

### **Moving Onwards and Upwards: Inclusive Education in Secondary Schools** **Chris Forlin**

The inclusive educational movement originated from a strong philosophical desire to increase opportunities for children with disabilities to be educated in mainstream schools alongside their community and similar aged peers. In more recent years inclusivity has been seen as having a dual role. While the initial vision of including more students with disabilities has been retained, the focus has been broadened to additionally consider the need to better cater for the widening population of increasingly heterogeneous classrooms.

In Australia, there are many national and state-wide initiatives that continue to be enacted as educational systems undergo restructuring and refocusing to meet the changing needs of their students. While many of these do not directly focus on inclusive practices, in reality they all impact to some degree on this paradigm shift. In addition, most states and territories have undertaken major reviews of special education service provision during the past five years. These have led to a plethora of initiatives that have been introduced to further inclusive educational practices. Concomitantly, schools have to meet government directives associated with broad restructuring of schools and systems. Increased accountability for student achievements, greater expectation for participation in school-based decision making and the need to ensure that students achieve appropriate standards are but a few of the new demands to be placed on teachers in recent years.

The impact of inclusive education on regular secondary schools has to date been marginal as these schools have mainly been able to avoid the large influx of students with disabilities

experienced by primary schools. As increasing numbers of students graduate from inclusive primary schools, the demand on high schools to provide similar opportunities will certainly increase. Since the government in Australia has recently announced the retention of secondary students from 15 to 17 years, the diversity of student need in the upper years of secondary schooling will also increase and the needs of those students now required to remain in education are likely to be even more diverse than at present. With greater devolution of responsibilities to schools, secondary schools will also be progressively required to support their own staff as they up skill them to cater for these diverse student populations. Continuing fiscal constraints and an increasing demand on a teacher's time, though, do not necessarily support opportunities for additional professional development.

Inclusive educational practices in secondary schools will, therefore, involve a tripartite perspective in the very near future. Firstly, increasing numbers of students with disabilities will be expected. Many more children will have completed primary education in inclusive schools and they will demand similar opportunities in high schools. Secondly, the broadening diversity of student populations in high schools and the challenges for students as they need to cope with increasing society pressures will see ever more potentially marginalized students who experience difficulties in accessing the regular class curriculum. Thirdly, the retention of 15 year olds for a further two years of education will require a major reconceptualisation of current curriculum offerings and pedagogical approaches if students

are to actively engage in a positive way during these two years.

This compilation of papers, then, provides a timely consideration of how secondary schools can prepare for and embrace the heterogeneous needs of their student populations. Each paper individually contributes to different aspects of inclusion in secondary education but together they provide the reader with a range of opportunities to reflect on their own practices and to consider how educational, social, and emotional advantages may be achieved for all students in secondary schools. Within this anthology of papers can be found an array of potential solutions to some of the unique issues faced by inclusive education in high schools. The reader is provided with both a grounded theoretical debate and a plethora of authentic and practical ideas to help them include students with diverse needs. This collection of articles ensures a highly useful, relevant and current account that should appeal to all researchers, academics and practitioners engaged in enhancing inclusive educational practices in secondary schools.

A major implicit theme that transcends all of these papers is that while various authors have provided a variety of suggestions for enhancing instructional environments for diverse student populations, final decisions have to be context specific, cater for the unique needs of individual students and take full account of the cultural differences found in the heterogeneous schools of the new century. The effectiveness of differential programming will only be realized if schools are given the flexibility to implement localized and relevant inclusive models that truly reflect the individual and diverse needs of their unique client groups. Such a challenge is explored by the discussion of seven different collaborative and evidence-based research projects presented by university researchers, high school teachers and principals.

The papers commence with a discussion by Pearce and Forlin of the specific challenges for inclusive education in high schools. Following a brief review of current inclusive practices in Australian primary schools they discuss the inevitable transition of students with disabilities into secondary schools. They consider how the challenges of inclusive education are enhanced in the secondary school that by its very nature already faces many unique situations. Despite these prospective challenges they present a range of potential solutions that could provide opportunities for reform.

A detailed examination of the development of inclusive thinking and practice in secondary schools is, subsequently, undertaken by Ainscow and Kaplan when they consider change from an organizational paradigm approach. Their comprehensive investigation of how one school increased its capacity for responding to all learners records both staff and student perceptions on the participatory and collective decision-making approach employed by a newly appointed headmaster. While the school was under external pressure to "raise standards", it was clear that in many ways it had still been able to move towards more inclusive ways of working. The inquiry based approach employed to enable school improvement had resulted in many challenging dialogues. The importance of a strong and positive leadership emerged as a critical factor in fostering a willingness to respond openly and honestly to the voices of all community members.

The third paper similarly considers cultural and organizational features of a school. Here, though, the focus is more specifically related to using this as an alternative approach to providing support for students with diverse abilities, rather than employing a more traditional 'specialist' support model that is mainly still evident in Australian secondary schools. Deppeler,

Loreman and Sharma argue that specialist support services need to be re-framed with the emphasis no longer being on providing an array of support after students are found to not be engaging in the curriculum, but to supporting schools to avoid the creation of such barriers in the first instance. They challenge the reader to consider their proposition and to engage further in exchange of ideas regarding investment in the professional learning of teachers and leaders and how best to employ a collaborative, evidence-based approach to further inclusive school development.

The next two papers take a case study perspective and illustrate aspects of secondary schooling that are particularly challenging for children with Asperger Syndrome (AS). The paper by Konza provides a reminder of some of the particular challenges faced by students with AS, focusing on the specific challenges this causes adolescents. This is followed by a discussion of a range of practical interventions successfully employed to support the social inclusion, communication skills and behavioural challenges faced by eight adolescent students with AS in mainstream schools. The paper by Hay and Winn, subsequently reports the findings from interviews with different community groups within one school, concluding that inclusive practice is a complex, dynamic and multi-dimensional concept. It is particularly interesting to review the issues and their relevant importance to the different stakeholder groups. Such a comprehensive analysis of the diverse perspectives of all those associated with inclusive educational practices in a secondary school is an opportune reminder of the need to be cognizant of the voices of many.

One group of participants whose views have traditionally been ignored is that of the student body itself. The project reported in the paper by Carrington and Holm was designed to empower

students to participate in school review and planning for inclusivity. They report how one secondary school community embraced the student body by enabling their voices to be heard. By supporting them to play a leading participatory role in school development the authors explore how the students' insights help to broaden community understanding of inclusion and exclusion in secondary schools. The secondary school that is a focus of this research is typical of many such schools in Australia that are purpose built to cater for rapidly increasing student numbers in newly developing regional hubs.

The final paper in this special edition by Forlin and Bamford also considers a new school in a regional centre in Western Australia. Although this mainstream middle school, similarly, had an education support centre on site, a collaborative project enabled a trial full inclusion model to be enacted. A year long review of this inclusion approach provides insights into different outcomes for all stakeholder groups in the school community. This paper also raises the issue of sustainability of inclusive practices and highlights the importance of appropriate support structures and the difficulties faced by the school when these were missing.

Utilising a data-mining tool (Leximancer, Smith, 2004), it was possible to analyse the content of this collection of papers in order to identify the main concepts being discussed. Thus, it is feasible to see at a glance the issues raised here that are the most pertinent ones in relation to inclusive education in secondary schools. In addition, it is possible to view how they are interrelated. The incidence of the most important 15 concepts identified in the papers is listed in Figure 1 together with a conceptual map of their relationships. As can be seen from the figure, as expected the most frequent terms are those that relate directly to the topic (school, teachers, inclusive, education). Other concepts that have

also been identified include issues such as support, learning, community, time and change. These concepts are contextually clustered on the map, showing those that appear together frequently in the papers. Of particular note are the links between support and teachers;

community and inclusive; change, practices and learning; and between secondary and time. Social is additionally linked to Asperger's Syndrome which is predictable with two papers specifically discussing this.

Concept	Absolute Count
school .....	765
teachers .....	234
inclusive .....	226
education .....	185
special .....	138
support .....	116
learning .....	106
secondary .....	97
community .....	88
social .....	83
time .....	68
practices .....	63
change .....	59
group .....	56
Asperger_Syndrome .....	56

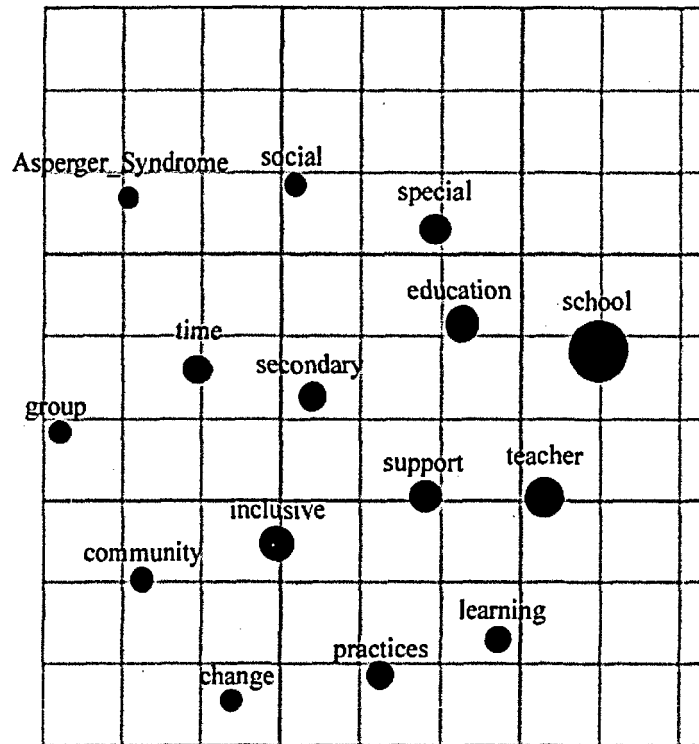


Figure 1. Frequency and relationship of concepts identified in the papers (Leximancer, Smith, 2004).

While the articles have highlighted issues and provided examples of practical approaches in action, limited evidence of the general sustainability of such a change process as inclusive education emerged. Many "levers for change" (Ainscow, 2002) could be identified and

a plethora of strategies were presented in response to the inclusion movement, but very few "wedges" (Forin, 2005) were apparent that would ensure the maintenance and sustainability of these strategies once the dynamic leaders who were in every instance initiating the school

changes, left their various schools. Sustaining inclusive schools will be a critical consideration for the future as inclusion moves onward and upward and more schools embrace this approach.

To conclude this collection of papers on inclusive education in secondary schools a postscript is provided by Mel Ainscow. In his closing comments he revisits the confusion surrounding the different interpretations of 'inclusion' and forwards a view that requires the negotiation of what he terms a 'common sense of purpose' amongst all stakeholders.

It is posited that this collection of ideas, research and practice will stimulate secondary school teachers, researchers and academics to engage in discourse to focus on the changing needs of their school populations in the immediate future. Together these papers will provide a stimulus and judicious reminder that inclusion in secondary schools is about to become a reality and no longer something that only happens in primary classes.

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#### References

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