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Breaking Free from the *Needs* Paradigm: A Collaborative Reflection on Inclusion

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This self-study, based on research, conducted over five years, focuses on my leadership role employing an inclusion model of education in a school in Iceland serving students from ages 6 to 16. In this article, we examine how Edda's practice helped support inclusion for the students, their families, and the teachers who engage with them. This multi-layered self-study research project included feedback and insights from others in order to inform my understanding of my practice within the context of inclusion. Findings reveal Edda's focus on the discourse of diagnosis as a dominant structural issue within her practice. The resulting themes on perceptions of inclusion, coordination of support, deployment of people, and collaboration across different entities have informed my understanding about my practice and my perspective on the meaning of a support system within inclusive education and improved student performance.

Keywords: inclusive practice, special education, reflective practice, leadership, education in Iceland

In this article we introduce inclusive education as a theoretical framework for a self-study involving collaboration among three researchers: Edda is a leader of the support system at the Waterfront school (pseudonym) in Iceland and her practice is the focus of the study; all first-person references in this article are the voice of Edda. Hafdís and Deborah participated in the self-study as critical friends. In this self-study, inclusion is seen as both the context for examination of practice and the theoretical view of teaching and learning within a diverse setting in the classroom. Through a five-year study, I examined my practice as a leader in inclusion. Inclusion is the educational policy in Iceland 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 students). According to the latest Act for Compulsory Schools (Compulsory School Act 91/2008), school practice should be in accordance with student needs and attainment, supporting their development, well-being, and education. 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. I examined my practice within these arenas. The findings from this study were initially presented at the 11th International Conference on Self-study of Teacher Education Practice in 2018.

Theoretical Framework: Inclusive Education

Inclusive practice is fundamentally grounded in the ideologies of social justice, democracy, human rights and full participation of all (Ainscow, 2005; Florian, 2008; Guðjónsdóttir &

Karlsdóttir, 2009; Jónsson, 2011). These ideologies are connected and dependent on each other in various ways. A socially just education system is premised on the idea that quality education is the democratic right of all rather than a prize to be competitively fought for (Reay, 2012). This idea is integral to inclusive education systems as those advocating for critical social justice seek a world that is fair and equitable for everyone, not a world where everyone gets the same to reach the same goals. Inclusion furthermore implies a shift from emphasising the source of learning difficulties or difficulties in school as coming from within the pupil or stemming from his/her social circumstances to viewing the problem as the influence of the system of education or the environment (UNESCO, 2009).

Inclusion is aimed at diverting attention towards inequalities presented in exclusion and discrimination against diversities such as social and ethnic circumstances, religion, gender, ability of students, and their families. Thus, inclusive education is a movement against exclusion of any kind and a reaction to political segregation and social inequality (Petrou, Angelides, & Leigh, 2009). It 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). Our position is that inclusive schools are learning communities that invest in the presence, participation and achievement of everyone in the school, both staff and students. Everyone's presence is valued and noted, their participation is meaningful, and they get the opportunity to achieve and show their strengths (Ainscow & Miles, 2008).

My reasons for initiating this self-study of my practice grew out of my concern regarding the functionality of inclusive practices in my school. These concerns included the "overreliance on paraprofessionals" (Giangreco, Broer, & Suter, 2011, p. 23), the call for pull-out programs, the lack of innovative solutions for students with emotional/behavioural problems, and the daily discourse of labelling students according to their assessed deficits. My worry was that teachers often regarded students with special needs as guests in their classrooms, as these students have allocated support and the support system *owns* them. Before I could begin considering how I might help the school to move toward greater inclusion, I needed to look more closely at my own practice to determine how I influence or detract such progress.

The 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 students, their families, and the teachers who engage with these students (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2004, 2006; Florian, 2014). Central to this multi-layered self-study was my gaining of both feedback and insights from others in order to inform my understanding of my practice within the context of inclusion. It was important to give stakeholders a chance to participate and influence the research in order for them to have a sense of ownership. By giving stakeholders ownership and a voice in the research, I anticipated that the development of inclusive practice would be sustainable.

The purpose of the self-study was twofold: 1) to understand my role in improving leadership and collaboration for inclusion, and 2) to develop the support service in Waterfront School so that it reinforces inclusive practice. My self-study research was driven by the following overarching 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?* This article addresses a portion of this larger study, highlighting the engagement of myself with educators with whom I work to inform my understanding of my practice in a leadership role within inclusion education.

Methods

This self-study research is grounded in the “development of living, situational knowledge” (Reason, 2006, p. 197). Self-study has been connected with teacher education practices (LaBoskey, 2004; Tidwell, Heston, & Fitzgerald, 2009), but is also suitable to teachers examining their own practice (Austin & Senese, 2004; Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2015; Samaras & Freese, 2006). 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 and valued source of knowledge in my professional setting; 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, I as the central participant have worked with my two critical friends who are teacher educators experienced in self-study and special education. They provided feedback and insights into the data gathering and data analysis process. Subsidiary participants (school staff and administrators, a select group of students, and a group of mothers) provided useful contextual information that informed my self-study inquiry. 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, enactment, and reflective. As grounding understanding of the context is critical in self-study research (Wilcox, Watson, & Paterson, 2004), 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, students 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.

New Perspectives on Practice

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 gave me a new perspective on the support system within the school. I had always believed that the school needed a strong support system, not 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. Ironically, the strong support system *takes care of* students' needs, and in so doing is perceived as assuming the responsibility for their education. Confounding this is the lack of teacher confidence in being able to include students with special needs within their classrooms. This lack of teacher confidence is something I found prevalent in my research findings.

The theme of educators having low confidence in teaching a diverse group of students has multiple dimensions. For example, Nina, a 6th grade teacher, said:

nevertheless this [teaching diverse group of students] 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)

Nina was expressing her feeling of guilt towards teaching disabled students, and her worries over not possessing 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 student 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 students] 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 students 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 students to the school structure, that students 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 students with diagnosis, the school administration has thus stated that children cannot get tailored support unless they have a diagnosis. This leads the teachers to press parents to agree to a psychological diagnosis in the hope that they will get more support into their classrooms and even that the responsibility of educating a student that has complex needs is assumed by or shared with *those that know more about students with disability* (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 student 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. (Student Interview #2)

The danger of support is that students, who *belong* to the support system, are subjected to lower expectations and become dependent on the support they receive. This is confirmed by the words of Alma, a teacher assistant who stated: "...some of the students 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 students 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 Kristín, a 6th grade student, who thought it was unfair or unjust that some are more entitled to support than others. In the figure below, Kristin expressed her frustration over her belief that everyone should get the support they need. "I can have my hand raised for the longest time, but one student gets all the help and attention" (Interview w. students #5).

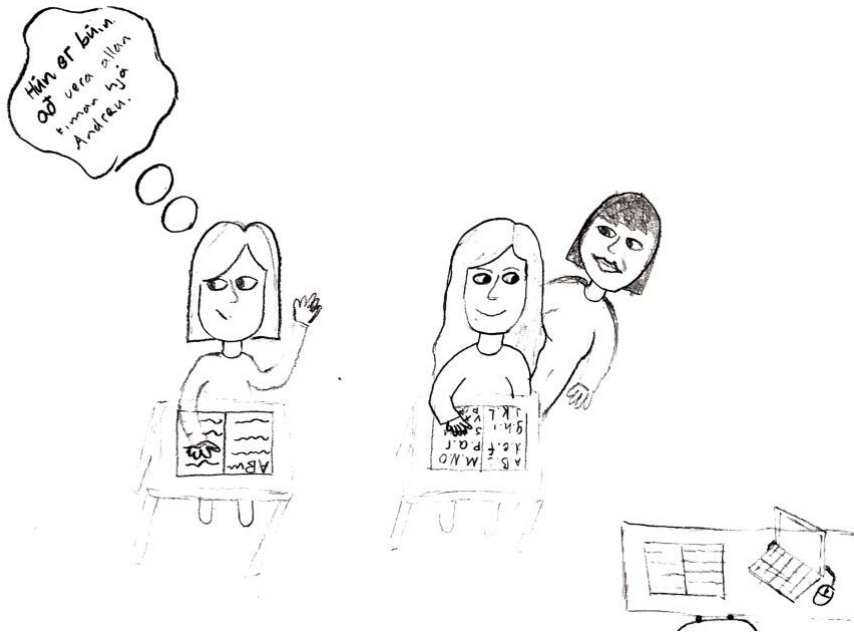


Figure 1. Kristin's drawing of how she sees support in the school

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 students by their disability and give the support person an ownership of the student – 'your Joe is here'" (interview 3, p. 5). Here she is addressing two issues: the issue of referring to students by their

disability and of connecting the students to the support person rather than to their class or to their classroom teacher. This call for change has connections to another theme addressed by Sif:

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 the student who is supported. I saw this comment by Sif as a valid point, because most often social educators are hired to the school to work with specific students, 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. In examining data on my own practice (research journal and planning schedules) in concert with the feedback from these educators and para-professionals, I realized that my actions as the leader were contributing to the belief that students need to be supported in order to assimilate to the school structure, not vice versa.

The golden thread that runs through my data is the discourse of how students need to be supported, and even protected, to be able to take part in the regular classroom. Traces of this discourse of deficit that regards disabled students as too difficult to accommodate in the regular school system can be seen in the way I, in my practice, assigned support to students, 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.

Insights from the Conference Presentation

The purpose of our conference presentation was to get participants to reflect on issues related to the education of students with diverse backgrounds and give them time to do this in dialogue with others. During our presentation at the conference, the audience became participants in an interactive walk and talk engagement about inclusion and teaching. Participants were divided into six groups. Six posters were hung on the walls inside and outside the building. The instructions were that the groups should rotate through the six questions, walk and talk, and bring completed posters back to the whole group for sharing at the end. The following were the questions and responses:

1. What does inclusive practice mean to you?

This first question is important as inclusion does not mean the same for everyone and this affects the way it is enacted in practice. Participants' responses highlighted the importance of creating the environment for learning to happen, celebrating the individual as an integral part of the community, finding ways to address learning for each students' abilities, and respecting all members of the school community (including students and parents).

2. What elements of self-study methodology enable us to identify/recognize our own positioning of our understanding?

With this question the aim was to highlight the role of self-study in positioning our understanding. Participants' responses can be grouped around three areas: method issues of self-study, actions by the researcher when engaged in self-study, and the effects of self-study on the researcher. Method issues were described as specific methods such as journaling, use of a critical friend, memory reconstruction, and collaborative conversations. The use of a process such as reflexivity, and the importance of using methods that can reveal evidence of change were also mentioned. Actions by the researcher included risk-taking, reflecting on practice, and confronting tacit/explicit assumptions. Effects of self-study on recognizing one's own positioning of understanding included developing self-awareness, expanding perspectives, and challenging knowledge of practice and of what works.

3. What is the value of getting input from different stakeholders to your self-study?

While self-study is often seen as an individual's deeper examination of one's own practice, we asked the participants to share their views on the value of getting input from different stakeholders for self-study. Participants cited the value of multiple perspectives and interpretations through questioning, challenging and extending thinking, and through broadening perspectives that democratizes information through collaboration. Through this process, the self-study researcher can be open to the feelings/tones of others and see different images of the self through others. Finally, using input from different stakeholders can help to reframe or underscore a researcher's initial position, asking *What ideology is framing what is valued?*

4. How can we work with views and beliefs that are discriminating in teacher education?

As educators working in a field that often reflects discriminatory views and beliefs about learners, we were curious what insights the participants could provide us on how we can work with such views within teacher education. Overall, they cited the importance of recognizing that educators can discriminate, and that there needs to be a safe place to listen to and to discuss such conceptualizations. Ultimately, they argued there needs to be an opportunity for preservice and in-service teachers to hear themselves articulate their views and beliefs, and to have an opportunity to build relationships, to question their reasoning behind actions and beliefs, and to have opportunities to reframe and address conditions that perpetuate discriminating values.

5. Can you give an example of how teacher education prepares student teachers/preservice teachers for inclusive practice?

Preparing teachers for inclusive practices is an important factor of teacher education, therefore creating a space for teacher educators to discuss this matter is essential. Teaching suggestions from participants included modelling desired approaches, using universal design and planning for diverse learners, creating experiences where students collaborate across abilities, and of inclusion and exclusion. Teaching content included addressing the importance of asking questions, types of disabilities, multi-modal activities, and using the students' first language.

6. How can we create learning spaces for diverse groups of students at all education levels?

With this question we wanted participants to reflect and discuss their own teaching in order to share ideas of practice. Suggestions included differentiated instruction and universal design.

Within these frames were the need for physical spaces, planning that includes working with strengths and interest, providing access to supports, staffing that supports the program, developing relationships in the classroom and knowing who the students are in order to provide real world challenges and connections.

The way we set up the session at the Castle conference provided us an opportunity to work further with our findings and involve a larger audience in discussions about inclusion. In the next section the results of the walk-and-talk experience are discussed in concert with the findings from the self-study.

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 research journal entries depicted moments of distress where my insecurity could 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 normalizing students 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 students' difficulties in school as needing repairs and compensation, which is a practice that leads to low expectations and learned helplessness of the student.

The needs paradigm as a discourse of deficit positions disabled students as too difficult to accommodate in the regular school system and can be evidenced in the way I assigned support to students, not to classrooms or teachers. This discourse relates to the medical discourse of diagnosing and providing therapy to function and be normalized, that ignores students' 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 students bring to school, thereby moving away from focusing on student's needs (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Rodriguez, 2007). Planning education and organizing learning situations that respond to students is then based on the knowledge that teachers have about their students, 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 students 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' students from learning difficulties, where a diagnosis is important for providing knowledge about student'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 students 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 students 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.

Presenting the research at the Castle conference with my critical friends gave us an opportunity to discuss how these findings can be used to inform and develop teacher education practices. Through the six questions posed to the session participants, we discussed our understanding of inclusion and inclusive practices and how self-study can help us to develop these further. Analysing the data from the discussions regarding inclusion we can see certain trends and messages about what needs to be emphasized in teacher education. Central to this is the enabling of all teachers and leaders to work inclusively in schools. Thus, the goal involves preparing teachers and leaders to work with diverse groups of students, to plan teaching and pedagogy that will ensure quality education for all. There is a call for learning environments, teaching methods, and assessment of learning that is sensitive to all kinds of human differences. Although the participants were from diverse universities around the world and from diverse disciplines, there was a consensus in the messages conveyed. This gives hope for a continuation of further research on how to achieve inclusive practices at various levels in the education system.

The discussions about self-study methodology and how it can support further development of inclusive practices emphasised methods to transform and develop the self and

one's own practice. Collecting and analysing data through self-study that reflects both our thinking and our engagement is critical toward understanding what lays at the centre of our practice. Thus developing practice and self builds on more than a feeling, it builds on data gathered about practice and self, and on understanding the struggle we go through when we realize that our practice is in conflict with our values. These changes are not easy; they need to become deeply embedded in our professional self so that we are able to show them through our actions as well as our words.

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