being outside the school walls into which children and young people may later gain access if they 'participate' properly now as pupils' (Mannion, 2003, p. 178). This change then assumes that education is viewed as a form of citizenship, rather than learning about citizenship. In addition, this intensifies the challenge by requiring school communities to engage in a complimentary paradigm of children's social inclusion while pupils or citizens in their school.

Engage students as citizens in school review and development

This principle in part draws on the work of Freiberg (1996) with a focus on establishing collaboration and teamwork in a culture where students are treated as citizens and not as tourists. Students are encouraged to contribute in a meaningful way to a school community so that cooperation, participation and support are key factors. Students can be more valued and respected as citizens in a school community. They can also participate in school review, planning and action (Carrington & Holm, 2005). To enable this respectful culture in schools, we need to overcome the traditional power relationships between some teachers and students that create barriers to inclusion. The power relationships and hierarchies in education systems can reinforce authoritarian teacher-student relationships. Can we facilitate teachers to step outside authoritarian roles and critically analyse examples of discourses of sarcasm and domineering language?

Warham (1993) describes examples of dominant strategies teachers use to control their students and the strategies that students use to control their teachers. Through more peer supported learning where students are participating in more active ways, there is a need for less dominating strategies. When students are invited to be 'co-constructors and co-creators' rather than passive consumers, students' perspectives, cultures and experiences come into the centre of the curriculum (Smyth, 2000). A study of children's awareness of self in relationships (Furrer & Skinner, 2003) concluded that children's sense of belonging played an important role in their academic motivation and performance. This view is supported by Beck & Malley (1998) who call for a 'pedagogy of belonging' stressing human relationships over the demands of competitions, grades and scores. This approach requires connecting students with the school community and highlights the importance of teacher-student relationships. In addition, by including students in planning for education reform, traditional roles, relationships, expectations and meanings within a school community can be challenged from a different perspective (Carrington & Holm, 2005).

This type of engagement with the school community in a process of school review and planning can also promote social capital that demonstrates 'active connections among people: the trust, mutual understanding, and shared values and behaviours that bind the members of human networks and communities and make cooperative action possible' (Cohen & Prusak, 2001, p. 4). The basic premise of building social capital that 'bridges' interaction and creates reciprocity, enables people to build a community where people are committed to each other. A sense of belonging and relationships of trust and tolerance can bring great benefits to a school community. These values are illustrated in the words of students and parents in a recent Queensland secondary

school project where a process of stakeholder involvement in review and development increased social capital in the school:

It makes us feel like we belong to the school and that we are part of it, and that we have something to say that can get across and be listened to. ... It makes us feel like that we are, like the school principal has told us since we first came, that we're family. And the more she involves us in decisions that get made, the more we feel like we are part of a family.

(student)

Everybody respected each other's opinions of what should and shouldn't happen in the school. And it was just a good way so we all knew what everyone was feeling.

(student)

The process 'focused the Parent and Citizens group on taking this school out into a broader community, beyond just the parent community. So that all the businesses and other political and commercial infrastructure in our catchment area, if you like and beyond, become aware of the school as an asset to our community'.

(parent)

The students, in effect, not just in words, have ownership of how this place is progressing and this place is evolving. And this is an absolutely fabulous thing, and certainly never happened in my day ... but it is wonderful to see ownership of the entire school, of policies and code of conduct... that the students actually are encouraged to build it.

(parent)

(Carrington & Holm, 2005)

Support teacher's critical engagement with inclusive ideals and practices

This principle is to support the critical intellectual roles of teachers (Smyth, 2000). This is in contrast to compliant workers who methodologically insert ordered facts into students' minds (Scheffier, 1968). Our school communities need to encourage our teachers to question, challenge and move outside the assumptions and practices of the existing order (for example, *the five industrial-age assumptions of schooling*). However, the difficulty for school staff is that they are operating from within the perspective of an existing structure which makes it difficult to think about alternative practices in school organization and teaching of the curriculum. This is where a critical friend can bring a fresh perspective to provoke and challenge current policy and practice. Research has shown that a focus on 'one shot deal' or 'spray paint method' workshops (Schmuck, 1998, p. v) involving teaching strategies and new curriculum are not sufficient to address complex changes associated with inclusion (Skrtic, 1991; Ainscow, 1999; Carrington, 1999; Kugelmass, 2001). This model of change is failing because 'attempts to improve teaching are couched solely in terms of perceived individual deficits within teachers' pedagogical repertoires and styles (or the learning styles of their students)' and does not 'grapple systematically with historical and structural factors that have made teaching (and learning) the way it is' (Smyth, 2000, p. 497). In addition, most school leadership practices create temporary change but little long term improvement (Hargreaves & Fink, 2004).

In our work, we have used a model of professional development using the powerful medium of Forum Theatre to 'kick-start' a process of critical reflection and engagement in schools. The piece of theatre titled 'Who We Are', explored a few of the many faces of exclusion in the lives of young people. The play aimed to provoke and provide an opportunity for dialogue about racism, homophobia, adolescent body image, and teacher sarcasm. The process helped teachers and students to explore issues of exclusion in a supportive and creative environment. It is vital to develop a critical dimension to school discourse that will challenge the deployment of those age-

old assumptions. This is because 'language is how we name the world and assign cultural meanings to who we are and what we do' (Ballard, 2003). Teacher's use of language can reflect and maintain the dominant power relations within the pedagogical domain or teachers can engage in more democratic relationships with students.

Conclusion

After attending the recent International Colloquium on Inclusive Education in Montreal, Canada, in July 2004 (<http://www.mcgill.ca/edu-conferences/inclusive/>), we shared the frustration of the colloquium participants about the lack of systemic change in education organizations throughout the world after years of work towards more inclusive schooling. We could all share an example of a fantastic school that was striving to include all students and achieving significant results but we are also aware that these are pockets of innovation. In fact, in Queensland, we suggest that many schools are working way beyond current policy expectations and presenting amazing stories of community engagement and student achievement (e.g. Sharing Success Conference, Cairns, Australia, May 2004, <http://www.learningplace.com.au/deliver/content.asp?pid=17446>). However, we have many staff in leadership positions trapped in the industrial-age assumptions. Many of these people will vehemently deny this fact and use the fashionable rhetoric of the time, hopefully indicating their currency in the new age of educational reform. But 'leakage' of traditional power maintaining language and practice ensures that deep change and reform is not viable and indeed not valued.

Our experience in some schools informs us that community satisfaction and pride ensures sustainability of structured and unstructured interconnected teams that reflect the four guiding principles discussed in this paper. These teams of students, staff, and parents work together and listen (really listen) to each other. In this context, listening is connected to empowerment in a school culture built on value and respect. Although it is difficult to avoid the power dichotomies of teachers as leaders and students as followers, we believe teachers and students can be encouraged to develop relationships and communication based on mutual respect. Slee (1994, p. 161) reminds us that 'empowerment assumes substantive changes in relationships'. Learning from each other adds a layer of respect and understanding of difference that cannot be achieved through the latest workshop on a new teaching strategy for inclusive education. Rather, the school community learn behaviours that encourage and enable cooperation and achievement of an inclusive school culture (Carrington, 1999). Many of these schools can be described as moving schools that are able to implement systematic and strategic innovation through their internal resources (Ainscow & Hopkins, 1992) and we would argue that frequently this occurs without systemic direction or accountability. We would argue that these school communities do value and respect each other and work together as our African friend described at the 5th International Special Education Congress. This is because the social relationships that develop are the catalyst for learning in less bounded and more community focused ways (Mallory & New, 1994).

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