Initial Teacher Education: Navigating the Inclusion Illusion

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Abstract

Inclusion is a useful illusion, a rhetorical tool to include in policy, but it is not (currently) a value that is woven coherently into the fabric of society. What Foucault calls 'contradictory discourse' is evident across different threads of education.

'Inclusion' challenges current educational priorities of high stakes testing and a narrow knowledge based curriculum, but there is little acknowledgement of this.

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) is mandated to train teachers to be inclusive, but unwilling to address the discrepancy between the rhetoric of inclusion and the reality of a highly pressured, fast paced academic National Curriculum.

The dilemma for schools is that in order to gain 'league table glory' they have to sacrifice inclusive values in practice. Schools which resist the pressure to 'play the game' suffer (Glazzard 2014).

The disappointing 'gap' between the hopes and expectations of future teachers, and the realities of teaching as a profession is not a new phenomenon. However, contemporary challenges in education in England highlight the discrepancies between ideals and reality.

Teaching and ITE is more highly regulated than ever before. This bureaucracy creates an increasingly simplistic narrative and a 'check box' approach. If regulations were coherent this standardisation would make good sense (given that ITE provision in England has been splintered into multiple models); but this is not the case.

In response to this over-simple inclusion illusion, we have developed a carefully structured ITE curriculum. The waves of practice model structures school based experiences and academic teacher development strands as two waves. When one wave is reaching a peak the other is in a trough- where the experiences intersect we offer structured moments for reflection. In acknowledging that education is multifaceted, we support our future teachers to develop a sense of the nuanced nature of teaching. We use a range of strategies to prompt inquiries around inclusion (examples will be given in presentation).

In ITE our challenge is to prepare future teachers to make a positive impact in pupils' lives; teaching them to navigate the inclusion illusion is one part of that challenge.

In UK educational policy, soundbites like the term 'inclusion' are used as signifiers of a 'broad direction of travel'. Inclusion is a useful signpost term, a useful illusion for politicians and policy makers, however the dominance of the term means it is widely used, but rarely examined. Without careful definition and critical examination, 'inclusion' is a weasel word that masks complexity and real dilemmas in practice. Exclusionary practices continue across the English education system despite the language of 'inclusion'.

The term inclusion is evident in policy and statutory guidance from the Children and families act (2014) Special Educational Needs (SEN) code of Practice (2015), Teacher Standards (2011) and ITE framework (2016)- all of which is laudable. However, the use of inclusive language does not equate to inclusion in practice, and rather masks the contradictory drivers in the English education system. The contradictory discourses of performativity and inclusion mean that in Glazzard's (2014) words, teachers 'are faced with a stark choice – to focus on those children who will make a significant difference to a school's results or to educate children equally and risk being viewed as a failing teacher.' (p 2). The increasing scrutiny on academic attainment as a

measure of the performance of teachers and schools has had negative consequences on inclusive school culture (see Levitas 1998 for the link between educational and wider social exclusion). It also poses a real challenge to novice teachers, who may subscribe to the inclusive ideal, but have little awareness of the threat inclusive practices face in the current educational climate.

The illusion of inclusion is evident in wider English society too, where the sentiments and rhetoric do not match reality in relation to disabled people's lives.

In 2017 the Equality and Human Rights commission described the discrimination and disadvantage facing those with disabilities in England, offering evidence of social, academic and economic exclusion across multiple measures. The UK has a disability employment gap which has been persistent and is evident in not only lower rates of employment but also lower pay while in employment (TUC 2018). In terms of educational exclusion we can see the identifiable link between school exclusion and social exclusion: "Excluded children are the most vulnerable: twice as likely to be in the care of the state, four times more likely to have grown up in poverty, seven times more likely to have a special educational need and 10 times more likely to suffer recognised mental health problems."(Gill, Quilter-Pinner & Swift, 2017, p 9). Educational attainment of pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) is also notably lower than students without SEND (EHRC 2017, Department for Education 2019). Pupils with SEND attend a range of school types, even thirty years after legislative reforms towards inclusion (Education Act 1981), special and alternative education settings persist. In January 2019 there were 1318300 pupils with an identified SEN, 14.9% of the total pupil population (DfE 2019). 183546 young people, around 2% of the whole pupil population are educated in special settings (special school or academy, PRU or Alternative Provision) separate from mainstream education. It is more accurate then, to describe English education system as a mixed inclusive and special education system.

The inclusion illusion, then, is the claim that inclusive policy and practice are the norm and relatively simple and straightforward to implement. Given the evidence that inclusive education is only a part of the wider educational offer in England and that social exclusion and disadvantage a dominant trend for disabled members of the community we note that 'inclusion' is anything but simple.

Teaching in England and the training of future teachers is highly regulated by legislation and legally binding statutory guidance (a statutory framework). This regulation feeds into a 'discourse of inclusion' which is increasingly simplistic and promotes a reductive 'check box' approach. If regulations were coherent this narrative would make sense given that ITE provision in England follows multiple models (Carter 2015); but this is not the case. Guidance for teachers and those preparing future teachers is inherently contradictory, claiming to take a 'social model' stance on inclusion while simultaneously prescribing a diagnostic medical typology to conceptualise different learner needs. This is evident in documents from the SEND code of practice (2015) to the ITE framework. For example, the SEND Code of practice (2015) on p25 cites the Children and Families act in ensuring the presumption of mainstream (inclusive education) and also justifies exceptions to this requirement: 'High quality teaching that is differentiated and personalised will meet the individual needs of the majority of children and young people. Some children and young people need educational provision that is additional to or different from this. This is special educational provision under Section 21 of the Children and Families Act 2014.' (Department for Education, 2015, p25).

Given the inherent contradiction in promoting a model which pathologises difference alongside quoting 'inclusion' as orthodoxy, the task for novice teachers to make sense of and become 'inclusive practitioners' is pressing. In preparing future teachers, we have developed a carefully structured ITE curriculum. The 'waves of practice' model incorporates school based practice experiences (teaching in practice) and academic teacher development (teaching in theory) experiences as two waves.

When one wave is reaching a peak of intensity the other is in a trough (low intensity)- where the experiences intersect we offer structured moments for reflection. Each 'moment of reflection' prompts novice teachers to reflect on experiences and offers a formal opportunity to practice monitoring their own development as they make connections between what they know and what they do as teachers. The two waves (teaching in theory and teaching in practice) are made up of a number of dimensions, which inform different characteristics of teacher knowledge, belief and skill. In order to develop a rich repertoire, training needs to be dynamic and multifaceted, offering a range of experiences and opportunities to build a rich professional schema as Ball and Forzani describe: "Skillful teaching requires appropriately using and integrating specific moves and activities in particular cases and contexts, based on knowledge and understanding of one's pupils and on the application of professional judgment."(Ball & Forzani, 2009, P 497).

The dimensions within the teaching in theory wave, include knowledge of the statutory framework which teachers are working within; an understanding of child development and cognitive theories about learning including common barriers to learning (both in terms of theories as well as research evidence on these subjects). This wave also includes subject content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman 1987), and knowledge of general pedagogical techniques (not related to a specific subject). In this academic strand we also critically explore the concept of inclusion and examine beliefs and our own inclusive dispositions. Initially the input on these dimensions is heavily scaffolded as a structured curriculum of teacher education, later, as students become more experienced there is a less didactic structure and more opportunity for critical examination of research, concepts and theories as a part of early professional development.

The teaching in practice wave comprises the experiences novice teachers experience while on teaching placement within school classrooms. This wave focuses on the application of skills and novice teachers developing understanding of when and how to apply knowledge, techniques and skills. Some of the facets of teacher development in this wave are the application of general pedagogical and classroom skills, the development of context specific knowledge and skills particular to the context of their practice. This strand depends on future teachers applying their developing understanding of pedagogical techniques and developing the practical skills of understanding and identifying pupil needs in order to adapt their teaching. We also see within this wave ethical and care values in practice, and novice teachers will experience the tensions and challenges where pragmatism and professional judgment are put to the test.

When the high intensity phase of one wave ebbs, we have structured provocations to prompt an episode of reflection for our novice teachers. These provocations take a number of forms, and are couched in the idea that teaching is a complex business, and that teacher professional practice is not simple and continues to develop.

In acknowledging that education is multifaceted, the waves model supports future teachers to develop a sense of the nuanced nature of teaching. We use a range of strategies to prompt inquiries around inclusion and are exploring different methods for evaluating the effectiveness of this training model.

In ITE our challenge is to prepare future teachers to make a positive impact in pupils lives; supporting them to develop a nuanced understanding of inclusion and inclusive practice is an important part of that role.

References

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