

RAISING ACHIEVEMENT FOR ALL LEARNERS – QUALITY IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION (RA4AL)

‘Quality must be seen in light of how societies define the purpose of education. In most, two principal objectives are at stake: the first is to ensure the cognitive development of learners. The second emphasizes the role of education in nurturing the creative and emotional growth of learners and in helping them to acquire values and attitudes for responsible citizenship. Finally, quality must pass the test of equity: an education system characterized by discrimination against any particular group is not fulfilling its mission.’

Foreword, Education for All: The Quality Imperative, EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005, UNESCO, Paris, 2004

Background

In 2010, the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (the Agency) conducted a survey. Twenty-one out of twenty-nine replies from Ministerial Representatives of member countries stated that the topic of raising achievement for all learners in inclusive settings was a priority for further investigation at European level.

Following discussions at the Agency bi-annual meeting in April 2011, the Representative Board members (RBs) agreed that the Raising Achievement for all Learners project (RA4AL) should aim to explore how the presence, participation and achievement of all learners in education could be improved in a meaningful way that improves their life chances and opportunities for active citizenship.

This paper sets out an underpinning rationale and some initial ideas about the key issues to be discussed and clarified as a basis for longer-term work.

Project Rationale

In recent work, the Agency has followed the broad definition of inclusive education set out at the 48th Session of the International Conference on Education (ICE) (2008): ‘inclusive education is an on-going process aimed at offering quality education for all while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectations of the students and communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination’ (UNESCO-IBE 2008, p. 3).

Inclusive education is therefore associated with principles of equity, social justice, democracy and participation. The recent *Council Conclusions on the Social Dimension of Education and Training* (Council of the European Union, 2010) note that education and training systems across Europe need to ensure both equity and excellence and recognise that improving educational attainment and key

competences for all are crucial, not only to economic growth and competitiveness but also to reducing poverty and fostering social inclusion.

The OECD (2012) similarly states that reducing school failure pays off for both society and individuals and can contribute to economic growth and social development. They point out that the highest performing education systems across OECD countries are those that combine quality with equity. They also provide the following clarification: 'Equity in education means that personal or social circumstances such as gender, ethnic origin or family background, are not obstacles to achieving educational potential (fairness) and that that all individuals reach at least a basic minimum level of skills (inclusion)'. Too often access to educational opportunities depends on the learner's ability to conform and learners perceived to be different are marginalised or excluded further perpetuating social and educational inequalities.

Confronting the fear that including all learners may somehow be detrimental to high achievement, the OECD (2011) shows that the improvement of the lowest performing students does not have to be at expense of higher performers. The findings of the UNESCO report 'Learning Divides' (Willms 2006) also provides evidence that strong school performance and equity can go hand in hand and that countries that have the highest levels of performance tend to be those that are successful in not only raising the learning bar but also levelling it.

Farrell et al. (2007) found only a small body of research that addresses the question of how inclusion impacts on the achievements of pupils with and without SEN. They suggest that placing pupils with SEN in mainstream schools has no major adverse consequences for all children's academic achievement, behaviour and attitudes. They point out, however, that many studies were carried out in different contexts, with different methodologies and often involved only small numbers of learners and schools.

Similar caveats also apply to the findings of a systematic review of the literature commissioned by the Evidence for Policy and Practice Initiative (EPPI) (Kalambouka et al., 2005) who found that, in general, there are no adverse effects on pupils without SEN when pupils with special needs are included in mainstream schools.

Lindsay (2007) acknowledges that a major driver for inclusion has been the concern that children's rights are compromised by special education that segregates them from typically developing peers and the mainstream curriculum and educational practices. Finding little research evidence on inclusive education however, he notes: 'It is important to recognize that research evidence is only one factor in policy formulation. ... Values provide a second pillar along with research evidence that might reasonably be considered to support policies concerning the education of children and young people with disabilities and SEN. Hence both evidence for differential effectiveness of processes and outcomes, and compliance with the values

and aspirations of society are factors in policy development, including the determination of children's rights.' (p. 2).

The Agency Director, Cor Meijer, speaking at the conference 'Inclusive Education: A way to promote social cohesion' in Madrid in 2010 put forward a similar argument – that although there is an expectation of clear evidence of the effectiveness of inclusive education for all learners, this is not widely available. As shown above, due to the lack of clarity around the terminology, the complexity of the issues involved and also the difficulties in applying 'scientific' methodology, research into this area is often not conclusive. However, Meijer continues; '... the relevance and necessity of social cohesion as well as inclusive education are purely normative issues. And we should keep them there!'

Despite positive developments in many Agency member countries, there is still a lack of clarity about the meaning of 'inclusion' and consequently what action should be taken to bring about positive attitudes to diversity and increase the capacity of education systems and schools to meet the needs of all learners. Transplanting special education thinking and practice into mainstream contexts is not the way forward – there is a need to debate many assumptions about the way education systems and schools currently work. West-Burnham (2005) suggests that these include:

- The knowledge base and professional practice of teachers
- The principles underpinning school design and organization
- The role of pupils and students
- The nature of the curriculum
- The criteria for effectiveness (p.98).

As will be seen in the following sections, these points have much in common both with the issues raised by Agency Representative Board members and with themes covered by recent Agency work. The RA4AL project will provide an opportunity to clarify and discuss these issues, drawing recent Agency findings together in a holistic way to inform future work.

Who are the learners?

The project is explicit about the focus on 'all learners' – any idea that education is not for everyone and that some learners will always be destined to fail must be challenged. However, of particular concern are learners from groups known to be vulnerable to underachievement including those from lower socio-economic groups, with disabilities/SEN, looked after by the authorities, living in difficult circumstances, e.g. victims of abuse or violence, whose home language is different from the main language of instruction, from minority cultural/religious groups, Roma and travellers, learners who do not regularly attend school, who are pregnant or have caring

responsibilities and learners who may be more able and talented. The following questions should be considered: How should a focus on the needs of learners who may be vulnerable to underachievement and marginalisation be managed in the context of inclusion, without the use of potentially limiting 'labels'? How can outcomes for such learners best be monitored/evaluated to ensure their needs are being met?

Key issues

At the Agency bi-annual meeting in Bordeaux, in April 2011, Agency Representative Board members (RBs) held an exchange session to discuss some key questions in relation to raising the achievement of all learners. These were:

- What does the topic 'raising achievement' mean for you? Which achievements? What do you understand by 'raising'?
- What are your expectations in terms of the learners to be considered?
- Raising achievement for all learners is a quality issue – what does quality mean for you?
- How can quality and raised achievement be identified?

Stressing the need to draw on previous Agency work, the RB discussions highlighted the need to ensure a focus on meaningful participation for all learners, rather than on specific needs and also to focus on value rather than cost.

The key issues are set out below, together with links to relevant Agency work.

Terminology – the need for a common language and understanding of inclusion.

See: Inclusive Education in Action (2010):

<http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/iea>

Teacher Education for Inclusion (2011):

<http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/Teacher-Education-for-Inclusion>

Mapping the Implementation of Policy for Inclusive Education (2011):

<http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/mapping-the-implementation-of-policy-for-inclusive-education>

What is 'achievement'? How is it measured? How can areas such as social aspects of learning and participation be measured?

See: Vocational Education and Training:

<http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/vocational-education-and-training>

Participation in Inclusive Education (2011):

<http://www.european-agency.org/publications/ereports/participation-in-inclusive-education-2013-a-framework-for-developing-indicators/participation-in-inclusive-education-2013-a-framework-for-developing-indicators>

Developing a curriculum for all and personalising learning

See: Inclusive education and classroom practices (2003):

<http://www.european-agency.org/publications/ereports/inclusive-education-and-classroom-practices>

Inclusive Education and Classroom Practice in Secondary Education (2005):

<http://www.european-agency.org/publications/ereports/inclusive-education-and-classroom-practice-in-secondary-education>

Assessment in Inclusive Settings (2007):

<http://www.european-agency.org/publications/ereports/assessment-in-inclusive-settings-key-issues-for-policy-and-practice/assessment-in-inclusive-settings-key-issues-for-policy-and-practice>

Putting Inclusive Assessment into Practice (2009):

<http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/assessment-in-inclusive-settings/phase-2>

ICTs in Education for People with Disabilities – Review of Innovative Practice (2011):

<http://www.european-agency.org/publications/ereports/ICTs-in-Education-for-People-With-Disabilities/Review-of-Innovative-Practice>

Multicultural Diversity and Special Needs Education (2009):

<http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/multicultural-diversity-and-special-needs-education>

Individual Transition Plans - Supporting the move from school to employment (2006):

<http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/transition-from-school-to-employment>

Key Principles for Promoting Quality in Inclusive Education – Recommendations for Practice (2011):

<http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/key-principles>

Assessment for learning and assessment of learning in inclusive contexts

See: Assessment in Inclusive settings (2007, 2009); Key Principles for Promoting Quality in Inclusive Education – Recommendations for Policy Makers and Recommendations for Practice (2011). (Links provided above)

Professional competences – what does ‘quality’ in inclusive settings look like in practice?

See: Teacher Education for Inclusion (2011), Profile of Inclusive Teachers (in press): <http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/Teacher-Education-for-Inclusion>

Early Childhood Intervention (2005) and (2010):

<http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/early-childhood-intervention>

Key Principles for Promoting Quality in Inclusive Education – Recommendations for Policy Makers (2009)

<http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/key-principles>

Collaboration and networking with other schools and services, working with parents and the wider community

See: Early Childhood Intervention (2005) and (2010); Multicultural diversity and Special Needs Education (2009); Key Principles for Promoting Quality in Inclusive Education – Recommendation for practice (2011) (Links provided above)

The issues raised above by Agency Representative Board members are broadly consistent with many accounts found in recent literature. These are set out in the next sections of this paper, focusing on first the national level and then the local/school context.

Challenges for national education systems

Providing a quality education for all learners in inclusive settings clearly presents many challenges, one of the greatest being the need to take a long-term, strategic approach to changing the education system.

Dyson and colleagues (2004) point out that any ‘solutions’ that lead to initiatives that are simply overlaid or bolted on to an inherently unfair system will inevitably fail. They state: ‘Unequal educational outcomes arise out of deep social inequalities, and are compounded by the competitive, standards-driven nature of the system itself. Unless these underlying issues are addressed, endless initiatives targeting failing schools and underachieving groups will make little difference.’ (p. 5).

Transforming education in this way involves re-visiting its core purpose. Bangs et al. (2011) believe that ‘Debates about values and education are meaningless unless they inform the work of education systems in changing children’s lives for the better’ (p. 132). They quote from the preface to the OECD Report on Child Well Being in Rich Countries:

‘The true measure of a nation’s standing is how well it attends to its children – their health and safety, their material security, their education and socialisation, and their sense of being loved, valued, and included in the families and societies into which they are born’ (p. 3).

Claxton (2008) expresses a similar view: ‘In thrall to content and qualifications, we have forgotten the deeper purpose of education. In the rush to make young people successful exam passers, we have over-looked the deeper need to become successful people, eager to learn and grow in the real-life world of work, leisure and relationships.’ (p. ix).

Lloyd (2007) believes that one perceived barrier to participation of all learners is the lack of skills/ability of certain groups to meet norm-related standards or conform to certain pre-determined norms of behavior. She points out that the strategy to remove these barriers is, however, through ‘compensatory, normalisation approaches’ such as extra support, individualized learning and specialist strategies. She writes: ‘While these measures may be seen to be laudable, in terms of developing *good* practice they are, however, all concerned with compensatory and deficit approaches geared towards the normalisation and indeed standardization, of groups and individuals rather than contributing to the denormalisation of the institutions, systems and rules which comprise education and schooling’ (p. 7). This change in thinking represents a major challenge to the development of more inclusive education systems.

Gordon et al. (2009) talking about the reform necessary to implement the key competences agenda note that: ‘key competence reforms shift school systems from being predominantly input-led and subject oriented towards curricula which include competences, cross-curricular activities, active and individual learning – as well as a focus on learning outcomes’ (p. 219). Such reforms also require teachers to ‘open up to more complex definitions of knowledge as they move from the knowledge transmission-acquisition paradigm towards a knowledge construction approach, which involves active learners’ (p. 221).

The common ground between many initiatives in education highlights the importance of taking a holistic view – the above observations although focused on the introduction of key competences will clearly support greater inclusion by creating flexible environments to allow innovation, mutual learning and the formation of communities of practice and local networks. One recommendation of the Key Competences Report is that member states should ‘strengthen linkages and alignment between different facets of school development and establish ways to

make innovations in school organisation and leadership an integrated part of curriculum innovation and strategies aimed at meeting needs of all learners' (p. 235).

Work by the OECD (2007) and their recent publication *Equity and quality in education – supporting disadvantaged students and schools* (2012) recommends that countries avoid system level policies conducive to school and student failure such as grade repetition and early tracking and selection. They suggest that countries manage school choice to avoid segregation and increased inequities, make funding strategies responsive to students' and schools' needs and design equivalent upper secondary education pathways to ensure completion. They also recommend the following actions to help disadvantaged schools and students to improve: strengthen and support school leadership; stimulate a supportive school climate and environment for learning; attract, support and retain high quality teachers; ensure effective classroom learning strategies and prioritise linking schools with parents and communities.

The work of Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) highlights principles similar to those identified by many other writers (e.g. Hopkins, 2010). They show how former ways of bringing about educational and social change are no longer appropriate. Following an analysis of three former change models, they offer a 'fourth way' based on the following:

- A compelling, inclusive and inspirational vision in the society and its schools;
- Learning and achievement priorities that follow the vision;
- Attraction and retention of high-quality teachers;
- Professional cultures of trust, co-operation and responsibility;
- Evidence-informed rather than data-driven improvement;
- Close relationships of mutual trust between districts and schools;
- Professional networking of peers and with mentors;
- Cultures of improvement where the strong help the weak;
- Community development, engagement and empowerment (p. 69).

While addressing many of the above challenges will require resources, this is not the only factor at work. Mourshed (2010) in a report for McKinsey and Company found that successful education systems were not only about resources as, despite similar spend, school performance was found to vary widely. Levin (2008) notes, however, that the appropriate *allocation* of resources is one of the key organisational supports for change, along with engagement and commitment, professional learning communities and aligned, coherent and supportive system policies and practices.

In the current climate, the development of appropriate accountability mechanisms and ways to measure valued achievement and monitor equity also present further

challenges. Despite the drive for hard data, Fullan (2011) cautions that: ‘statistics are a wonderful servant but an appalling master’ (p. 127) and Hargreaves and Shirley (op. cit.) stress the need to place responsibility before accountability. They suggest that accountability should ‘serve as a conscience through sampling’ and that an assault should be conducted ‘on the excesses of tested standardization that deny diversity and destroy creativity’ (p. 109).

The need for qualitative as well as quantitative data is frequently discussed in the literature and these issues are explored further in the Agency reports: Development of a set of indicators for inclusive education in Europe (2009) and Mapping the Implementation of Policy for Inclusive Education (2011) (See links on page 4).

School-level challenges

Dyson et al (2002) undertook a review of school-level actions to promote participation and found that there are general principles of school organisation and classroom practice that should be followed. These include: the removal of structural barriers between different groups of students and staff; the development of pedagogical approaches (such as constructivist approaches) which enable students to learn together rather than separately and the building of close relations with parents and communities based on developing a shared commitment to inclusive values. They also suggest that separate programmes, services and specialisms should be dismantled.

Ainscow and Kendrick (2010) suggest that the category ‘special educational needs’ has become ‘a repository for various groups who suffer discrimination in society, such as those from minority backgrounds’. They continue: ‘In this way special education can be a way of hiding discrimination against some groups of students behind an apparently benign label, thus justifying their low attainments and, therefore, their need for separate educational arrangements’ (p. 870).

Florian and Rouse (2009) put forward a view of inclusive practice that does not deny individual differences but accommodates them within the structures and processes that are available to all learners – that is by extending what is generally available and reducing the need for ‘additional’ support. This view involves re-thinking ideas about learning, for example the idea that ability is fixed. Dweck (2006) stresses the importance of a ‘growth mindset’ and shows how a belief in fixed intelligence undermines resilience and leads to lack of effort in the face of challenge while Hart et al (2004) point out that real equity in learning opportunities ‘only becomes possible when young people’s school experiences are not organised and structured on the basis of judgements of ability’ (p. 3).

Willms (op. cit.) concludes that successful schools tend to be those that bolster the performance of students from less advantaged backgrounds and Dyson et al (2004) and Mitchell (2010) both suggest that successful inclusive schools tend to have explicit strategies for raising achievement generally and use broad strategies such as

offering a well-balanced and engaging curriculum that are likely to benefit all learners.

Ferguson (2010) provides a synthesis of what changes occur when schools pursue the beliefs and practices that embrace and include diversity and difference of all kinds. These are: a change of focus from teaching to learning, making the curriculum more engaging and personalising learning, creating communities of learners who support and share in each other's learning and a move from offering services to providing supports. She suggests that a shift occurs from individual to group practice for both staff and learners, with the creation of professional learning communities to improve practice. There is also a tendency to broaden the view of 'parent involvement' to 'family-school linkages' that involve a 'mutuality of interaction and collaboration that commits both home and school to each other' (p. 117).

These closely reflect the nine essential practices for improved outcomes put forward by Levin (2008): high expectations for all; strong personal connections between students and adults; greater student engagement and motivation; rich and engaging formal and informal curriculum; effective teaching practices in all classrooms on a daily basis; effective use of data and feedback to improve learning; early support with minimum disruption for students in need; strong positive relationships with parents and effective engagement with the broader community (p. 92).

Alton-Lee (2003) emphasising the importance of attention to student learning, outlines 10 inter-related characteristics of quality teaching for diverse students. These are:

- Quality teaching is focused on raising student achievement (including social outcomes), and facilitates high standards of student outcomes for diverse learners;
- Pedagogical practices enable classes and other learning groupings to work as caring, inclusive, and cohesive learning communities;
- Effective links are created between school cultural contexts and other cultural contexts in which students are socialised to facilitate learning;
- Quality teaching is responsive to student learning processes;
- Opportunity to learn is effective and sufficient;
- Multiple task contexts support learning cycles;
- Curriculum goals, resources including ICT usage, task design and teaching are effectively aligned;
- Pedagogy scaffolds and provides appropriate feedback on students' task engagement;
- Pedagogy promotes learning orientations, student self-regulation, metacognitive strategies and thoughtful student discourse;

- Teachers and students engage constructively in goal-oriented assessment.

Recent Agency work on Teacher Education for Inclusion reinforces these characteristics and adds weight to the assertion that teacher education is a key leverage point for the wider systemic change needed for inclusive education more generally.

Many writers stress the key role of personalising learning. Here, some clarification may be helpful to distinguish between personalisation and individualisation. Sebba (2010) suggests that an emphasis on participation and involvement in decision making are the key to distinguishing between the two and concludes that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the child offers a clear values base to develop cultures in which pupils are trusted, listened to and given responsibility for learning and decision making.

Hargreaves (2006) draws parallels between education and business and stresses the need for a move from mass production to mass customisation together with innovation to meet client needs. He puts forward nine gateways to personalising learning: curriculum; learning to learn; assessment for learning; new technologies; advice and guidance; mentoring/coaching; student voice; design and organisation and workforce reform.

Hattie (2009) who synthesised the findings of over 800 meta-analyses of influences on achievement of school-aged students similarly concludes that helping pupils to become independent reflective learners, involved in their own learning is the most effective way of increasing attainment.

Teachers must, therefore, be clear about these different approaches and take responsibility for all learners, being open to their full involvement and participation. While many learners do have needs in common, the processes of differentiation and individualisation remain teacher-centred and needs focused while personalisation starts with the learner and connects with interests and aspirations.

The critical role of school leadership is noted by Leithwood and Levin (2005) and also by Robinson (2007) whose meta-analysis of work on school leadership and student outcomes identified the following leadership dimensions: Establishing goals and expectations; strategic resourcing; planning, co-ordinating and evaluating teaching and curriculum; promoting participation in teacher learning and development and ensuring an orderly and supportive environment.

To sum up, recent Agency work on Key Principles for Promoting Quality in Inclusive Education (2011) further reinforces these ideas by outlining the following six areas concerned with the quality of education for all learners:

- Responding to learners' voices
- Active participation of learners
- Positive teacher attitudes

- Effective teacher skills
- Visionary school leadership
- Coherent inter-disciplinary services

Concluding remarks

This paper has outlined key issues and concerns from policy makers and from recent research as a starting point for discussions at the RA4AL conference. It is hoped that the conference will provide an opportunity for a range of stakeholders to clarify these issues and prioritise areas for further investigation.

The Agency report on Teacher Education for Inclusion states: ‘The benefits of increasing inclusion, linked to other priorities such as social justice and community cohesion, are long-term and investment in early childhood education and an increasingly inclusive education system is likely to represent a more effective use of resources than short term initiatives designed to “close gaps” or support certain marginalised groups.’

The RA4AL work in the longer term hopes to support a more strategic approach to reform that promotes inclusive values, recognising that raising achievement for all learners is not a policy initiative but an ethical imperative.

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