Inclusive Education

Barriers and solutions to effective inclusive practice

Emily Alexander
s2714968

Serene Choi

Loraine McKay
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The philosophy of inclusive education has its roots within social justice (Morcom & MaCallam, 2012), stating that all children have the right to quality education. This stance is purported by international social justice bodies, such as the United Nations Children's Fund in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), and the Salamanca Statement (1994) produced by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Boyle, Scriven, Durning & Downes, 2011). On a national level, inclusive education has support in legislation and policies, including the Disability Standards for Education Act (Cth) in 2005, and in QLD the Anti-Discrimination Act (1991) which prohibits discrimination within education on the grounds of disability (Dickson, 2011). The Australian Professional Standards for Teaching (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2014), require all teachers support the full participation of students with disabilities, which includes ongoing differentiation of the means of representation, engagement and expression in learning. Furthermore, the Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians (2008) Goal One aims to provide all young australians with access to high quality education (Cumming & Mawdesley, 2013; Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008). As a result of inclusive education policies and legislation, teaching frameworks and strategies such as Universal Design for Learning, Differentiated Instruction and Response to Intervention are being implemented throughout Australian schools. However, these frameworks and instructional strategies are not without challenges, and often fail to increase student success and effective inclusion due to a range of barriers to implementation, such as lack of knowledge on diverse needs (Pivik, McComas and LaFlamme, 2002), and attitudes towards inclusive education (Sharma, Forlin, Loreman & Earle, 2007). Overcoming such barriers is an ongoing challenge, however, teachers are more able to do so through utilising the practice of collaboration (Saggers, Macartney & Guerin in Carrington & MacArthur, 2013), and engaging in ongoing critical reflection (Larrivee, 2000).

Inclusive education is not simply catering for the needs of students with disabilities, instead it is reframing the teaching role that encourages teachers to respond to individual differences, including cultural, linguistic, cognition, physicality, emotional or social needs of students (Voltz, Sims & Nelson, 2010). In practice, this requires adjustments to instruction, materials and resources, curriculum and assessment format and content. The frameworks and methods of UDL, DI and RTI present inclusive considerations in a manner that supports the teacher, and ensures the success of all students.

UDL is a systematic and scientific framework that guides teachers in the how part of inclusive classrooms (Izzo, 2012). According to Rose (2001), UDL is about the flexibility of the methods and materials used within a classroom, in a manner than maximises all student learning potential. The UDL framework suggests three overarching concepts, which aim to overcome potential barriers to learning, including sensory, physical and cognitive barriers (Rose, 2001). The first key concept is supporting diverse needs of students by providing multiple methods of presentation or representation of information and content (Rose, 2001; Courey, Tappe, Siker & LePage, 2013). In the classroom, this means presenting lesson content in a range of
ways, using a variety of teaching strategies that cater for different learning styles, and overcome particular barriers to learning (Izzo, 2012). For example, providing lesson content verbally, with the addition of visual information such as Picture Communication Symbols, for students who have hearing impairment or sensory issues. The second concept suggests the need for flexible and multiple means of expression (Rose, 2001; Courey et al, 2013). In a classroom, this involves changes to assessment, providing different options for students to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding, such as oral or written formative and summative assessment (Izzo, 2012). The third concept is to provide multiple and flexible options for engagement in content and in learning (Rose, 2001; Courey et al, 2013). For example engaging in content through audio-visual information, group work, individual, and written text means. Overall, the UDL to provides teachers with a framework for formatting learning experiences for students, with highly flexible options for learning, accommodating for a broad range of needs.

Differentiated Instruction (DI) is similar UDL in that it supports teachers in creating an inclusive classroom (Voltz, Sims & Nelson, 2010), by focusing on meeting the learning needs of all students (Anderson, 2007). Anderson (2007) suggests that DI draws on scientific understanding of the brain, Gardiner's multiple intelligences theory, understanding of the role of student motivation in learning, and understanding student engagement. Anderson (2007) and Watts-Taff, Laster, Broach, Marinak, Connor and Walker-Dalhouse (2012) suggest that DI allows students to access the same classroom curriculum by providing multiple entry points, learning tasks, and outcomes-the three overarching concepts also that underpin UDL. However, different from UDL, DI emphasises the importance of engaging student interest in learning. Logan (n.d) suggests examples of modifications of content, processes and products in the classroom-providing a range of books and materials that cater for different reading levels; creating activities based on Bloom's taxonomy and the hierarchy of thinking; and providing different task options such as writing, performing, creating a book report (Logan, n.d). In reading instruction, DI approach is highly effective. A study carried out by Reis, McCoach, Little Muller and Kaniskan (2011) demonstrated the success of providing individualised learning session which focused on increasing reader fluency and comprehension, through interest based reading curriculum, in which students self-selected readers.

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a school-wide framework for multi-tiered instruction that uses three levels of intervention to respond to individual needs of students (Hoover, 2009). Tier One, 'universal prevention,' all outcomes, practices and systems are whole-school focused, and provide support for both academic and behavioural needs of the whole-school (Simonsen, Shaw, Fagella-Luby, Sugai, Coyne, Rhein, Madaus & Alfano, 2010). All students are screened through testing and data analysis, to establish which students require additional support from Tier Two instruction (Hoover, 2009). Students who show a lack of progress towards universal academic and behavioural benchmarks, are provided with Tier Two support, which is tailored towards particular needs. For example, students who receive additional support from a phonics teacher in addition to mainstream literacy lessons; and some students may be placed on a positive behaviour support plan. Tier Three is established for learners who have more significant educational and behavioural
needs, and require ongoing and sustained intervention in highly individualised manner (Simonsen et al, 2010). These students have individual learning plans, curriculum plans and assessment plans that allow them to engage with curriculum content, and have the ability to succeed against specific objectives. RTI functions through intensive progress monitoring, and data-driven decisions, in which the entire school program is structured to cater for individual needs of all students.

Whilst these frameworks and instructional strategies provide guidelines for schools and teachers on how to successfully implement inclusive education practices, research has demonstrated that there are a number barriers to the successful implementation of inclusive education. Two such barriers are teacher knowledge of disabilities and teacher attitudes towards inclusive education. Teacher attitudes towards inclusive education are directly effected by their knowledge and understanding of disabilities and inclusive education; through addressing teacher knowledge, potential negative attitudes towards inclusive practices can be negated through better understanding and education.

Pivik et al (2002) present a study on the barriers to inclusive education, suggesting that a frequently reported barrier is the unintentional barrier of lack of knowledge, education and understanding on the part of staff and the education system. In the classroom, this equates to teachers not adapting curriculum to suit specific needs and abilities of students, lack of adaptation in specialist classes such as physical education, and exclusion from particular classes due to physical limitations such as vision impairment of physical impairment (Pivik, et al, 2002). Carroll, Forlin and Jobling (2003) support this stance by providing research evidence that suggests improved teacher education can address the barriers to successful implementation of inclusive education.

Sharma et al (2007) state that the importance of positive attitudes towards inclusive education is pivotal, and that success of inclusive practices is influenced by how teachers perceive students with disabilities. Sharma et al (2007) suggest that anxiety and concern arises through lack of experience in working with people with disabilities, personal values and ethics not in alignment with the philosophical rationale of inclusive education. Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2000) propose that attitudes towards inclusion stem from the nature and severity of the disabilities of students, and the issues surrounding educational provisions. For example, research suggests that teachers feel children with sensory issues are more easily included within the mainstream setting, opposed to children with severe intellectual impairments (Avramidis et al, 2000). Therefore, through collaboration with staff and members of the community with a broad and professional knowledge on all special needs, teachers can overcome their lack of knowledge, and attitudes can be altered through deeper knowledge and a sense of professional community.

The practice of collaboration supports inclusive education by building a sense of partnership amongst professional personnel (Saggers et al, 2013). The real-world implication of inclusive education is that teachers are faced with the unknown, and don't always have the necessary foundational knowledge to foster
and support effective and equitable education for all students. However, by engaging in collaborative learning and partnerships, knowledge and experience can be shared, alongside resources and ideas for inclusive curriculum. Collaborative partnerships can be formed by teachers who meet to establish joint learning goals or assessment strategies for their students, as well as planning an inclusive curriculum for their students (Saggers et al, 2013). Teachers may collaborate to establish alternative assessments that meet curriculum requirements, such as planning alternatives to oral presentations for non-verbal students, or providing assessment information in audio format for visually impaired students.

Teacher-teacher collaboration encourages shared responsibility for student progress, and makes use of the skills and specialised knowledge different teachers possess (Voltz et al, 2010). When teachers utilise UDL or DI, or the school is structured through RTI, collaboration supports the planning process, because there is a sense of responsibility for all students, and therefore teachers will support each other with resources, curriculum plans, assessment plans and strategies. In an RTI structured school, collaboration may involve generalist classroom teachers, special educators, assessment and curriculum specialists, reading specialists, speech and language specialists, occupational therapists, other paraprofessionals, and parents/guardians (Hoover, 2009). If a non-verbal, physically disabled and vision impaired student begins to learn switching, a teacher may collaborate on communication goals and strategies with an occupational therapist, to best support the learning needs of the student.

Overall, through the process of collaboration, significant gaps in professional knowledge of disabilities or lack of understanding in designing inclusive curriculum and learning experiences, can be overcome. Furthermore, to overcome additional gaps in knowledge or attitudinal issues surrounding inclusive education, ongoing professional and critical reflection can assist teachers in becoming an effective inclusive educator.

Critical reflection, according to Larrivee (2000) is both the process of critical inquiry and self-reflection (p.294). It involves the consideration of personal and professional beliefs, assumptions and values, ethical implications and how these impact upon professional practice. For example, through practice and critical reflection, teachers views on disabilities may be challenged, no longer viewing disability as a deficit (McKay, Carrington & Iyer, 2014). Bently-Williams and Morgan (2012) research indicated that preservice teachers gained a deeper insight into inclusive education through the practice of critical reflection, particularly aspects of environment, curriculum, and knowing and understanding students needs. McKay et al (2014) further suggest that engaging in critical reflection leads to more deliberate decision making and practice; teachers can question and evaluate the effectiveness of curriculum, teaching strategies and assessment for their students.

Larrivee's (2000, p.302) levels of critical reflection enable teachers to approach reflection, focusing on philosophical core beliefs, underlying principles, daily teaching practice and decision making and strategies. A classroom teacher who has no experience with disabilities and has a student with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can reflect daily through these four levels. Firstly, reflecting upon philosophical beliefs one can reflect upon values, ethics, teaching standards and policies, to understand that all students have the right
to quality education. Secondly, the teacher can reflect on a framework for practice, whether the school has a framework in place, such as RTI or independently implementing UDL within the classroom to cater for the needs of the student with ASD. Thirdly, the teacher can assess their daily practice. What teaching strategies are being used? What resources and materials encourage and support all students, and enable the barriers of ASD with learning to be overcome? Lastly, reflecting decision makings—what decisions need to be made to positively effect this student? This may involve rearranging the physical environment, seeking additional support, using ICT resources to engage, and creating an individual learning plan for the student.

Inclusive education is the most pertinent issue in education, and while all teachers have heard the phrase, and all preservice teachers learn the rhetoric, barriers to practicing inclusive education are present. The challenges to ensuring quality education for all students exist in every classroom, and require frameworks, strategies and resources to support teachers in enabling their students to learn. By engaging in formal and informal collaboration in teacher-teacher, parent-teacher, teacher-student and teacher-paraprofessional, some existing barriers, such as lack of knowledge on disabilities and negative attitudes towards inclusion, can begin to be overcome. Furthermore, by committing to ongoing critical reflection, understanding how values effect what is taught and how, teachers can reach and teach every student that comes into their classroom.
References


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