

Ethos

The role of Teachers in Inclusive Education

Inclusive education by definition strives to provide *equal educational opportunities* for every child. The terms 'inclusion' or 'inclusive education' have largely replaced 'integration' and are intended to represent a different concept: 'integration' may be seen as a child adapting to a host educational setting while 'inclusion' may refer to the educational setting adapting in order to meet the needs of a child. The change in terminology reflects a shift from a needs-based to a rights-based agenda (Pirrie, Head, & Brna, 2006). Consequently, the inclusive education is defined as a multifaceted practice, built upon foundations grounded in a belief that children with SEN or any kind of developmental or learning difficulties require appropriate education, which optimizes their life chances as individuals to become full members of society. The proposition that this should largely if not entirely be facilitated by education in mainstream schools should be recognized as a values-based position.

It has been wide admitted that the role of teachers in developing inclusion is central to its effectiveness. Consequently, teachers' attitudes, as well as their behaviors, play a crucial role in successful implementation of inclusive education, the key factors of which are the positive ethos, with a values-based teachers' commitment to inclusion (Lindsay, 2007).

In 2012 the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education issued a Profile of Inclusive Teachers. The Profile aimed to highlight the essential core values and areas of competence necessary for preparing teachers to work in inclusive education considering all forms of diversity. The Profile admits that the failure to take the cultural dimension and all possible cultural and social variables and differences into account by a teacher leads to the failure to adapt teaching methods and behavior according to individual needs of a child, i.e. to the pedagogical failure and, consequently, to a failure of inclusive education.

The Profile developed the framework of core values and areas of competence of an inclusive teacher (p. 7). This includes:

- Valuing Learner Diversity – learner difference is considered as a resource and an asset to education.
- Supporting All Learners – teachers have high expectations for all learners' achievements; promote the academic, practical, social and emotional learning of all learners; apply effective teaching approaches in heterogeneous classes.
- Working With Others – collaboration and teamwork are essential approaches, including working with parents and families and with a range of other educational professionals.
- Personal Professional Development – teaching is a learning activity and teachers take responsibility for their lifelong learning; teachers are reflective practitioners.

The first core value of an inclusive teacher - Valuing Learner Diversity – implies the development of teacher's intercultural competence which builds fundamental grounds for ethos in inclusive education.

Valuing Learner Diversity

Diversity refers to any mixture of items characterized by differences and similarities. In the sociopolitical and economic realms cultural diversity can be found in the context of ethnicity, culture, gender mainstreaming, plurality of languages and religions, age, social class, sexual orientation, professional function, educational background, mental and physical capabilities, health, etc. (Wood 2003).

In order to be able to recognize cultural variables within a group of children, teachers need to develop **cultural sensitivity, cultural awareness** or so called **cultural critical consciousness** that involves **self-reflection**, the ability of standing back from themselves and critically reflect on their own cultural values, norms, beliefs and attitudes. Self-reflection and cultural critical consciousness also involve thoroughly analyzing and carefully monitoring both personal beliefs and instructional behaviors about the value of cultural diversity, and the best ways to teach culturally different pupils for maximum positive effects. Corresponding behaviors have to be changed to incorporate more positive knowledge and perceptions of cultural diversity. To engage in these continuous critiques and efforts to make teaching more relevant to diverse pupils, teachers need to have a thorough understanding of their own cultures and the cultures of different sociocultural groups, as well as how this affects teaching and learning behaviors. Thus, a teacher admits that the pedagogical problems shouldn't be studied and approached in isolation from sociocultural environment of a child and cultural self-reflection (Gay, Kirkland, 2003).

Shortage of self-reflection and cultural critical consciousness lead to neglectfulness, lack of understanding, categorization and labelling of children that consequently can have a negative impact upon their development and learning opportunities, also create other intentional and unintentional attitudinal barriers (Pivik, Mccomas, Laflamme, 2002).

Inclusive teacher respects cultural differences and is aware of millstones of ethnocentric attitudes. Within the value attitude of ethnocentrism, individuals judge other groups in relation to their own particular culture, which is perceived as a standard especially with concern to values, social norms, beliefs, behavior, customs, and religion. The opposite value attitude is called cultural relativism which is based on the idea that all norms, beliefs, and values are dependent on their cultural context, and should be treated as such. Thus, an inclusive teacher can be described as a person who deeply believes that being different means being "normal", who respects, values and understands diversity as a resource that enhances learning opportunities and adds value to schools and other educational institutions, local communities and society (Profile of Inclusive Teachers, 2012).

Avoiding falling into the culturist trap

Another obstacle to inclusive education is the tendency to essentialize cultural differences and develop patronizing attitude towards children from minority groups. Essentialist notion of culture leads to the usual mistake that everyone in a certain culture is the same. It explains the behavior of people in terms of their culture, allowing “culture” to become greater than the people themselves. This is the way of othering and reducing children from minority groups to a prescribed image based mostly on stereotypes. Overestimating cultural differences and encouraging the belief that cultural categorizations are permanent and “natural” rather than being social and changeable, essentialism puts a child from any minority group in a deficit position labelling her or him as less capable than other pupils. This way even the notion of “special needs” is an issue which affects the inclusion of children from diverse backgrounds and abilities within education system (Holliday, Hyde, Kullman, 2010: 34-35).

Therefore for an inclusive teacher it is important to **avoid falling into the culturist trap of reducing children to less than they are**, in the same way as it is necessary to avoid racist and sexist traps. Using Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of “defamiliarization”, it could be suggested that every teacher must go through the process which “takes as away from our comfortable, limited, commonly accepted and often unconsidered opinions about what everybody and everything is like and makes us more sensitive to the way that those opinions are formed and maintained” (Bauman 1990: 15-16).

In relation to essentialism, the policy of multicultural education have been criticized for reinforcing and politicizing cultural differences, for stressing the importance of a particular culture and its claims to superiority (Kuper 2000: 242). The possible response to this critique can be deessentialization of the culture concept in inclusive education which could be viewed as an admirable alternative to the previous strategy of multiculturalism. In inclusive education the main concern has been shifted from the preoccupation with culture to a child and her/his needs, thus putting in focus and challenging established societal power relationships and dominant cultural prejudices.

Being aware of social inequalities

Cultural critical consciousness alone is not enough for implementation of culturally responsive education and development of teacher’s intercultural competence, as the latter implies not merely awareness of cultural differences, but also **awareness of social inequalities** that often correspond with cultural diversity. On the society level diversity turns into inequality. Nowadays the problem of compensating social inequality in education is acknowledged to be the main issue of inclusive education in most of the EU countries (Intercultural Education in Schools: VI). Treating children with different from their own social, cultural, ethnic background unfairly, teachers and educational system

in general can unwillingly serve as the means of social exclusion, legitimizing social inequalities by converting them into inequalities at school.

Inclusive teacher understands the problems connected with social inequality and is aware of the key role education and a teacher plays in establishing democracy and social justice in society. She/he takes responsibility for promoting education equity in the classroom, **treating every child as equally important and valued individuals. Seeing parents as equals**, an inclusive teacher strives to create and maintain positive relationships with them.

The lack of such attitude may lead to dysfunctions in the contact with children as well as with parents from so called “vulnerable groups”, caused by the differences in communication codes. Minority pupils and parents, whether they are social or ethnic, in general are often perceived as dysfunctional due to their cultural orientations different from those of the teachers (Garza, Crawford, 2005: 601; Posey-Maddox 2013). Therefore a teacher needs to **model respect in social relationships** and use appropriate language with all learners and stakeholders in education. Both, **children’s and parents’ voices should be heard, respected and valued**. The teacher is a key influence on a learners’ self-esteem and, as a consequence, their learning potential. Numerous studies have shown how parents feel about their position in the parent-teacher relationship becomes an important factor in their children’s academic success (Freeman 2010).

Being empathic to the diverse needs of learners

Facilitation of inclusive educational environment requires ensuring the opportunity for optimal learning and social experiences, and providing a nurturing climate. Emotions play a key role in that and therefore have been called “fundamental to learning” (Hinton, et al.2008: 90). Since children’s emotions affect the way and how much they develop and learn, an inclusive teacher is supposed to be able **to connect to, and understand their pupils** in order to best serve children's needs. In other words, a teacher must be emphatic and focused on “nurturing learning rather than judging performance” (Hinton, et al.2008: 91).

Empathy has been long-regarded as an important aspect of teacher’s professional preparation to teach in diverse school settings (Warren, 2013: 396). Practicing positive behavior and classroom management approaches, inclusive teachers not only themselves have empathy for their pupils in order to best teach them, they must develop this skill in their pupils as well. Expressing care for another is a skill that can be taught and nurtured through a supportive educational environment (McLennan, 2008: 454).

The term “empathy” is generally defined as the ability to sense other people’s emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling. The emotional domain of empathy is widely referred to as empathic concern, or sympathy. The intellectual domain of empathy is termed “perspective taking”. Perspective taking includes two modalities: imagining how another person is experiencing his or her condition (imagine other), and imagining how one’s own self would personally experience another person’s condition (imagine self). ‘Imagine other’ modality requires that the observer possess the capacity to surrender his or her own personal opinion, beliefs, and points of view to embrace those of the target (Warren, 2013). In other words, empathic concern is a product of perspective taking. Teachers have to imagine how children are feeling to determine the appropriate emotional, caring, or sympathetic response in their interactions with children. Caring is not just worrying about the academic success but worrying about children’s personal success, caring about their home life, being involved in who they are and who they become.

Thus, the application of empathy is a professional disposition teachers engage to adopt pupils’ social and cultural perspectives for the purposes of better connecting learning experiences to pupils’ home culture and the various forms of the individual cultural expression. Perspective taking and empathic concern are at the core of empathy’s application to child–teacher interactions (Warren, 2013).

Empathic interactions promote more nurturing classroom environments and the development of strong, positive children–teacher relationships. Empathy resists labels, overcomes stereotypes and breaks through the social construction of the other. Therefore it is an essential part of culturally responsive pedagogy

