



The Inclusive Practices Tools: Trying to Take a Short Cut to Inclusion?

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CHRISTOPHER MCMASTER
University of Canterbury

ABSTRACT

The Ministry of Education, through the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER), is currently trialling the Inclusive Practices Tools (IPT), an auditing device in which schools can measure the extent of 'inclusive practice' and identify areas for improvement. IPT will be rolled out nationally beginning in late 2014. Through reducing the exploration of inclusive values to a streamlined analysis of practice, there emerges the threat of limiting the aspirations of the project of inclusion. Lacking in the 'tools' offered to schools are essential aspects of sustainable change and professional development, notably time, reflection, stakeholder involvement, and collective exploration of values and assumptions. However, despite being handed what can be seen as a limited set of tools, teachers may use the opportunity to create more inclusive schools, and suggestions are offered in how to make the IPT review process more meaningful for the school community.

INTRODUCTION

The Inclusive Practices Tools (IPT) is part of the Ministry of Education's strategy for achieving 'a fully inclusive education system' (Ministry of Education, 2012b). The aspiration of 'a world class inclusive education system' dates back to Special Education 2000 (Ministry of Education, 1996). The Minister of Education has now, as part of the initiative Success for All: Every School, Every Child (Ministry of Education, 2012b) set the target of 100% 'inclusive' schools in New Zealand. As a result, schools will receive access to IPT, designed to be an online resource where they will be able to input data about their practices. During 2014 the Ministry, through the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER), will conduct trials of the prototype of this new tool, which will then be available to all schools nationally (Ministry of Education, 2012a).

The IPT has been designed to assist schools in their annual self review cycle. Data generated through questionnaires will generate reports that will feed into planning. As NZCER will manage and analyse data, the effort expended by each leadership team is minimised. For busy administrators, the IPT may provide a mechanism that makes review and planning easier. However, by turning to the research found in Teacher Professional Learning and Development: Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007) this paper will argue that while the Inclusive Practices Tools may

purport to offer a short cut to developing inclusive schools, it is not through short cuts that sustainable inclusive change is achieved. Finally, this paper will offer suggestions on how to use the IPT process to help create more inclusive schools. Teachers, and indeed school communities can seize an opportunity to foster inclusion in our schools.

BACKGROUND TO THE INCLUSIVE PRACTICES TOOLS INITIATIVE

In considering the IPT project, it is useful to look at what underlies Ministry strategies and what some of the emphasis behind Success for All is based upon.

‘Measuring’ inclusion

In 2010, the Education Review Office (ERO) was tasked with measuring how inclusive schools in New Zealand were. In this report, *Including Students with High Needs* (Education Review Office, 2010), ERO faced unique problems in its methodology. Inclusion as a concept has traditionally been hard to define and its definition has evolved with our conceptual understanding (McMaster, 2012). Inclusion has increasingly been understood to be an issue of social justice (Ballard, 1999; Booth & Ainscow, 2002). Researchers, educators and activists are considering not only who is to be included but have become increasingly aware of any who face exclusion (Kearney, 2008). In alignment with the Human Rights Act (1993), the New Zealand Disability Strategy (Ministry of Disability Issues, 2001) and the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994), inclusion has come to be seen as a human right, relating to all members of the community and embracing larger social issues of injustice and inequality. This is reflected in the Ministry of Education’s own ‘terms in special and general education’ section of their website, which describes inclusion as: ‘... about valuing all students and staff. It involves supporting all students and young people to participate in the cultures, curricula and communities of their local schools’ (Ministry of Education, 2008).

One problem ERO ran into when designing the methods in its 2010 review was (referring to the Ministry’s definition of inclusion), how could ‘valuing’ be quantified? How could ‘all students and young people’s participation’ be measured? Cultures are best looked at qualitatively; they are by definition multi-layered, complicated and personal (Schein, 1992). However, as inclusive values were difficult to measure, inclusive practices would be reviewed; more specifically, the practice of mainstreaming (Education Review Office, 2010, p. 3). Inclusion, within these limited parameters, was not about ‘all students and staff’, but rather a particular issue to do with disability. The point to consider, is what happens to the concept of inclusion when it is confined to such a narrow definition. What are the implications of limiting inclusion – an obvious contradiction between the concept and its implementation? Are schools willing to accept those implications?

The Inclusive Practices Tools

The Inclusive Practices Tools (IPT) comes as a result of the 2010 ERO report. The final results of this report were disturbing: according to ERO data only half of New Zealand schools were demonstrating what were deemed ‘mostly’ inclusive practices, 30% of schools were noted as demonstrating ‘some’

inclusive practices, and one out of every five schools demonstrated 'few' inclusive practices. This ERO report informed subsequent cabinet recommendations (Cabinet Social Policy Committee, 2011) which (in combination with public submissions) resulted in the Ministry of Education initiative, *Success for All: Every School, Every Child* (Ministry of Education, 2012b). *Success for All* reiterates the original aspiration of *Special Education 2000*. Its stated aim is to achieve 'a fully inclusive education system' by demonstrating that all New Zealand public schools are inclusive (80% 'mostly' inclusive and 20% of schools exhibiting 'some' inclusive practices) by the end of 2014.

To work towards the identified targets, the Ministry of Education has created an Inclusion Task Force, mandated to 'accelerate the pace of change' and achieve the Government's goals (Ministry of Education, 2012c). As a result, the Ministry has contracted NZCER to create a set of tools to monitor and encourage progress. Their efforts, originally called the Inclusion SMART Tool, or IST (NZCER, 2012b), and now known as the Inclusive Practices Tools, or IPT (NZCER, 2013a), resulted in online audit/questionnaires in which schools are measured for their 'inclusive practices' using a Likert scale (Strongly Agree, Agree Moderately, Agree a Bit, Disagree). As the process is online, all data will be held by NZCER in their Wellbeing@school administration area, which can produce automated confidential reports to schools highlighting strengths and weaknesses and recommending areas for improvement (Knowles, 2012). The application of the IPT will be trialled throughout 2014 for a planned launch at the end of that academic year.

To create a measuring device to support its research, ERO borrowed indicators from the Index for Inclusion. The Index for Inclusion was designed as a process consisting of three dimensions: producing inclusive policies, evolving inclusive practices and creating inclusive cultures (Booth & Ainscow, 2011, p. 13). The Index for Inclusion was designed to be used and adapted by individual schools. Initial activities in the Index process involve reviewing the existing school culture through indicators, questions and activities. Analysing the results of this process, schools can identify and prioritise areas of concern (e.g., barriers), areas of strength, and areas to act on. Action plans are developed, followed through, and reviewed for further development. The framework provided by the Index for Inclusion is designed to take place throughout a school year, and incorporates the exploration of values and the examination of the theories on which practice and assumptions are based. The sequence encouraged through the Index for Inclusion can be likened to a spiral or koru: review, produce a plan, take action, and review the subsequent development. This description is provided to highlight ERO's mis-use of those indicators, which were adapted to a Likert scale to measure performance. The word 'mis-use' is applied as the Index for Inclusion is about supporting owned, culturally sustained development. It is not primarily an evaluation tool, and as such a very conscious decision was taken by the developers of the Index to avoid the use of quantitative devices (Booth, 2013).

The prototype of the IPT questionnaires dispense with numerical measures, offering instead the agree/disagree spectrums as found in the Index for Inclusion. The ultimate shape of the NZCER designed questionnaires and those of the Index are striking, right down to the number of questions. The IPT offers questionnaires to staff, 'community', and students (directed at those with

'special educational needs'). The Index for Inclusion offers questionnaires to staff, parents/carers, and students (in two different forms based on age rather than disability). However, rather than submitting results online to be analysed as part of a School Review Profile (NZCER, 2013b), the questionnaires that are part of the Index process are shared and discussed amongst the school community. The dialogue and exploration of the results and comments form part of the school-wide exploration of inclusive values behind individual and systemic practices. Interpreting what is revealed in the questionnaire results becomes a shared exercise that focuses the project of school improvement and helps create a shared language around inclusion. Importantly, the use of questionnaires form an integral part of the IPT; in the Index process they are not an integral part in learning about the school community, they are only offered as a possible way to begin.

STRATEGIES FOR MAKING THE IPT EXPERIENCE MEANINGFUL

The following suggestions are guided by that principle of community-wide collaboration as well as the research found within the Teacher Professional Learning and Development Best Evidence Synthesis (BES) (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007). The suggestions are not intended to replace the IPT process but are offered as ways in which the IPT experience can be turned into a more meaningful exercise.

Do not limit the definition of inclusion

The definition of inclusion offered by the Education Review Office and pursued by the Ministry of Education in the IPT limits inclusion to an issue concerning a select minority of the school population. While the IPT is designed to examine how all students are included, its deliberate and specific focus on those with disabilities (such as the sole student questionnaire being directed to that group) can limit the understanding and focus of inclusion. Inclusion has been a term whose definition has changed over time. Perhaps its strength lies in this flexibility as people explore what it means to them and their communities. Inclusion is not something that can be limited to a specific group of children. It is a process that involves constantly searching for better ways of responding to diversity; it is concerned with the identification and removal of barriers to meaningful participation. It is especially focused on those children or groups of learners who are 'at risk of marginalisation, exclusion or underachievement' (Ainscow, 2005, p. 119). The definition of inclusion offered by the Ministry cited above, that inclusion was about 'valuing all' is perhaps the best expression of the concept to come out of that body. 'All' is not limited to those qualifying for a specific educational service, nor is it reduced to measurable practice in a performance audit. While looking at inclusion, look at any in your school community who might face exclusion, who may be 'on the outside looking in'. Inclusion is a word that deserves to be out in the open, to be taken home and explored.

Do not limit participation in the review process

The IPT guidelines recommend that the self-review team 'should include representatives from all groups who are involved in the education of students who have special educational needs' (NZCER, 2012a, p. 4). Members that are envisioned include a Board of Trustees representative, the Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCO), the Resource Teacher: Learning and Behaviour (RTLB), the psychologist, the speech therapist, one or two teachers who have students with special needs in their classrooms, one or two parents of children with special needs, and an older student with special needs themselves. This team make-up is based on the limiting of inclusion to what may be a handful of students with high special educational needs attending the school. However, if inclusion were not thought of as something relating to a small minority it would follow that the 'review team' would come from a wider group of individuals. Limiting who is involved in the 'review team' is counter-intuitive to inclusion.

'Review team' is framed with speech marks deliberately. A 'review team' is formed for a single purpose – to complete a review exercise. Consider the individuals brought together more as a planning group. The planning group, rather than being brought together to complete an audit, is tasked with planning how the school community will review itself and how the process of school development can reach as many members of the school community as possible. This group should then reflect the gender and ethnic composition of the school, include teaching and non-teaching staff, children and young people. This team, brought together under the aegis of the School Inclusion Review Tool (SIRT) process, will then be well placed to continue the work of school change. Perhaps there are concurrent initiatives running in the school. Representatives from these initiatives may be eager to participate if it is seen that inclusion can be a mechanism to improve those initiatives. Inclusion, far from yet another initiative or exercise tacked onto the school calendar, can instead be an umbrella in which all areas and initiatives can improve.

Involve your students

Unfortunately, student voice is largely absent from the IPT. Where it is included, such as possible representation in a 'review team', participation is akin to contributing to a consumer survey of the school experience. Plans to devise questionnaires for students similarly reduces student agency to that of passive respondent. Your students no doubt have a very unique take on the culture of the school. Their perceptions are invaluable in understanding the nature of that learning environment. As an educator, there is also the responsibility of teaching students how to express their agency in constructive and proactive ways. A school-wide school review project aimed at creating a better place to learn can provide an invaluable teaching opportunity. One way to begin this process could be to adapt the IPT questionnaire into a form that would interest children and young persons. The Index for Inclusion already contains questionnaires in this format. What key issues would your students identify? What do they have to say when they are given voice? What type of action plans would they co-create? You will never know until they have the opportunity to speak. That is certainly worth exploring.

Be creative

As indicated above, there is no reason why the process of self-review cannot be fun. One school in Australia utilised visual narrative techniques in an action research model to ensure that students' voice was heard and fed into the change process (Carrington, Allen, & Osmolowski, 2007). Rather than a Likert scale, what would school members produce visually or graphically as they investigated the question: How inclusive is our school? Could data be presented in that most powerful of media, the play? What would that data look like as performance poetry? Unfortunately, or so it seems at this point, the Likert scale will need filling in. But, and this point cannot be repeated enough, there is an opportunity being presented to make the process meaningful, engaging and, well, fun for your school improvement.

Take time developing your action plan

Time is an important factor in sustainable change (Timperley, et al., 2007). Once the IPT review process is completed, give school community members time to reflect on what has been shown. Take time to facilitate dialogue about the importance or meaning of the data. As discussed above, set time aside for the voice of the community to not only be heard but to participate in the process in a meaningful way. 'Meaningful' is not described as simply being asked one's views. It is being an active member in the change process. If inclusive change is the desired goal, if a fully inclusive educational system is to be developed and sustained, then the process cannot be rushed. The BES notes that for change to be sustained the theory behind that change must be developed and explored. ERO (2010) identified committed leadership as a key feature in inclusive practice. BES has indicated that when teachers, supported by those committed school leaders, are given time to explore ideas and integrate them into practice, then that change is more likely to be sustained. Lacking in the IPT process is the time and collaboration for the development of two additional levers for transforming school cultures: a common sense of purpose and a common use of language (Ainscow & Miles, 2009). When everybody is on the same page then any action taken will be imbued with meaning.

Reflect on your action plan

The BES has identified that to achieve sustainable professional change, learning must take place over a period time and is reinforced through self-reflection. Fullan (2007) notes that change in the workplace involves two components, structure and culture. The structure involves such things as ensuring teachers or students have time to collaborate and create, that there are mechanisms for voice to be heard and agency expressed. The development of inclusive cultures and reflecting on the experience is a learning situation, one in which diverse members of the school community are taking part. As such, it involves new experiences and new ideas. Some of these experiences may challenge previous beliefs or assumptions. They may create what Timperley, et al. (2007) refer to as 'dissonance', or challenges to what may have been currently held. The process of reflection allows for these experiences to be processed and newer ideas to be considered rather than rejected because of any discomfort they may cause. Time spent reflecting on the results of the

action plan and the experience of change are valuable tools in creating the next action plan. As the American educational philosopher John Dewey observed, people learn not by doing per se but by thinking about their doing (Fullan, 2007, p. 41).

Spend time reflecting on your underlying values and school vision

The Index for Inclusion process asks participants to reflect on the values underpinning inclusion in their school and community. Values presented include equality, rights, participation, community, respect for diversity, sustainability, non-violence, trust, compassion, honesty, courage, joy, love, hope/optimism, and beauty. These words and their definitions are presented as a starting point for discussion. What does joy mean in your classrooms? What does respect look like in your school? What would your community be like without hope? To remove an exploration of values from the development of inclusion is to reduce inclusion to mere technique, a procedure to be measured and audited.

Index for Inclusion co-author Tony Booth (2012) asks these questions:

- What are the fundamental beliefs that act as spurs to action?
- What are the implications to the classroom and the school if these are inculcated?
- What are the factors that counter or negate those values?

While these questions do not have a place in SIRT, they are worthy of consideration. Indeed, the values framework of your school is the basis for your school's improvement.

Refer to the questions underlying the indicators in the Index for Inclusion

There are six indicator headings in the Index for Inclusion. Each of these headings is sub-divided into nine to fourteen aspiration statements. For example, under the indicator heading, Building Community, can be found an aspiration statement like, 'Everyone is welcome.' Following this aspiration statement are not numbers on a Likert scale but questions that define the meaning of the statement and provide for a detailed review. Each aspiration statement can have over twenty questions, and space is provided for schools to create their own. Some questions provided, still under the aspiration statement 'Everyone is welcome' include: Is the first contact that people have with the school welcoming? Are people's spirits lifted by a visit to the school? Do staff, children and parents/carers greet each other in a polite and friendly way? Do children feel ownership of their classrooms or tutor rooms? The indicators and questions make up the bulk of the Index for Inclusion. They provide the depth sorely lacking in performance audits such as SIRT. They allow the review process to have meaning.

CONCLUSION

Despite aspiration statements of a 'world class inclusive education system', or a 'fully inclusive education system', the Ministry of Education is offering an approach that limits the definition, and also the scope of inclusion. This has manifested itself in a set of performance auditing tools known as the Inclusive Practices Tools, or IPT, that resembles corporate efficiency practice more than it does sustainable school improvement or professional development. Making school self review processes easier may be appreciated by busy administrators, however, sustainable inclusive schools will be built through collective action, involving the whole school community on a shared journey. While the IPT endeavours to make school self review processes easier, it is important to remember that real and meaningful change, whether personal or institutional, is not achieved through short cuts.

While the approach of the Inclusive Practices Tools has some use it suffers a severe limitation – sustainability. What is missing in these mechanisms for measuring school culture or inclusion are the transformational activities which can bring members of the school community together in shared activities to build on newer ideals and values. Through the process of 'moving' together, inclusive values can be validated and reinforced in the consciousness of community members. In whole school development programmes, such as the Index for Inclusion, as in other programmes used throughout the world (such as Whole Schooling, Indicators of Success, or Quality Indicators, reviewed in McMaster, 2013), there is an inbuilt process not only of review but of collective reflection, collective planning, and joint action. These processes have been identified in the Teacher Professional Learning and Development: Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration (BES) (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007) for achieving sustainability in professional learning and development. A mechanism for shared action, and review and reflection of that action, is provided. Through the exploration of inclusive values the school community is able to question older assumptions. Through shared action, the process can become one of transforming those older assumptions into new values and beliefs of an inclusive nature. The principle is that through praxis, inclusive education is strengthened.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CHRISTOPHER MCMASTER
University of Canterbury



Christopher McMaster has worked in the United Kingdom, United States and New Zealand as both a regular and special educator and advisor.

He is currently a Doctoral candidate at the University of Canterbury School of Educational Studies and Leadership. His area of study is the re-culturing of school communities to reflect inclusive values and practices. He is using the Index for Inclusion in his research.

Contact: chris.mcmaster@pg.canterbury.ac.nz