

Index for Inclusion

Allister Smith

Principal, Central Normal School, Palmerston North



ABSTRACT

Index for Inclusion is a programme to assist in developing learning and participation in schools. It was written by Tony Booth and Mel Ainscow from the Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education, UK. Central Normal School was pleased to have the opportunity to trial this programme.

Practice paper

KEYWORDS:

Inclusion, inclusive schools, school culture.

INDEX FOR INCLUSION TRIAL

Central Normal School has had a policy of inclusion for children with special needs since moving away from 'special classes' in 1989. Our work in special education has developed significantly through the years and we believed that we had very good systems in place, as well as able and experienced staff providing effective programmes. We are decile 5, with a roll of 516 students Year 0 to 6, and 18 students on the Ongoing Reviewable Resourcing Scheme. We are directly resourced and have a significant team of teaching and support staff working in special education. There are six bilingual classes at level 2 te reo Māori, which have 50 to 80 percent of their programme in te reo Māori. We have a further 30 children, for whom English is a second language, adding another dimension and interest to the school community.

We promote our school as one with a culture of inclusion that meets the learning and social needs of a diverse range of children. We felt that the Index would be an excellent tool to get feedback from all involved in the school and support us in setting goals and directions for development for the next few years. It was apparent that data gathered could give us wide ranging feedback relating to many aspects of the school on a broader base than our special education programmes.

The Index was introduced to us by a facilitator, who shared the document with the senior management of the school, attended all the committee meetings and ensured that we were informed and kept up with the planned programme. We found the Index to be a document that, although written for the British school system, was set up so if modified to meet the needs of a particular school community, it would give excellent feedback. The three key elements which explore culture, policy and practice would fit well into the practice of a New Zealand school. We hoped that by this, it would not only affirm good practice, but also indicate any gaps we may not be aware of.

THE STEERING COMMITTEE

After discussing the use of the Index with the board of trustees (BOT) and the staff, and receiving a favourable response to trialling it in the school, a steering committee was formed. We wished to have a good representation of the school community and were pleased when three members of the BOT showed a willingness to be involved, a parent from the Māori community, a Chinese parent, the senior management team of the school (including the principal) and a psychologist from the Ministry of Education Group Special Education.

Our facilitator provided each member of the committee with a copy of the Index to read, after which we met to discuss the direction that we would take. It was decided to initially focus on the indicators relating to school culture because we all believed that culture is the foundation on which all else develops. The committee took some time rewording a number of indicator questions so that a questionnaire could be sent out to the community that fitted both the New Zealand and Central Normal contexts. As well as some rewording of questions, it was important to us that there were questions relating to the place of Māori and ethnic minorities in the school.

The issue of translations was raised and we consulted to see which languages we may need translating. The questionnaire was then translated into Mandarin and Tongan. The group also decided that it was important to hear the voices of the children. A further task then was to reword a number of the questions from the Index to be used with the children. We decided to include children from Years 4 to 6.

INFORMING THE COMMUNITY

Before we distributed the questionnaire, the school community was told about the Index in the regular school newsletter. We wanted them to be fully involved and urged them to participate and respond to the questionnaire. Classroom teachers talked about it with their children and return boxes were placed in each room with a class list attached. Teachers encouraged and cajoled, and the class with the highest percentage of returns was offered a treat. There was significant interest, especially when the returns came in. The children were praised and encouraged to keep talking at home about the questionnaire. For two parent families two questionnaires went home so that both parents or caregivers could respond separately if they so chose.

The questionnaire for the children was also taken from the Index and adjusted for our school. It was important that the children could readily relate to the questions. A set of instructions was provided for each of the teachers so that all children got the same message. We learnt an important lesson regarding questions for children. They need to be very clear and explicit and leave no room for a range of interpretations. The children were also encouraged to write a sentence or two sharing their feelings about the school, which many of them did.

FEEDBACK

We were delighted to get close to an 80 percent return of the questionnaires and also fortunate to have some graduate assistants from Massey University available to do the initial analysis for us. Numbers of parents responded with comments, questions or statements that added further depth to the responses. When the feedback came in to the school, we were able to respond immediately through the newsletters to some of the issues raised. A section called 'sharing the big picture' gave parents the overall results of the questionnaire and specific topics were covered each month. These statements included information about the teams' names of the school, the teaching of Te Reo/Tikanga Māori and behaviour management. The committee talked through the analysed responses from the adults and, apart from the many areas that affirmed the culture of the school, three specific areas emerged that will lead to further discussion and development.

1. A number of adults responding felt they needed further information about what goes on in the school. They felt that they didn't have enough information to give accurate responses in some areas.
2. There was a lack of knowledge and understanding of how the staff and the BOT worked together for the benefit of learning and teaching.
3. A response, mainly from staff, suggested that the school could be doing more in support of children for whom English is a second language.

A group of children was spoken with by two committee members to get further insight from the information gathered from the Year 4 to 6 children. There were concerns from them about the limited number of teachers on 'duty' in the playground, about adults not listening to them and whether or not they were always expected to do their best. Information gained from the adult questionnaire and from the children was shared with the BOT and taken into consideration when the development plan for 2005 was developed and the strategic plan adjusted.

CONCLUSION

The responses to the Index questionnaire have strongly affirmed the culture of the school as an inclusive and welcoming place where children are well supported in their learning. We have been able to readily respond to a number of issues raised by parents, and to give information and add to understanding about the school and its programmes. The areas discussed for development have been included in our plans for the future.

We believe that the Index for Inclusion can be a valuable and effective tool for the New Zealand schools. Put in place as a one year programme, it gives a school time to examine culture, policy and practice in any area chosen for development. Time is needed to select the aspect of the index that will be most useful to the school. There is a wide bank of useful questions already prepared but these need adjusting to meet the needs of an individual school. The senior management of the school needs to be involved to ensure that there is widespread involvement and organisation. Time is needed to ensure a good coverage of the community and that the information gathered is well analysed. Having a facilitator is a wonderful asset in helping the school keep focused and work through to a stage where the data gathered will meaningfully support future development.

The Index for Inclusion, developing learning and participation in schools, is a great way to get useful feedback from the whole school community, which will assist the school to develop for the benefit of all students' learning.

I would be happy to share our experiences in the use of the Index and I can be contacted at principal@centralnormal.school.nz

AUTHOR PROFILE

Allister Smith is the Principal of Central Normal School in Palmerston North. The school is very proud of its tradition as Palmerston North's original school and the current programmes of teaching and learning. Two particular aspects of special character are the significant work carried out in Inclusive Special Education and the success of the bilingual team Te Arawaru.

