Perspectives on inclusive education: learning from each other

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Many courses of study are currently available that address inclusive education and, increasingly, distance education is seen as a flexible and appropriately inclusive way to deliver such courses. In this article a team of colleagues, Kieron Sheehy, Jonathan Rix, Melanie Nind and Katy Simmons, discusses the development of an Open University course, E243 Inclusive Education: Learning from Each Other, which was launched in February 2004. The team reflects on their own process of learning from each other and from the rich network of people involved, mirroring some of the course themes in their own journeys. Collaborative learning became a key theme within the course, both as a method for teaching within the 'inclusive classroom' and also as the process for producing a course in a contested and challenging area. This experience allowed the team to change and develop their own perspectives on important issues and, it is suggested, allowed the course to include ways in which students could be supported in having the same opportunity.

Key words: inclusive education, collaborative learning, disability.

The context for the course development

E243 Inclusive Education: Learning from Each Other is the third in a series of Open University undergraduate courses in inclusive education published since the early 1980s. *E241 Special Needs and Education* (1982–1991) had critiqued the education system and *E242 Learning for All* (1992–2003) had campaigned for inclusive education. The courses introduced students to inclusion before it was regularly on the minds of teachers and the lips of politicians. The courses asked the kinds of questions that led teachers to question their practice. But their impact also extended more widely. Mark Vaughan (2002), for example, acknowledges the influence of these courses on his thinking and on the campaigns of the Centre for Studies in Inclusive Education.

At the start of the new millennium, as we began our three-year-long course development work, we wondered what role was left for a new course to play, especially when, on first glance, the battle for inclusive policy appeared to have been won. We began by asking what was left to say and teach about inclusive education and what we could do differently to reflect the new context. This led us to want to address what it is we think should happen when we bring diverse learners together in one place of learning. Hence our concern that pupils (and the people working with them) should learn from each other – not just alongside one another but with and from each other. We also wanted to explore how school communities can make this learning happen. Learning from each other became central both to the course content and to the processes of course development as we collaborated with different tutors, practitioners and disabled people, working with and across our different perspectives and experiences.

We talked, observed, filmed and wrote amid circumstances in which pressure from local political agendas, disability lobbies, parent groups and young people themselves had influenced and continued to influence the national and international context. These different pressures inevitably created what we saw as 'jagged edges' in policy. We saw, for example, that the 'inclusion' agenda often did not sit comfortably with the 'standards' agenda, with its specialist schools, league tables, increased selection of pupils and increased pressures to exclude. In addition, the concept of 'parental choice' had led more articulate and better-off parents to pursue places in what they saw as 'better' schools, often outside their immediate neighbourhood.

In 1997, the incoming New Labour government had made a clear commitment to 'the principle of inclusive education' (DfEE, 1997, p. 44) in its Green Paper, *Excellence for All*

Children, signalling government support for the Salamanca World Statement on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994). The *Programme of Action* (DfEE, 1998) promised changes in the legislative framework to promote inclusion as well as financial support for inclusion projects. Subsequent official documents, such as National Curriculum 2000, *Respect for All: valuing diversity and challenging racism through the curriculum* (QCA, 2004a) and *Inclusion: providing effective learning opportunities for all pupils* (QCA, 2004b), embedded rather than bolted on the concept of inclusion. The promised legislation, in the form of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA) 2001, amended Section 316 of the 1996 Education Act and removed all but one of the caveats that had acted as a barrier to inclusion. (Previously the caveats were if the child's inclusion was an inefficient use of resources and would not meet the special educational needs of the child. The remaining caveat is 'where placement in mainstream would be incompatible with the efficient education of other children'. However, the LEA is obliged to show that there are no reasonable steps that could be taken to prevent such incompatibility.) The SENDA also extended the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act to include schools, and extended the remit of the Special Educational Needs Tribunal to hear educational discrimination cases.

Alongside this policy and legislative context inclusion was strongly promoted through every school being given a copy of *Index for Inclusion* (Booth, Ainscow and Vaughan, 2000). Ofsted's monitoring of inclusion in schools and LEAs was established as a critical part of the inspection process. There were interventions to address the effects of poverty on education (with the establishment of the Social Exclusion Unit, Sure Start, Education Action Zones and the Excellence in Cities initiative) and a stress on schools as part of their communities (with the establishment of one-stop shops, family literacy centres and full service schools initiatives).

All of this, however, took place without a consistent government definition of inclusion and, in the context of competing agendas, that made inclusive practice difficult. We were writing about education at a time when gaps and contradictions in policy were rife. For example, the Children and Young Peoples' Unit (CYPU) had been created by legislation in 2000 specifically to enable young people to participate in policy making and with a particular focus on marginalised young people. Policy makers were urged to ensure that such young people 'are aware of and take up appropriate opportunities to have their say'(CYPU, 2001,p. 11). Yet, when the 2001 SENDA extended the right of appeal to the Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal, those extended rights were given to parents rather than to young people themselves. Despite much rhetoric, there was little change in the way that the law relates to children and young people: they continue to lack the legal right to take part in person in educational decisions that concern them. Moreover, underlying all the changes, we still had the fundamental anomaly of a legislative process firmly based on the medical model, with 'need' rather than rights seen as the basis of provision.

Ambitions for the course

We wanted to design a course about inclusive education that would put rights into the foreground rather than needs. It would have to form part of foundation degrees in primary and early years and hold relevance for teachers, teaching assistants, other professionals, parents and those with a general interest. We were clear that we did not want the course to be about whether or not there should be inclusive education. In this we supported Jordan and Goodey's (2002) observation that 'the case for inclusion has been made'(p. 33) and Mittler's (2000) stance that we 'no longer need to weigh the evidence for and against something most countries have decided to do anyway'(p. vii). The issue we saw as our focus was what kind of inclusive education each of us wanted and how we might overcome the barriers and obstacles on the road to achieving it. Our explicit values position as pro-inclusionists could be construed as directive were it not for an equally strong influence on the course: our belief that the students should be valued as active meaning-makers with the potential power to transform their own and others' educational experiences (Collins, Harkin and Nind, 2002). We invite students to begin to construct their own 'different interpretations or visions of inclusion' (Open University, 2004, p. 55) – what it means to them, and how they can hear and act on calls for equity, social justice and human rights.

We wanted to do justice to the complexities of the concept of inclusive education, recognising that there isn't just one inclusion but, rather, inclusion according to government rhetoric, inclusion as seen by children within schools, inclusion according to disabled activists, inclusion according to the lay person and inclusion contested by various academics. We did not want to be prescriptive about any one of these, but we did want to enhance understanding and, where possible, to enhance practice – another part of our own activist or values agenda. Moreover, we wanted to teach about inclusive education through inclusive education, even though working to become inclusive enough to be credible in our students' and our own eyes brought its own challenges.

Making it happen

As with the audience for the course, the team brought different histories and expectations. We debated a range of issues, from specific use of language (should we use Down syndrome or Down's syndrome?) to fundamental concepts such as how we should deal with the idea of 'need'. Here, for example, we had to acknowledge both the constraints and opportunities that a label brings, but we also had to critique the power of the professional to make judgements which will create identities upon which so many other judgements will be made. Some debates remain unresolved – will young people 'with moderate learning difficulties' ever come together to reclaim the labels used against them and find power in shared identity? How much room is there for optimism about inclusion? How much power do grass-roots activists and practitioners really have?

While we shared overall aims these differences shaped our thoughts about how to achieve them. In this section we each reflect on our learning experiences:

KSh: Exploring the historical development of inclusive education gave me an awareness of how forces from previous eras continue to affect current issues and educational practices. Of particular importance in this exploration were the views of people who had been segregated and oppressed by the system. Attending a Social History of Learning Disability conference during this time, in which papers were given by both academics and people with learning difficulties, was a watershed. This resulted in the inclusion of a chapter, in one of the set books, by Mabel Cooper (2004), who is a survivor of institutionalisation; it changed the way I saw my own history in special education and also what I thought inclusive education should look like in the future.

By the end of the course I think our ideas have moved closer together regarding what constitutes an inclusive pedagogy, with collaborative and interactive teaching being at its heart. These ideas were influenced by our discussions of the social model of disability. Consequently I changed my ideas about how technology could be used in supporting inclusion. I had moved away from an individual needs model towards designing universal environments for the potential benefit of all. The term potential is important here as in the course we acknowledge that all educational practices develop within a culture, and we consider the danger that technology might be used to recreate previous/existing inequalities. It was challenging trying to turn some of these experiences and ideas into activities within the course itself and allow students to construct their own understanding of how inclusive education can be achieved.

JR: While working on the course I have found myself looking back at the way I have taught, and seen even more lost opportunities than I did at the time. I have become ever more aware of my role within classroom conflicts and my failure to make the best of a situation. I have found my critical faculties heightened enormously, particularly in relation to the need for schools and staff to listen to the voices of their students. I have also found that my frustration with the dominant drive for standards has increased, as has my understanding of parental confusion about how they should make choices for their children. Perhaps the greatest satisfaction from working on this course, however, has been the confirmation of how essential it is that we are all given the time and are encouraged to reflect and collaborate.

KS: As I worked on the course, I became particularly aware of the multiple and often conflicting perspectives that I hold. As, at different times, a user of, and also a provider of services,how could I present these perspectives as anything other than being in conflict? I sometimes felt I was rather a negative influence in the course team, as I pointed to the gaps between rhetoric and the often dismal experiences of users of services.

My experience of making a video at Penn Green Family Centre enabled me to see how user and provider perspectives were not necessarily mutually exclusive: users' voices can shape services. Finding that 'voice', and enabling it to speak through the course, then became a driving force in writing my units, as it did for my colleagues. We became aware of how difficult it is to find those voices in much of the academic literature. Many of our sources therefore drew on 'ephemera' – material from the web, papers from conferences of young people, or disabled people, or parents. The extended team members who critically read the material were valuable in reminding us of the primacy of these non-traditional sources and voices. The principle of 'nothing about us without us'became a strong influence on each unit.

Another area of debate that we returned to many times was the impact of those 'jagged edges' we had identified at the start of our work. So, for example, we acknowledged that there had been changes in legislation, specifically the amendment of Section 316, to reduce barriers to placement in mainstream schools. But how significant was this, if the educational system was such that only the articulate middle classes could access it? Should we be pleased that the legislation had been amended? Cynical about the real changes that it made to access? Or angry that legislation was still based on a medical rather than rights-based model and largely continued to ignore children's views?

MN: For me the process of working on the course highlighted how little attention is actually given in the inclusion literature to teaching and learning in inclusive classrooms. Much of my thinking time was taken up in trying to bring together my previous work on developing meaningful teaching approaches for people with severe learning difficulties (e.g. Nind and Hewett, 1994) with all the discussion about inclusion as a basic right. This led me to steer our search for what characterises inclusive teaching. Making the videos illustrated all the tensions and resonance between what good teachers ordinarily do and what they do when their classes become more and more diverse. In pursuing this interest in pedagogy I was also learning from our research group. The group was looking at inclusive school cultures in which we became interested in moments of inclusion amidst all the many moments of exclusion (Nind, Benjamin, Sheehy, Collins and Hall, in press, Benjamin, Nind, Collins, Hall and Sheehy, 2003). I think our students, like us, will grapple with what makes such moments of inclusion happen and how we can make them permeate more of classroom life. My thinking was particularly moved on by the work of Susan Hart (2003) and Susan Simmons (2003), who wrote chapters for our set books. They helped me to further my understanding of the limits of traditional notions of differentiation and access and to be able to envisage living examples of alternative practices of teaching for everyone and of learning from learners. The whole collaborative process has brought me to my own (albeit untidy) vision of how inclusive education can and should be.

The outcome

We each faced our own steep learning curves to develop a course that ultimately we are proud of. Our materials address the need for a pedagogy of recognition (Slee, 1999), where diverse learners can recognise their own experiences and identities in the curriculum, and we try to represent and value our own diverse students in this way. We try to talk *to* rather than *about* disabled students. We want students with minority cultures, languages and sexuality to find themselves visible in the materials. Similarly, we discuss inclusive teaching as good teaching, that is teaching that is collaborative and interactive, and we bring this to bear in our exercises and assignments which draw extensively on student experience. We focus on the active participation of all learners and our materials are designed to support students as they develop their own informed understandings of the various ways in which inclusion is conceptualised and, indeed, how they themselves construct inclusion.

To illustrate the complexities of inclusion we maintain a position of this as problematic and as contested territory. We are transparent about our own positions and how these have developed and continue to develop. As course writers we have disabled family members and have all been marginalised in our educational experiences in some way, but we are able-bodied professionals and this is undoubtedly problematic for some readers and critics. Through dialogue with our critical readers (including disabled writers Sally French and Jon Swain) our positions and more often our emphases changed; we became more reflexive and our concern with whose voices are heard increased.

The E243 books reflect a journey, with students *Starting out* (book 1) from where they are. This first unit (which we wrote last) recognises the contradictions that students are likely to encounter in practice, legislation and provision, and attempts to show them where these competing discourses have come from. This notion of competing discourses is developed in *Thinking it through* (book 2), where different conceptual frameworks, particularly the medical,social and rights models, are explored. Our aim was to give students the tools to critique practices and positions and to understand their own position. In book 3, *Listening to others*, this understanding is extended and they engage with the perspectives of children, parents, professionals, activists and academics. They explore some of the discomfort zones, where children and teachers might want different things and where activists and teachers have clashing priorities. Book 4, *Working it out*, discusses different models of inclusive practice including the resourced school, the community school and proactive and reactive measures for promoting inclusion and preventing exclusion. It does not present models of how to do it as much as insights into moments of inclusion or examples of developing practice. Finally, book 5, *Making it happen*, looks at how we can bring about the kinds of inclusion we might want at the levels of classroom,school and communities. It balances the contribution of activists and legislators and looks at how changes in culture can be brought about, both on a personal level and within complex systems.

Echoing the students'pathways, we too have gone through the stages of working out our initial stance, understanding it better by applying the conceptual frameworks, learning by listening to others, evaluating models in practice and trying to make inclusive education happen within our own sphere of influence.

Conclusion

We feel very fortunate to have worked on this course. We have all been challenged by, and learned from, the critical readers who have appraised our materials as we have gone along, the authors we have commissioned to write chapters for us, and the people at the heart of the action in schools where we filmed. The invaluable feedback from our external assessor, Julie Allan, also made us more comfortable with the shifting, untidy, sometimes contradictory nature of bringing together voices on inclusion. There are inevitably things we would do differently if we were to start again, but the process is one we would keep.

The course has required us to engage in inclusive research – finding rich data to analyse and share. It has also encouraged us to engage in inclusive teaching, with each of our decisions influenced by some of the following questions. Will this speak to everyone? What impact will these words have on how students feel? And will this help students feel equal and trusted? (Hart, 2003.) We all feel that we have been involved in a kind of inclusive learning, made possible by a number of factors, all of which are applicable to inclusive learning more generally. We were able to make time and space to collaborate and to create a culture in which everyone could feel safe taking risks with new ideas. Perhaps most rewarding of all was that points of conflict or controversy were not seen as personal threats but as prompts to re-examine our thinking. A quirk of distance education is that we have had little opportunity along the way to hear from our students and, of course, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Our students will tell us whether they feel included and what they learn, and we will need to be ready to listen.

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