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THE MISSING PIECE OF THE PUZZLE CALLED 'PROVISION OF EQUAL PARTICIPATION IN TEACHING AND LEARNING'(?)

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Although many studies have been published about inclusive education there is still a prevalent displeasure around the world with the inclusive capabilities of many schools and teachers. Despite the fact that teachers generally follow the rules suggested by the literature that lead to inclusion it seems that something is still missing. In my opinion it is that teachers and schools fail to spot and pay attention to certain details and that this has a major effect on their efforts to provide equal participation in teaching and learning for all students. My argument in this paper is that if we pay attention to and consider those particular details it may help us to provide more inclusive practice.

Recent years have seen considerable efforts in many countries to ensure the right of all students to participate equally in teaching (e.g. UNESCO, 1994). Existing research focuses attention on some of the difficulties currently encountered within schools. For example, there are concerns about how to respond to students categorized as having behavioral difficulties (Angelides, 2000), or how to integrate students with disabilities into regular classrooms (e.g. Booth and Ainscow, 1998), or how to overcome barriers to participation and learning experienced by students (e.g. Clark, Dyson, Millward, & Skidmore, 1997). In addition, the traditional field of *special* education in many parts of the world faces one of the deepest challenges in its history: it is merging with *mainstream* education (Booth & Ainscow, 1998). This means that children who may in the past have been served primarily by special teachers in segregated settings are increasingly becoming the concern of every educator. Mainstream schools have to be transformed in ways that will increase their capacity to respond to all children. The implication of this is that all teachers have to modify their practice in order to be able to teach effectively children who are considered as having *special needs* and to put into operation policies of inclusion.

Following this trend teachers increasingly acquire more qualifications in order to be more effective in the classroom and to be able to provide equal participation in teaching and learning for all children. However, there is still a prevalent displeasure around the world with the inclusive capabilities of many schools and teachers. In this paper, I argue that an important factor contributing to this situation is the failure of many teachers to identify and pay attention to detail.

What is inclusion?

Over the last 25 years there is an international interest in the integration at the beginning, and then, in the inclusion of children considered as having special needs in regular schools (Ainscow, 1999; Ballard, 1998; Booth & Ainscow, 1998; Daniels, 1999; Thomas & Loxley, 2001). In the past, children defined as having special needs were educated in special schools and institutions separately from their age-mates. The perception that education should be provided to all children regardless of their singularities and needs has led to the philosophy of inclusive education. This philosophy has been strengthened in the 1990s (e.g. UNESCO, 1994) and has spread promises that it would treat all children considered as having special needs as individuals who have equal rights with the rest children, providing equal opportunities to teaching and learning.

This new philosophy opposes the practice of separation and it is based on the notion of equity. Emphasis is given to the needs and rights of children including their right to education. It accepts

to its bosom all children providing them with adequate resources and support according to their individuality. Talking about integration we mean the integration of an individual into a school that previously was not being accepted. The inclusive philosophy does not simply refer to the placement of children categorised as having special needs into normal schools, but it also considers under which conditions we can educate effectively all children in such a way as to serve their needs, whichever these are (Barton, 1997). Sebba & Ainscow (1996), for example, define inclusive education as the process with which schools try to respond to all students as individuals, reviewing the organisation and provision of their curriculum.

Inclusive education is virtually the practice that provides school experiences to children with special needs in the same school and classrooms they would attend if they did not have special needs. It is the process during which all children, regardless of their abilities and needs, participate into the same school (Thomas, 1997). The main purpose of this process is the education of all children regardless of differences, problems and difficulties having a vision for a school for all. Such a school accepts all children, understands their individuality and responds accordingly to their individual needs. A school for all is virtually a place where every child can develop according to its abilities, skills and talents.

Successful inclusion

During teaching we are confronted with many events and incidents. Very often teachers pass over some of them as minor and unimportant and do not question them. Despite the fact that teachers generally follow the rules suggested by the literature that lead to inclusion (e.g. Ainscow, 2000; Armstrong, Armstrong, & Barton, 2000; Clark, Dyson, & Millward, 1995) it seems that something is still missing. In my opinion it is that teachers and schools fail to spot and pay attention to certain details and that this has a major effect on their efforts to provide equal participation in teaching and learning for all students. My argument in this paper is that if we pay attention to and consider those particular details it may help us to provide more inclusive practice. If we develop the ability to identify and pay attention to little and seemingly insignificant details we will then be able to translate them into more inclusive practice.

In what follows I provide an example from a school in Cyprus, which illustrates how a teacher marginalized two students by failing to pay attention to a little detail.

It was a fifth grade class with 20 students. Mr. Leonidas, the teacher, used to call all students by their first names except for two boys whom he called by their last names. Mr. Leonidas introduced both boys to me as having learning difficulties. Similarly all their classmates called them by their last names while the rest addressed each other using their first names. When I enquired why he called them by their last names Mr Leonidas explained that both have the same first name, Constantinos, so in order to clarify to whom he speaks he uses their last names. Talking with the boys I learned that their parents called them by their nicknames (Dinos and Costas). When I informed Mr Leonidas about it he began calling them by their nicknames. During the first week the boys told me that felt a little uncomfortable. Three months later Mr Leonidas reported the following observations:

- Both boys seemed to feel more comfortable and happy in the classroom.
- Their behavior improved significantly. Although they did not create any major trouble they sometimes did not obey to his directions. After he began calling them by their nicknames this behavior virtually disappeared.
- Both boys appeared to be putting in more effort in the classroom and their general attainment improved.
- He was very surprised by what happened. He did not think that such a small detail could influence his students' attainment and behavior.
- He claimed that his practice, after that, was more inclusive than previously.

In addition, both boys reported that they felt more comfortable at the school, and therefore, they put more effort into lessons. Further, they said that their relationships with their teacher and their classmates had greatly improved.

Despite the fact that his colleagues and his superiors considered Mr. Leonidas to be a successful teacher, in the above case his practice was more exclusive than inclusive. He did not do it on purpose, of course. Mr Leonidas did not even think, as he said, that his practice of calling those two students by their last names was a barrier to their improvement. He emphasized that he inherited this practice from previous teachers who used to also call those two boys by their last names. When this little detail was spotted, however, his practice became more inclusive.

This experience points to the fact that teachers very often marginalize some students because they fail to pay attention to little details. From my experience with schools in different countries and Cyprus in particular, it seems that some teachers tend to ignore small details, considering them to be insignificant and unrelated to their students' academic attainment. They seem to be more concerned with general issues rather than with paying attention to detail because it appears to have no immediate effect on their students.

Teaching all students

In order to ensure that teachers are paying attention to detail a number of things need to be introduced to teacher initial education and in teacher in-service training. First of all, teacher education programs must include practice, in addition to the regular one, specifically focused on schools and classrooms with students with learning difficulties. Most of the existing teacher education programs do not include compulsory experiences with special/inclusive education in practice. In addition, ordinary teachers need to be involved in in-service education programs that aim at developing their practice. Specifically, they should be trained to include all children in teaching and shown techniques that may facilitate them to pay attention to details when teaching. However, it would be better if in-service training ceased to take place in amphitheatres where teachers attend lectures, and which promote just individual theoretical learning without direct connections to practice. In-service training should take place in schools and classrooms following collaborative approaches that analyze local practice (Angelides, 2002). In this way, all involved can reflect in detail on aspects of their thinking and practice, and thus, they can develop techniques for spotting and paying attention to detail.

The professional growth of teachers presupposes a process, which supports experimentation and reflection, and provides teachers with opportunities to consider new possibilities (Ainscow, 1995). My point is that when there is no inquiry and reflection on classroom practice teachers seem to fail to identify the details of their practice, and therefore, fail to provide equal opportunities to teaching and learning to all students. What we need is more critical thinking and detailed reflection on aspects of our thinking and practice. We need teachers to be able to identify those little points, pay a little bit more attention to them and gradually, in this way, those little details will add up and translate into more inclusive practice.

Final thoughts

What I have argued in this paper is that even little details are important for encouraging the participation and learning of all children. If we pay attention to detail we may not have immediate results but over a period of four or five months they will show up, and therefore, more inclusive practice will be developed. We can add up those little details and then translate them into the effective implementation of inclusive education. To put this another way, paying attention to detail may be the missing piece of the puzzle called *provision of equal participation in teaching and learning*. This piece may help to overcome the widespread dissatisfaction with the teaching abilities of our teachers who work with mixed ability classes.

School-based programs, therefore, must place greater emphasis on helping teachers to consider, scrutinize and respond to details. Advocates of inclusion need to recognize that in order to progress with this important agenda, they must be able to notice and deal with minor and perhaps seemingly insignificant features of their practice.

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