

TEACHERS AS LEADERS IN THE JOURNEY TO INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS

A GUIDE TO LOCAL ACTION

*Across Latin America, governments have declared their support for the global commitment to deliver 'Education for All' and the specific requirement of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to 'ensure an inclusive education system at all levels'. Families, especially families with children at risk of exclusion, are increasingly campaigning for the right of their children to good education alongside their peers. **These positive goals can only be achieved through the commitment and skills which teachers as individuals and as a profession bring to their students and their classrooms.** This pamphlet is written for all teachers taking on leadership roles in their schools. It offers a framework for thinking about the issues to be addressed in plotting the journey to inclusion - and provides one tool for planning action and exchanging experience among teachers making this important journey.*



We all live in diverse and unequal societies. *Education for All* our children and young people is the key to them taking their rightful place as adults whose contributions are valued by their fellow citizens. *Inclusive education means, simply, that all students, irrespective of wealth, gender, ethnicity, disability or other differences, are educated in the same classrooms and local schools as other children and young people of the same age from their communities.*

STARTING THE JOURNEY

This journey starts when good teachers come together to explore ‘What are we educating our students for?’, ‘What do we mean by inclusive education?’ and ‘How can we best make progress in our school?’ It continues as they involve other staff in this exploration and engage students and their families more actively. It requires in particular that existing approaches to listening to students and promoting their participation in improving the everyday life of the school are used and developed further to make them partners in the journey towards inclusion.

Of course this transformation takes time. Depending on what has already been achieved, it may be necessary to look ahead for two or three years to achieve major changes – and indeed to continue the work thereafter in the light of the school’s assessment of progress.

Teachers leading this journey therefore need to construct a map of the route forward, giving particular definition to an action plan for the next term and the next year. The graphic which follows offers one such map. Of course, many of the steps suggested will need to be repeated as participants agree on the priority issues to be addressed and learn from experience. In practice the straight arrow may seem more like a spiral. Each school will need to make its own version of this map and doubtless revise it regularly.

In plotting the route forward this graphic suggests ten key questions, all developed further in the **boxes** which follow.

Box 1. Defining Inclusive Education

The concepts set out in global commitments like *Education For All* are a useful resource but efforts to achieve positive change from within our schools require serious exploration of how best to define inclusive education in local circumstances so as to create a shared vision of success. One starting point is a holistic understanding of the purpose of education as equipping each child and young person with the moral, intellectual and social skills necessary to take their full part in community life. A second is acceptance that if some students are missing out, this is because our schools and communities have not yet removed barriers to their full participation. Thus inclusion is about ensuring schools become more responsive to diversity in students’ backgrounds, interests, experience, knowledge and skills. A third is explicit attention to the values which underpin inclusive schooling: equal rights, respect for diversity, active participation, community spirit and preparation for a sustainable future.

It follows that inclusive education is likely to mean:

- ✓ Educating all children and young people within community schools.
- ✓ Supporting every student to feel that they belong and are valued equally.
- ✓ Providing appropriate teaching mostly within the common learning environment of the classroom.
- ✓ Personalising learning goals to every individual.
- ✓ Promoting collaboration so students learn from working with each other.
- ✓ Recognising that inclusive education is a route to building inclusive societies.

PLOTTING THE ROUTE

EDUCATION FOR LIFE

- 6. Transforming the school
- 7. Local education as a system
- 8. The national policy context
- 9. Checking progress
- 10. Learning from each other



- 1. Defining inclusive education
- 2. Mobilising effective action
- 3. Engaging students & families
- 4. A welcome for all
- 5. Developing classroom strategies

BUILDING SUPPORT FOR CHANGE

Box 2. Mobilising Effective Action

This journey needs to start from raising awareness of the importance of inclusive education and generating widespread discussion of the local vision. The vision provides a good framework for engaging teachers in identifying what's already working in their schools to ensure that the current diverse student population is educated well. The aim is to build the programme for wider transformation on strengths, recognising that good teachers are already achieving a lot.

Beyond this, it will be important to widen the network of colleagues working together to achieve change and focus action on what needs to be done to educate a more diverse range of students. Fundamentally of course, students make up most of the school community – it will be essential that they become partners in improving the school, including by advancing inclusion. It will also be important to engage and draw on the expertise of families and to learn from adults (e.g. disabled people) who have already faced similar challenges in their school experiences.

There are a range of tools, like the *Index for Inclusion*, which can be used for systematic diagnosis of strengths and challenges in current school performance, but there is merit in starting simply, for example by using the 21 item checklist in **Box 9** as a vehicle for discussing and agreeing priorities.

Over time, the aim will be to implement and celebrate improvements in classroom practice and embed these in the working of the school as a whole, for example through the School Improvement Plan.



Box 3. Engaging students and their families

Advancing inclusive schooling is a community building process in which teachers, students and their families need to work as partners. Students learn best when their teachers and their families cooperate in their education. In practice this means:

- ✓ Raising everyone's awareness of the benefits of inclusion and the need to tackle discrimination.
- ✓ Encouraging *all* students to contribute to school planning through sharing their ideas on what they like about the school and what could be better.
- ✓ Ensuring that families are well-informed and contribute their ideas to school improvement.
- ✓ Promoting opportunities for parent-to-parent support.
- ✓ Developing the capacity of teachers to work effectively with students and families.

IMPROVING PRACTICE

Box 4. A Welcome For All

Central to advancing the vision of inclusive education is that its values are both communicated and acted upon in everyday life so that the school becomes a more inclusive community. This requires investment in the preparation of staff, parents and students so that all students are welcomed positively and feel equally valued.

In the classroom it means:

- ✓ Recognising diversity honestly and explaining differential expectations.
- ✓ Making the accommodations (for example in methods and tools for communication) necessary for everyone to participate.
- ✓ Managing lessons so as to promote group working and varied activities.
- ✓ Encouraging students to help each other.
- ✓ Celebrating everyone's work.
- ✓ Demonstrating fairness not charity.
- ✓ Building commitment to oppose bullying and other forms of discrimination.
- ✓ Linking school experience to life outside the school.

Box 5. Developing Classroom Strategies

The school's vision of inclusive education and its welcoming culture provide the context for developing better teaching and learning. Good teachers think carefully about how each student learns best, taking account of different ability levels and learning styles, and what modifications in curricula and teaching methods will address this diversity. They also encourage the active participation of all students in classroom activities.

Promising strategies are likely to include:

- ✓ Constructing lessons around what is important in life to interest everyone.
- ✓ Co-teaching (e.g. with teaching assistants) where resources allow this.
- ✓ Co-operative learning through fluid groupings of students.
- ✓ Adapting curricula, teaching methods and communication tools to student differences.
- ✓ Personalised learning plans which set achievable goals for each student.
- ✓ Progress assessment which offers encouragement to all students.
- ✓ Grounding discipline in mutual respect.

Box 6. Transforming The School

Enthusiastic teachers, working together, can raise awareness about inclusive schooling and get started on this journey but sustainable change requires whole school transformation. Teachers need to work with school Principals and other stakeholders, especially parents, to develop a transformation strategy embracing:

- ✓ Visible leadership from the Principal and the school management team in making the journey to inclusion central to the School Improvement Plan.
- ✓ A clear mandate for a School Transformation Team, not confined to champions for inclusion, to promote the School Improvement Plan, remove barriers and embed the inclusive culture and practices in everyday activities.
- ✓ Specific efforts to: establish partnerships with parents; strengthen student participation; ensure both student and family voices inform the School Improvement Plan; support professional development opportunities and provide learning resources for teachers; foster team-work among staff; and identify other professional support to teachers.

ESTABLISHING SUPPORTIVE POLICIES

Box 7. Local Education As A System

Public schools are typically part of a local education system and private schools mostly serve part of the same population. Local success requires a continuing dialogue between schools and the local educational system to shape both the direction and support for change. Important issues in this local dialogue should include:

- ✓ Establishing an inspiring vision for an inclusive future.
- ✓ Ensuring partnership between the Education Department, schools, teachers, students and their families in achieving change.
- ✓ Developing an increasingly precise map of the journey towards inclusion.
- ✓ Creating expert groups to advise on key elements in this strategy concerned for example with support to families; removing barriers; adapting curricula and assessment processes; fair admission policies; financial incentives; expert support to teachers; links with health, social and other relevant programmes; and investing in training and professional development for both current and new teachers.
- ✓ Encouraging schools to take responsibility for strategy implementation and establish their own transformation teams to provide necessary leadership.
- ✓ Monitoring progress to reinforce success and share lessons.

Box 8. The National Policy Context

While teachers are taking the initiative to develop more inclusive schools, sustainable change in the national educational system requires of course that governments back the rhetoric of *Education For All* with legislation, policies and investment which provide a supportive context for local implementation. Experience in the schools should inform this national policy-making. Important issues in the local-national dialogue should include:

- ✓ National leadership putting education at the heart of preparation for active citizenship in inclusive societies.
- ✓ Clear Education Ministry responsibility for the education of all children.
- ✓ Anti-discrimination legislation and guidelines for accommodating diversity.
- ✓ Systematic analysis of social exclusion and barriers to full participation.
- ✓ Reform of the national curriculum and related assessment processes.
- ✓ The role of all schools, public and private, in advancing Education For All.
- ✓ Reform in the training, support and rewards for teachers.
- ✓ Shifting specialist teaching and therapeutic resources to support for mainstream schools and their students.
- ✓ Support to parents, information and advocacy systems.
- ✓ Raising public awareness of the benefits of inclusive education.

Governments may never get all this right. Teachers as leaders can work together to stretch the boundaries of current opportunities, while illuminating what else is required to do better for more children.

POINTERS TO SUCCESS

Box 9. Checking Progress

The key measures of progress in the journey to inclusive schools are the extent to which each school welcomes the full diversity of students from its locality and ensures they are able to develop their academic, social and other talents to the full. Many things contribute to these positive outcomes. The table below is a simple instrument for diagnosing challenges, identifying priorities and assessing progress.

POINTER	NOW?	PROPOSED ACTION?
School culture		
1. All students feel welcome.		
2. Staff work together to widen student diversity.		
3. Students are valued equally.		
4. Students help each other.		
5. The school communicates inclusive values.		
6. Staff and parents work together.		
7. Staff and students respect each other.		
Classroom practice		
8. Curricula focus learning on what is important to life.		
9. Learning activities are planned with all students in mind.		
10. Students are actively involved.		
11. Teachers use differentiated instruction.		
12. There is individualised learning.		
13. Assessment encourages all students to achieve.		
14. Staff plan, teach and review together.		
Policies and support		
15. There is a school improvement plan, informed by the voices of students and families.		
16. School leadership focuses on widening inclusion.		
17. Admission policies show this commitment.		
18. The school is made accessible.		
19. There is investment in developing teachers.		
20. Teachers can draw on expert resources.		
21. The education system rewards success.		

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

Box 10. Learning From Each Other

Good teachers already know a great deal about making their classrooms a welcoming environment for all students and ensuring that teaching responds to their diversity. Teachers learn how to be more effective by reflecting on their own practice and sharing their learning with colleagues. Ways schools can encourage this include:

- ✓ Working in small teams to develop flexible curricula, plan lessons and learn from what happens.
- ✓ Participation in action learning sets in which small groups of teachers reflect regularly on their own classroom experience.
- ✓ Continuing thematic workshops (e.g. organised across schools by a local University) on issues emerging in the process of transformation.
- ✓ Web-based learning to widen this exchange (e.g. by sharing school stories of their 'journey to inclusion') and enhance access to published resources.



This pamphlet was written by David Towell and Heidi Araque in conversation with teachers leading the journey towards inclusion in Bucaramanga and Cali, Colombia and Culiacán, Mexico.

They drew on their earlier paper 'Advancing Inclusive Education For An Inclusive Society' (available on the www.centreforwelfarereform.org website); and materials on the www.eenet.org.uk website including the Index for Inclusion.

April, 2012