

Building teacher confidence and competence to include children with disabilities

Richard Rieser

It was on 20th September 1997 that I came into the world – the firstborn of my parents. The doctors were shocked to see me. They told my parents that I am suffering from multiple abnormalities in the DNA. They told my family that I would neither be able to walk nor sit. As I stepped into the sixth year of my life, my parents started to look for a school which would accept me with my challenges and provide me with all facilities and support that I required, to enable me to do what a normal six-year-old does. Thanks to my school I have learnt that disabilities should not be allowed to draw boundaries in my life. Fears and inhibitions are in the mind. I am sure that I can pass my school life successfully in St Mary's, but what about my higher studies? Will my rights as a child with disability be protected? I want to focus on ways to make the lives of children born with such disability easier. But what if I don't get an opportunity to do it only because of my disability?

– Rabjyot Singh Kohli, age 14, St Mary's School, New Delhi, to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Conference of States Parties, September 2012.

How do we ensure that children with disabilities, like Rabjyot, are accepted and supported by their teachers and peers in a mainstream school and can go on to achieve their potential?

Addressing the education of all teachers to include children and students with disabilities is a crucial, but largely neglected, component for achieving Education for All. A 2009 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report highlighted the importance of teacher competence for developing quality education for all children, but particularly for children with disabilities. The report argues that for inclusive education to be effective, teacher education programmes need to provide teachers with the knowledge, skills and expertise that will enable them to teach students with different abilities, while also preparing them to accept all children and to celebrate diversity in regular schools. Teachers' attitudes towards and knowledge about disabilities are key factors in creating a friendly learning environment, in which every child feels valued and is able to learn.

Yet for many years, the education of children with disabilities has been viewed as a specialist study area for the few, often leading to special education in separate schools, while teachers of mainstream classes receive inadequate or no training in teaching children with disabilities. As a result, teachers feel ill-prepared and are often unwilling to make the changes necessary to include children with disabilities in their classrooms.

Theoretical framework

For inclusive education to be effective for all children, teacher training should be informed by the paradigm shift underlying the 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Convention moves from a traditional/medical model to a social/human rights model: from viewing persons with disabilities as 'objects' of charity, medical treatment and protection, towards viewing them as 'subjects' with rights, who are capable of making decisions about their lives.¹ The new paradigm espouses the critical distinction between 'impairment' – a loss of biological function – and 'disability' – a social process of exclusion caused by barriers of attitude, environment and organisation.

Much of the practice towards children with disabilities, characterised as 'special educational needs', is related to the old paradigm. There are some useful skills and techniques developed under special educational needs, but their application and focus need to change.

Inclusion of children with disabilities involves welcoming and supporting them within their local schools, by identifying and addressing barriers in the environment, organisation, within teaching and learning, and in the attitude of others. In order for children with disabilities to develop their academic and social potential, these barriers need to be addressed through:

- Structural change (universal design, accessible materials and communications, access to Braille and sign language, reasonable accommodations and support, including peer support)
- The modification of learning programmes, curricula and assessments

This is different from integration or mainstreaming, where the child with a disability is present but little in the educational environment is changed or adapted, so the child must fit into a school that is unresponsive to her or his needs. It is also different from special schools or classes where the pupil is segregated from pupils without disabilities.

Teachers' attitudes and other challenges

Values and attitudes are the most important elements in being receptive to developing inclusive practice, as demonstrated in the widely used school self-assessment tool, the 'Index for Inclusion'. Yet a 1996 study of teacher perceptions with regard to inclusive education found that while teachers overwhelmingly endorsed the general concept of providing support to students with disabilities, only one-third of them felt that they had the time, preparation,



Dr Md Rashid Un Nabi/Commonwealth Photographic Awards

Disability, or just impairment? Who decides?

resources and skills needed to do so. Similar findings have been observed in a number of more recent studies.

Inclusion training is an important factor in shaping teachers' attitudes towards including children with disabilities, but it is not enough. A 2011 study revealed that reviewing policies and acquiring knowledge does not in itself address teacher stress about inclusion. Rather, it is exposure to people with disabilities that has been shown to produce the best results. Disability Equality in Education, a UK-based disabled persons' organisation, taught people with disabilities how to train teachers; over a period of 12 years, 100,000 teachers were trained. An initial evaluation showed 94 per cent approval, as well as positive changes in teachers' attitudes and teaching practices.

In Burkina Faso, inclusion of children with disabilities was a new idea in the training of teachers when Handicap International started implementing a pilot project in 36 schools in Tanghin-Dassouri commune in 2003. Although initially reluctant, the teachers became enthusiastic about inclusive education when the training content related to everyday concerns. In addition, there was practical work in schools, where teachers were able to create solutions to real issues. Team teaching, differentiated teaching and learning strategies, and peer teaching helped increase the enrolment of children with disabilities from 54 in 2003 to 228 in 2005.

Teacher training: what works

Much hope is now being placed upon pre-service teaching to create a new generation of inclusive teachers, but such training is only as good as the thinking of the training staff delivering such courses. Training that integrates special and general education teaching as opposed to using separate modules on special education is a promising practice. Ongoing in-service training of good quality can also contribute to successful inclusive education.

Generally, in-service training is carried out by withdrawing one or two teachers per school, training them and then expecting them to pass on their knowledge to their colleagues. This is largely ineffective unless those withdrawn have a strong commitment to inclusion. Collaborative problem-solving with a support teacher who has expertise in including children with disabilities is what has been shown to work. In the Lao People's Democratic Republic, for example, the support of a District Advisory Implementation Team member greatly helped teachers in nine pilot inclusive schools. In particular, regular visits from the team, acting as critical friends and facilitating visits to other schools for teachers to develop their practice, were very positive.

Remote teacher training also seems to be a promising method. A 2005 study found no significant difference between traditional and online presentation of courses. The use of web-based training,

while not always an easy option, can provide an alternative access strategy and focus on learner-directed learning. This can be an attractive strategy, as it is cost-effective, but the crucial involvement of disabled people's organisations must be maintained.

Ways of sustaining methodological changes in schools are essential. The more 'ownership' there is by teachers and district officials in working in partnership with parents, non-governmental organisations and disabled persons' organisations, the more likely it is to be sustainable. In Vietnam, the model of 'key teachers' acting as resource persons, with particular competence and interest in inclusive education, has proved successful. These key teachers are usually school vice-principals or district education officers who are charged to visit the three to five schools under their responsibility for one to two hours a week.

Developing committed school leaders and administrators, followed by frequent and ongoing staff training and support, is a best practice for inclusive education. The principal is key to sustaining commitment to inclusion by the entire school. In the Lao People's Democratic Republic, committed principals are developing more inclusive practices. They have attended training and refresher courses, maintained collaboration with district support advisers, networked with other principals, observed teachers, encouraged creativity and innovation, and collaborated with teachers, parents and community.

Peer support

Peer support is based on actively facilitating and enlisting all the members of a class so that far greater forces for social and educational inclusion become available than if only teacher-directed methods are used. Given the large classes and low resource levels that exist in many parts of the world, inclusion of children with disabilities is not possible without mobilising the biggest resource the teacher has – the pupils in the class. The intentional building of pupil-teacher and pupil-pupil relationships is fundamental to inclusive education.

The most able child can fail in a school where he or she does not feel wanted; any child, even one with complex needs, can succeed in a school where teachers are welcoming and help him or her to participate and feel valued. Quality pre- and in-service training is crucial to ensuring that teachers have the skills, knowledge and understanding required to include the wide variety of children with disabilities in their classroom. Such training must include the development of positive attitudes and commitment to inclusive education. It must incorporate the insights gleaned from the paradigm shift embodied in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It must provide exposure to, and positive experiences of including, children with disabilities. It must be backed by ongoing institutional and peer support to teachers. And it must have the participation of school leaders and administrators to generate commitment and bring about the necessary changes.

Bibliography

Al Zyoudi, M., Al Sartwai, A. and Dodin, H. (2011). 'Attitudes of Pre-service Teachers towards Inclusive Education in UAE and Jordan (a comparative study)'. *International Journal of Disability, Community & Rehabilitation*.

Booth, T. and Ainscow, M. (2002). 'Index for Inclusion: Developing learning and participation in schools'. Bristol, UK: Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education (CSIE).

Disability Equality in Education (2008). *After 17 Years: The history of the charity Disability Equality in Education*. London.

Education Review Office (2010). *Including Students with High Needs*. Wellington, New Zealand.

European Agency for Development of Special Needs Education. (2010). *Education for Inclusion: International literature review*. Odense, Denmark.

European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2011). *Teacher Education for Inclusion Across Europe: Challenges and opportunities*. Odense, Denmark.

Florian, L. and Rouse, M. (2010). 'Teachers' Professional Learning and Inclusive Practice', in Richard Rose (ed.), *Confronting Obstacles to Inclusion: International response to developing inclusive schools*, pp. 185–199. London: Routledge.

Forlin, C. (2001). 'Inclusion: Identifying potential stressors for regular class teachers'. *Educational Research*, vol. 43, no. 3, pp. 235–245.

Forlin, C. (ed.) (2010). *Teacher Education for Inclusion: Changing paradigms and innovative approaches*. London and New York: Routledge.

Forlin, C. and Chambers, D. (2011). 'Teacher Preparation for Inclusive Education: Increasing knowledge but raising concerns'. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, vol. 39, no. 1, pp. 17–32.

Gansoré, N. (2006). *Inclusive Education Training in Burkina Faso: Teacher training*. Baltimore, M.D.: Catholic Relief Services.

Grimes, P. (2009). *Quality Education for All: A history of the Lao PDR Inclusive Education Project 1993–2009*. Norway: Save the Children.

Jobling, A. and Moni, K. B. (2004). 'I Never Imagined I'd Have to Teach These Children: Providing authentic learning experiences for secondary pre-service teachers in teaching students with special needs'. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 5–22.

Lambe, J. and Bones, R. (2006). 'Student Teachers' Perceptions About Inclusive Classroom Teaching in Northern Ireland Prior to Teaching Practice Experience'. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 167–186.

Nguyet, D. T. and Ha, L. T. (2010). *How-to Guide: Preparing teachers for inclusive education*. Baltimore, M.D.: Catholic Relief Services.

Peters, S. (2004). *Inclusive Education: An EFA strategy for all children*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank.

Peters, S. and Reid, D. K. (2009). 'Resistance and Discursive Practice: Promoting advocacy in teacher undergraduate and postgraduates'. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, vol. 25, no. 4, pp. 551–558.

Scruggs, T. E. and Mastropieri, M. A. (1996). 'Teacher Perceptions of Mainstreaming Inclusion, 1958–1995: A research synthesis'. *Exceptional Children*, vol. 63, no. 1, pp. 59–74.

Sharma, U., Ee, J. and Desai, I. (2003). 'A Comparison of Australian and Singaporean Pre-service Teachers' Attitudes and Concerns About Inclusive Education'. *Teaching and Learning*, vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 207–217.

Shippen, M. E., et al. (2005). 'Pre-service Teachers' Perceptions of Including Students with Disabilities'. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, vol. 28, no. 2.

Steinweg, S. B., Davis, M. L. and Thomson, W. S. (2005). 'A Comparison of Traditional and Online Instruction in an Introduction to Special Education Course'. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, vol. 28, no. 1.

Thomas, G. and Mathews, A. (2001). 'Evaluation of Training by DEE Pt 1 and Pt 2 Telephone Interviews'. Oxford, UK: Westminster Institute of Education, Oxford Brookes University.

UNESCO (2001). *The Open File on Inclusive Education*. Paris: UNESCO.

UNESCO (2009). *Towards Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities: A guideline*. Bangkok: UNESCO.

UNESCO (2010). *Global Monitoring Report 2010: Reaching the marginalized*. Paris: UNESCO.

Acknowledgement

This article is taken from a background paper for UNICEF's State of the World's Children Report 2013, and builds on the author's research for UNICEF on Developing Teachers for Children with Disabilities, funded by AusAid.

Endnote

- 1 To find out more about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, 2006, go to: <https://www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp?id=150>

RICHARD RIESER (rlrieser@gmail.com) is an international consultant on Inclusive Education and Disability Equality, World of Inclusion Ltd. A disabled person and teacher, he is author of *Implementing Inclusive Education: A Commonwealth Guide to Implementing Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities*, London: Commonwealth Secretariat (publications@commonwealth.int).