

Trapped in the needs paradigm

Edda Óskarsdóttir¹, Hafdís Guðjónsdóttir¹ and Deborah Tidwell²

¹ University of Iceland, Iceland

² University of Northern Iowa, Iowa, USA

This paper is a result of a collaboration across three researchers: the first author is a leader of the support system at the Waterfront school (pseudonym used) whose practice is the focus of this study, and the second and third authors engaged in the role as critical friends. Inclusion is the national policy that has the most effect on my practice as the leader of the support system for inclusive practice in a compulsory school serving all the children (ages 6-16) in the local community (approximately 500 pupils). As the leader of support I supervise special education teachers, classroom assistants, and social educators (educators who focus on social needs of learners). Another aspect of my role is to help classroom teachers with effective practices for learners with special needs, and to coordinate the delivery of special education. Inclusive practice is grounded in the ideologies of social justice, democracy, human rights and full participation of all (Ainscow, 2005; Florian, 2008; Guðjónsdóttir & Karlsdóttir, 2009; Jónsson, 2011). Inclusion is seen as an ongoing process focusing on increased performance, working against inequality, and increasing people's sense of belonging in school and society (Booth, 2010).

My reasons for doing self-study of my practice were that I felt the functionality of inclusive practices in my school was lacking, as could be seen in the “overreliance on paraprofessionals” (Giangreco, Broer, & Suter, 2011, p. 23), in the call for pull-out programs, in the lack of innovative solutions for pupils with emotional/behavioural problems, and in the daily discourse of labelling pupils according to their assessed deficits. However, my main reason for concern was that teachers often regarded pupils with special needs as guests in their classrooms, as these pupils have allocated support and the support system “owns” them.

This self-study research, conducted over the past five years, focuses on my leadership role within an inclusion model of education and examines how my practice can help to support inclusion for the pupils, their families, and the teachers who engage with these pupils (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2004, 2006; Florian, 2014). This self-study was the central focus of this multi-layered

Edda Óskarsdóttir (✉)

e-mail: eddao@hi.is

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research that included feedback and insights from others in order to inform my understanding of my practice within the context of inclusion.

The purpose of this self-study was twofold: a) to understand my role in improving leadership and collaboration for inclusion, and b) to develop the support service in Waterfront School so that it reinforces inclusive practice. My self-study research was driven by the following over-arching question and sub-question:

- How can I as a coordinator for support services improve the practice of support services in an inclusive school?
 - What can I do to make the organisation of support more inclusive?

Methods

This self-study research is grounded in the “development of living, situational knowledge” (Reason, 2006, p. 197). Traditionally, self-study has been connected mostly with teacher education practices (LaBoskey, 2004; Tidwell, Heston, & Fitzgerald, 2009). However, I found Samaras’ (2010) explanation of self-study as “personal situated inquiry” (p. 72) suited my purpose well in tackling issues and complexities situated within my practice. Elements such as focusing on experience in practice and not aiming for placing judgment on others through the research process are significant factors that characterise the self-study tradition (LaBoskey, 2004). The personal in self-study means that my voice is an important valued source of knowledge in my professional setting as the goal is to increase understanding of practice and my role as a practitioner and to bring about transformation of practice (Guðjónsdóttir, 2011; Guðjónsson, 2011).

In this self-study protocol, I am the central participant who worked with my two critical friends, getting feedback and insights into the data gathering and data analysis process. Subsidiary participants (school staff and administrators, a select group of pupils, and a group of mothers) provided information on the context of my practice that informed my self-study process. My research procedures were intentionally designed to be both structured and open-ended.

This is a study in and of my practice that was divided into three distinct phases: reconnaissance phase, enactment phase, and reflective phase. Grounding my understanding of the context of my own practice is critical in self-study research (Wilcox, Watson, & Paterson, 2004). Therefore, during the reconnaissance phase I conducted focus group interviews as well as individual interviews to capture how teachers, administrators, study counsellors, and social educators perceived inclusive practices in the school, as well as their ideas about how the support system could be improved. To summarize that initial step, during the reconnaissance phase both focus group and individual interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed through a grounded theory method (Berg, 2007). Based on this analysis, I created an action plan that I implemented in the next cycle of the research, the enactment phase.

In the enactment phase, the organisation of the support service was transformed according to analysis of the data from the reconnaissance phase and I recorded the process in a self-reflective research journal. Furthermore, I engaged with parents, pupils and teacher assistants in order to gather their viewpoints on inclusive practices in the school and how that could be improved from their standpoint. The analysis of this phase gave an insight into how the coordination of the support system was developed, what the main challenges were, and how collaboration between general educators and the support staff in the school was transformed.

During the reflective phase my reflection on practice involved an active and “personal process of thinking, refining, reframing and developing actions” (Loughran & Northfield, 1998). This phase involved thinking about and reflecting upon data from interviews in the reconnaissance phase, from journal entries in the enactment phase, and from discussions with the critical friends about the data and data analysis. Interconnections across these sources became the basis for my written reflections. These reflections were used in the final data discussions.

Findings

The data analysis from the reconnaissance phase revealed four major themes that influenced my organization of the enactment phase: perceptions of inclusion, coordination of support, deployment of people, and collaboration across different entities. My enactment phase then focused on three major areas: improving the support system, improving collaboration, and improving my own leadership role. The following discussion reflects the interconnections across the reconnaissance and enactment data analysis.

The data in the study have given me a new perspective on the support system within the school. I had always believed that the school needs a strong support system - not in the way that the education of children with special needs is the sole responsibility of the special needs experts, but rather that the support system and the classroom or subject teachers, building on each other strengths, would share the responsibility. However, I found that the lack of confidence teachers expressed towards working with pupils with special needs is grounded in the fact that we have a strong support system, that takes care of pupils' perceived needs and in doing so assumes also the responsibility for their education.

This theme of needing more knowledge or of low self-esteem towards teaching a diverse group of pupils has more sides to it.

Nína: ...nevertheless this [teaching diverse group of pupils] is my job and I should be prepared to deal with this. I shouldn't be able to just claim I haven't got the knowledge, that I don't know anything about autistic children or something, because it is really my job to teach everyone. No matter if they are dealing with some disability. (Interview 5, p. 1).

Nína, a 6th grade classroom teacher, is here dealing with the feeling of guilt towards teaching disabled pupils, expressing worries that she does not possess the knowledge to work with them like she would like to. The teachers seemed to be grappling with the responsibilities they have teaching a class with a diverse pupil population, feeling that they are “pushing away the tasks that we should really be attending to” (Interview 5, p. 1). This notion was confirmed by Sara, a special education teacher, who said that “the teachers are insecure... they are well qualified, but they think this [teaching disabled pupils] is more complicated than it is” (Interview 9, p. 2). The administrators further explained: “the teachers feel they can handle this if the child has ‘only’ got learning difficulties. But if it has a diagnosis or some disability then this is out of their scope of practice” (Interview 4, p. 2). The challenges here are focused on who is responsible for the education of pupils with special needs, for planning teaching, and executing those plans.

Responding to diversity and developing inclusive practice depends on the prevailing thinking about disability and difference in schools. I found that the discourse of difference centres around integration and assimilating pupils into the school structure, that pupils need to be diagnosed to be able to be supported in their education.

*The discourse of diagnosis is a dominant structural issue in the school. Since the school gets funding for the tailored support based on the number of pupils with diagnosis, the school administration has stated that children cannot get tailored support unless they have a diagnosis. This leads the teachers to press parents to agree to a psychologist diagnosis in the hope that they will get more support into their classrooms and even that the responsibility of educating a pupil that has complex needs is assumed by or shared with **those that know more about pupils with disability**. (Self-reflective research journal, Feb. 3, 2013)*

Diagnosis can be said to constitute an important conception of how normality and deviance from the norm are constructed (Hamre, 2016). Signý, a 9th grade pupil at the lower secondary level, whose brother is disabled, pointed out how the presence of a diagnosed disability affects the way a person is treated differently.

Sometimes you just have to be able to do things on your own, because when you get home there is no one to help. I find this is the case with my brother because he always has someone next to him [in school] and there he needs help with really easy tasks but [at home] I just tell him to read it again. He reads it again and can solve it himself. ... I think it is not good that sometimes when someone has special support the teachers and everyone start to have lower expectations for that person. (Interview w. pupils #2)

The danger of support is that pupils, who “belong” to the support system, are subjected to lower expectations and become dependent on the support they receive. This is supported by the words of Alma, a teacher assistant who stated: “some of the pupils are rather dependent on the support. Kalli does nothing on his own, he waits for the support person to come fetch him when he has to go from one room to the next” (Interview #12, p. 3). This can be described as learned helplessness, where the pupils have become dependent on support and believe they are unable to perform actions because they have gotten used to having an adult supervision, which confirms their dependency.

Another angle on the effects of support was presented by Kristin, a 6th grade pupil, who thought it was unfair or unjust that some are more entitled to support than others.

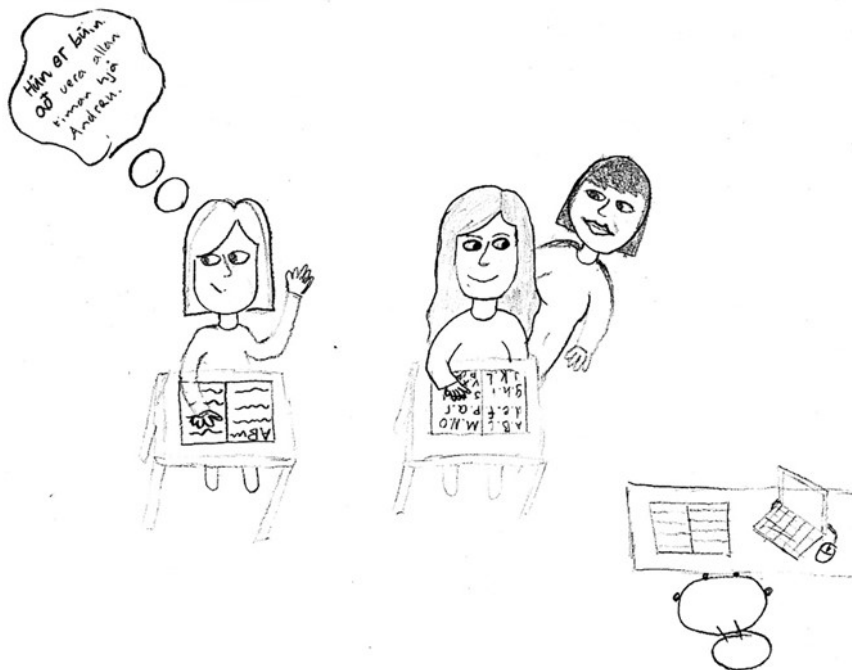


Figure 1. Kristin’s drawing of how she sees support in the school

Her view was that everyone should get the support they need, as she explained with her drawing (Figure 1): “I can have my hand raised for the longest time, but one pupil gets all the help and attention” (Interview w. pupils #5).

The ideas for changing this practice involved an important call for a change in the dialogue in the school as Sif, a social educator, argued: “we shouldn’t keep labelling pupils by their disability and give the support person an ownership of the pupil – ‘your Joe is here’” (interview 3, p. 5). Here she is addressing two issues: the issue of referring to pupils by their disability and of connecting the pupils to the support person and not to the class or classroom teacher that they belong to.

This call has connections to another theme that Sif came up with as she stated:

“I just think that when you interview me for a job, that you don’t just say: ‘You are hired here to work with Jónas and you are staying together for the next five years’. Rather you should say: ‘You are hired into the school as a social educator, special needs teacher or a teacher and that’s it.’ One is just supposed to know one’s role...” (Interview 3, p. 10).

Sif was speaking directly to me as she addresses the way that I have hired support persons to the school, which could be contributing to the fact that people make an ownership connection between the support person and a pupil who is supported. The comment Sif made is valid because most often social educators are hired to the school to work with specific pupils, which is not the case with special education teachers or teacher assistants because they are hired to work in the school on a broader basis.

The golden thread that runs through my data is the discourse of how pupils need to be supported, and even protected, to be able to take part in the regular classroom. Traces of this discourse of deficit that entails regarding disabled pupils as too difficult to accommodate in the regular school system can be seen in the way I, in my practice, assigned support to pupils, not to classrooms or teachers, and in the way teachers, support staff and even parents understand the support system.

Findings from this study cast a light on the factors constraining or facilitating the restructuring of the support service as inclusive practice in a school. The findings show that even though I was committed to improving the practices of support, there were influences and barriers to those improvements that made the whole process complex. Breaking away from the discourses of disability, charity and pathology that dictate the practice of support, thereby changing my own and others mind set, proved to be the greatest challenge.

Discussion

My self-study of practice has brought me from one place to another in the sense of my understanding of inclusive practice and how to coordinate support in an inclusive school. I faced challenges in my inquiry into how to develop special education support as inclusive practice. This was sometimes a chaotic undertaking, sometimes frustrating and sometimes successful, but through it all it was a learning journey.

Analysis of my self-reflective research journal entries depicted moments of distress where my insecurity can be seen in my concern over chaos and uncertainty in my practice. While I considered myself a strong proponent of inclusive practice, data analysis unfolded both expected and unexpected stances within my language and actions. The practice I was coordinating was focused on assimilation, on normalising pupils to assist them with belonging and to be participants in education. It can be said that I, as most of the people I was working with, was trapped in the ‘needs’ paradigm, viewing pupils’ difficulties in school as needing repairs and compensation, which is a practice that leads to low expectations and learned helplessness of the pupil.

The needs paradigm, as a discourse of deficit, positions disabled pupils as too difficult to accommodate in the regular school system and can be evidenced in the way I assigned support to pupils, not to classrooms or teachers. This discourse relates to the medical discourse of diagnosing and providing therapy to function and be normalized, that ignores pupils’ strengths, resources and humanity (Hamre, 2016; Rieser, 2011). Through the reflective phase I could see that my thoughts and actions in the reconnaissance and enactment phases were coloured by these discourses without me being aware of it. As a consequence, my attempts to develop inclusive practice were somewhat underdeveloped.

This self-study has given me an insight into how we need to transform practices and pedagogies by focusing on the resources, competences and funds of knowledge pupils bring to school, thereby moving away from focusing on pupil’s needs (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Rodriguez, 2007). Planning education and organising learning situations that respond to pupils is then based on the knowledge that teachers have about their pupils, in the collaboration between school practitioners and in strong leadership for inclusion.

Diversity implies that the “myth of the normal child” (Baglieri, Bejoian, Broderick, Connor, & Valle, 2011, p. 2124) needs to be dismantled. This means unravelling the ideologies of difference such as ableism and whiteness (Leonardo, 2009) that position some pupils as normal while others are marginalised and therefore need to be integrated into the traditional educational model that was not created with them in mind in the first place (Florian & Spratt, 2013; Waitoller & Artiles, 2013). Hence, when creating a learning environment that encompasses different cultural and linguistic practice, where a variety of ability is a valid form of participation and medium for learning, it is important to take a critical and reflective stance toward the myth of the normal child. In so doing, an understanding of the term ‘diversity’ must be expanded beyond disability or ethnic difference to focus on the value of differences in gender, socio-economic status, cultural group, abilities, learning styles and interests (Ainscow et al., 2004). Thus, inclusive practice is distinct in the ways the school system responds to diversity, how decisions about support and resources are made and how specialist knowledge is employed (Florian, 2010).

Through this self-study, I have gained a unique insight into practices in my school, and an understanding of the complexities involved in improving practice towards inclusion. Through questioning the practice of support and inclusion, and the politics and policies behind such practice, I have searched for ways to improve myself as a practitioner as well as the practice of support. I have reframed my conception of practice with the assistance of my research participants in the Waterfront school, and through communication and dialogue with critical friends and the literature.

I have come to recognise that inclusion cannot be achieved by transferring special education thinking and practice onto the mainstream setting; rather the school system must be transformed so that everyone has a place in it. I no longer see special needs education as a separate entity within the school that needs to be strong to ‘save’ pupils from learning difficulties, where a diagnosis is important for providing knowledge about pupil’s disability to conform to the norm. Rather, I think about school as a place where difference is accounted for as fundamental to human development which means that practices are aimed at creating rich learning environments for all pupils through differentiation, focusing on what is to be taught rather than who is to learn it. The learners and their families are at the centre of every policy, every curricular and pedagogical decision, and are given space for an authentic role in decision making about their school and classroom, about their ways of learning and how they want to be supported. Notions of ability as non-changeable are rejected, and thus pupils are grouped, not by their perceived ability, but based on the task at hand to support everyone’s learning.

For me, as a researcher, the strength of the self-study methodology is that it builds on spiral thinking and on a flexible, iterative process which enables me to use the data I am gathering to build on my understanding and to inform and to shape my thinking. Through this flexibility, I have been able to use what I have learned to transform my thoughts and beliefs about inclusive education, about the practice of support, and about schooling in general.

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