Preparing teachers for inclusive education: some reflections from the Netherlands

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Introduction
The inclusion of students with special needs in education has been described at student level as ‘taking a full and active part in school-life, being a valued member of the school community and being seen as an integral member’ (Farrell, 2000, p. 154). The true criterion for successfully implementing a more inclusive school ultimately depends on what goes on in schools and classrooms (Ainscow, 2007). Recently, this was affirmed in the United Nations (UN) declaration on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006, Article 24), which called for states to provide inclusive education at all levels. However, achieving inclusive education is an ongoing challenge in many Western countries. International comparisons show that countries and regions differ in the degree to which they have established inclusive schooling and in the number of students still in special settings (Meijer, 2003; Pijl, Meijer and Hegarty, 1997). Some have succeeded in reducing the number of students in special education significantly (e.g., Norway), whereas in other countries, special classes and schools still function as part of the education system (e.g., the Netherlands).

Despite considerable progress in newly formulated education policies, legislation, regulations and funding to support inclusion, empower parents and make society aware, a number of authors have recently concluded that progress in making schools more inclusive seems to have come to a halt (Ferguson, 2008; Vislie, 2003). Several reasons for this have been discussed, but the overall conclusion is that teachers as key persons in inclusive education hesitate to accept responsibility for students with special needs in regular education. They generally do not have positive attitudes towards inclusive education, citing a lack of personal knowledge and skill for teaching students with special needs, an area that was not sufficiently covered in their basic teacher training. Changing teacher training is an option, but it takes many years for the effects to be noticeable. This essay argues that there are other ways to prepare teachers and argues that by discussing problems in education with colleagues and working together as a team, they can resolve many of the issues for themselves.

Teachers in the Netherlands hesitate to accept responsibility for students with special needs in regular education. They generally do not have positive attitudes towards inclusive education, citing a lack of personal knowledge and skill for teaching students with special needs, an area that was not sufficiently covered in their basic teacher training. Changing teacher training is an option, but it takes many years for the effects to be noticeable. This essay argues that there are other ways to prepare teachers and argues that by discussing problems in education with colleagues and working together as a team, they can resolve many of the issues for themselves.

Lack of knowledge is also reflected in teachers’ attitudes. A recent international review shows that the majority of teachers hold neutral or negative attitudes towards the inclusion of students with special needs in regular primary education (de Boer, Pijl and Minnaert, 2010). The development of more positive attitudes depends in part on training and on experiences with inclusive education (Avramidis and Kalyva, 2007; Opdal, Wormmaes and Habayeb, 2001). Without training, teachers feel ill prepared, which in turn leads to negative or neutral attitudes towards inclusive schooling, resulting in certain hesitations to implement it in the classroom (Batsiou, Bebetsos and Panteli et al., 2008; Ghanizadeh, Bahredar and Moeini, 2006; Sari, 2007).

Without positive experiences of inclusive schooling, teachers are unlikely to change their attitudes (Ernst and Rogers, 2009; Guskey, 2002). The question is how to intervene in this ‘untrained-negative attitude-no positive experience’ cycle.

Recent thinking about solutions has focused on teacher training, and it is argued that improvements to initial teacher training are a prerequisite for inclusive education (Forlin and Hopewell, 2006; Kirby, Davies and Bryant, 2005). After all, the overall quality of schools depends heavily on the education, practical training and attitude of its teachers. However, the implementation of a more inclusive school system cannot depend solely on changes to teacher training. It would roughly take 15–20 years to ‘replace’ half the teachers lacking real special needs training with new teachers specially trained in inclusive education. Not only would this take too much time, but it is also an illusion to think that 3 or 4 years of initial teacher training can prepare teachers for educating a wide range of students with special needs. This does not mean that teachers do not need additional skills and knowledge in
implementing inclusive education. If changing initial teacher training is not a short-term option, then what other options are available?

**Developing inclusive education in the Netherlands**

Special education in the Netherlands has traditionally been completely separated from mainstream education, comprising special schools and, in recent decades, peripatetic support for teachers and students in regular schools. The participation rate in separate special schools is now about 5% of all primary and secondary school age children, and these percentages are still growing (Smeets, 2004). Today, this highly differentiated and extensive special education system is the subject of much debate. It is argued that too many students attend special schools and that segregation in education has gone too far.

Additionally, the growth of students in segregated settings is out of line with official policy targets. Dutch education policies and legislation have promoted inclusive education by changing funding procedures, creating incentives for regional organisations of schools and organising teacher support. Government policy, however, has not required teachers and school heads or boards to make schools more inclusive. Although government policy has removed the stumbling blocks for inclusive education, it has asked regular schools to take initiatives to stem the outflow of students with special needs to full-time special schools (Meijer, 2003).

The relatively high percentage of students in segregated special education and the ongoing increase in special education attendance suggest that both regular and special education teachers as well as the parents of pupils with special educational needs question inclusion. Although not rejecting the push for more inclusion in principle, many teachers and parents believe that pupils with special needs are generally better off in segregated settings and that these students need the specialist knowledge and experience available in special schools. Regular teacher training and mainstream teaching is commonly regarded as being insufficient for these students.

**Teacher training in the Netherlands**

Most countries in the Western world have 3 or 4- year teacher training programmes, and many also have various forms of in-service training (Soriano, 1999). In the Netherlands, it takes about 4 years to gain a regular teaching qualification: Primary school teacher training students study at institutions of higher education and gain a bachelor degree. They are trained to teach all curriculum subjects, for example, Dutch, mathematics, history, geography and drama, as well as a specialist subject. Teacher training is not only mainly focused on subject matter but also addresses theories on child development and adapting education to the individual needs of children. Approximately 25% of the 4-year course involves teaching practice. Teacher training also includes an introductory module on teaching pupils with special needs. Some teacher training students opt for a minor in special educational needs (30 European credits), and the precise content of this varies between teacher training programmes. Current government policy requires more knowledge of inclusive education within teacher training, but the special needs education programme is oversubscribed, and adding additional ones has proved difficult.

Though supplementary training for teachers in special education is optional, the majority of teachers working in Dutch special schools has followed a 2-year, part-time training course at master’s level at specialised higher education institutes. The master’s special educational needs programme assumes that student teachers have at least a part-time job in education and focuses both on theory and practice. The specialist fields include visual disabilities, behaviour problems, mental disabilities, remedial teaching and peripatetic teaching. Currently, the master’s in special educational needs covers issues regarding inclusion (Seminarium voor Orthopedagogiek, 2009). Although not obligatory, a growing number of regular teachers have a master’s in special needs education. In-service training for teachers is not obligatory, although many teachers follow short courses. Because of inclusion policies, the number of in-service courses on special needs education is increasing.

**Effects of additional/specialist training**

The effects and outcomes of additional training are difficult to predict. As the following examples show, the effects of additional teacher training can be contradictory. For example, following a review of case studies undertaken in several countries, Emanuelsson (2001) concluded that additional special needs training may lead to a new form of specialist status within the school team. Once one of the team members is identified as having additional expertise, the other teachers start consulting the specialist teacher about special needs students in their classes. By observing the student in the classroom and by gathering data, the specialist teacher reinforces the idea that this student is in some way special. This is likely to result in an increase of identified special education needs. Creating a group of special teachers then becomes a barrier to inclusion (Florian and Rouse, 2009).

A second example is based on the experience of special needs training for regular education teachers in the Netherlands. In order to end the growing number of referrals to special schools in the 1980s, the Dutch government set up a large-scale, in-service training for existing teachers aimed at screening, diagnosing and drawing up individual education plans for students with special needs. The effect was disappointing: Teachers used their newly acquired skills to detect students with special needs even earlier and still referred these to special schools (Reezigt, Pijl and HarSkamp, 1994). With hindsight, it is easy to conclude that the content and focus of the training was based on medical model thinking (Winzer, 2007) and was bound to ‘produce’ even more referrals.

A third example is based on a large-scale Regular Education Initiative (REI) that was funded in the USA in the 1980s. This training initiative was intended to enrich teachers’
experience regarding educating students with mild learning difficulties in regular schools. Teachers in each of the REI projects could choose the additional training they felt was needed (e.g., managing behaviour problems, curriculum-based measurement or mastery learning) in order prepare for participation in the programme. A surprising finding resulting from this initiative was that afterwards, the teachers reported feeling much better prepared for the job (Pijl, 1994). The wide range of topics for additional training suggests that it is not only the content of the training that is important for teaching in inclusive settings, but that it is also important to support an increase in self-confidence. The teachers felt that they were well prepared for the new task and able to teach students with mild learning difficulties.

These examples are not intended to suggest that teachers do not need additional skills and knowledge in implementing inclusive education. However, they do show that ‘additional training’ can have quite unexpected outcomes. Therefore, simply providing additional training will not necessarily prepare teachers for inclusive education. In fact, it may have undesired effects. As the REI example has shown, the content and delivery of the training are key considerations.

**Learning from professional experiences and from colleagues**

It is important to recognise that in addition to more formal ways of learning, there are various other possibilities for teachers to develop their knowledge and skills more informally by learning through doing and from colleagues.

Teachers work with student groups that are changing constantly and have to adjust their teaching to students’ needs. As Jordell (1987) explains, teaching is complex, insecure, unstable and unique, and has many defensible educational goals. As a result, teachers cannot expect that their initial training is sufficient to prepare them for any student group or every possible accommodation that may be needed by different students. Teachers can follow routines but often have to adapt their general knowledge to a constantly changing situation in the classroom. Often, these adaptations are made on the spot and, therefore, are not based on careful, rational decisions. Clark (1986) typifies the thinking of teachers as ‘sense making’ rather than ‘decision making’. Teachers realise meaningful teaching situations by estimation, trial and error, guesses and intuition. These intuitive choices are not made consciously. Half-conscious adaptations make reflection difficult, and therefore, it does not function as an input into teachers’ learning processes. For example, teachers find it difficult to explain later why, in a particular situation, they made particular decisions and choices. This aspect of teacher thinking is often referred to as ‘tacit knowledge’ (Handal, 1990). Tacit knowledge is a form of knowledge neither made consciously nor put into words. However, to learn from experience, it is necessary to be aware of the driving forces, the action and the consequences. Only then is reflection possible, and only then can it be recorded as a useful experience (Buchmann, 1987; Jordan, Schwartz and McGhie-Richmond, 2009).

In order to stimulate teachers to discuss their tacit knowledge, Handal and Lauvås (1987) developed what they called a process of reflective counselling. The idea was to invite teachers to talk about their experiences, decisions, the rationale for different decisions and effects. Handal and Lauvås report that this approach helped teachers to realise why, what and when certain actions were conducted. It is likely that when teachers regularly meet up with colleagues in small groups and talk about their work, tacit knowledge becomes less tacit. This requires teachers to give up their isolated positions in school and reflect on their actions in the presence of colleagues. However, teachers do not always feel comfortable engaging in such discussions as these bear directly on their functioning as a teacher (Metz, 1984). Research by Cohen, Deal and Meijer et al. (1979) showed that professional relations between colleagues and schools are fairly fragile: They have been described as instable phenomena. Yet in many international papers on the functioning of school teams, it is recommended that teachers cooperate more (Thousand, Nevin and Villa, 2007). Working in teams stimulates innovation and rightly gives teachers the idea that they can perform their work in a responsible, professional way. This feeling creates a reward from the team: Fellow teachers work together to realise something worthwhile. Disappointments are easier to cope with in a team, and it is reported that teachers feel less insecure.

**Conclusions**

Many teachers in the Netherlands hesitate to accept responsibility for students with special needs in their class. They worry, along with many parents, that their levels of knowledge and skill fall short, and that the needs of these students are not met by attendance in regular school. With the best interests of the student in mind, they therefore refer them to special schools. Their attitude towards inclusive education is a reflection of their hesitation to accept the responsibility for inclusive education, which is seen as an option only when teachers are better prepared for the job (i.e., when they are offered extended teacher training that includes special needs).

Pointing at insufficient training results in a stalemate. As noted above, teacher training in the Netherlands includes an introductory module on teaching pupils with special needs, and there is advanced training available. Yet teachers still feel unprepared for the responsibility of inclusive education. It is highly unlikely that initial teacher training will be extended to much more. In turn, this restricts developments aimed at implementing inclusive education, and teachers can continue to effectively ‘hide’ behind these conditions. The critical comments by Vislie (2003) and Ferguson (2008) regarding the lack of progress in making education more inclusive certainly holds for the Netherlands.

A major problem resulting from the stalemate described above is that teachers do not gain relevant experience in educating students with special needs. Therefore, they have little chance to experience the kind of success in teaching students with special educational needs that would lead to much needed attitude change. The question remains as to how to break this untrained–negative attitude–no positive experience cycle.
Policy-makers can ask teachers to take full responsibility for all students in their class and close down the ‘escape’ route of referring students to specialists or special schools, but it is essential that regular class teachers know that they are not on their own without the support they need to feel confident in their teaching. If they feel alone and unsupported, they are more likely to develop negative attitudes towards inclusive education, and this can ‘infect’ their colleagues as well (Hamstra, 2004). Thus, teachers must have access to support from school governing bodies, school management, and colleagues and support staff in and outside the school. Policy-makers can stimulate school managers and teachers to take on these responsibilities. They can also support and fund local/regional teacher support structures. Successful experiences of inclusive education will contribute greatly to teachers’ positive attitudes and self-confidence.

Implementing inclusive education is about schools and teachers changing their practice in order to combat segregation (Ainscow, 1995). Integration is often described as ‘just’ placing students with special needs and making, usually minor, adaptations to the standard curriculum and the classroom organisation, whereas implementing inclusive education focuses on a broader process of meaningful access to the general curriculum for all students (Gersten and Santoro, 2007; Pijl et al., 1997). The ‘Index for Inclusion’ (Booth and Ainscow, 2002) has shown how broad this process can be. It introduces a few hundred questions focusing on possible issues for change. Teachers have a key role in this change process, and they have to modify, among other things, their attitudes, ways of working and materials, and cooperate with other professionals in and outside the classroom (Ainscow, 2007).

This is not to suggest that teachers do not need additional skills and knowledge in implementing inclusive education, but it is unrealistic to think that reforming initial teacher training can bring about these changes. The central argument made here is that there are other ways to acquire additional knowledge and skills, and that teachers working in a team and supported by experienced staff from outside the school should be able to solve most of the challenges of inclusive education for themselves.

References


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