Inclusion in a New Zealand High School

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As a doctoral student at the University of Canterbury, I have been looking at whole school inclusive change in an Aotearoa New Zealand high school setting, using the *Index for Inclusion* (Booth & Ainscow, 2011) as a tool for reflection and review in a year-long critical ethnographic qualitative project.

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* has been a feature of English schools for over a decade, with the government providing copies to all primary, secondary, special schools and local education authorities. The *Index for Inclusion* has been used in over 30 countries around the world and translated into thirty-seven languages as school communities try to clarify the meaning of inclusion and build inclusive school cultures and practices (Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

The *Index for Inclusion* was designed to be used by individual schools. Initial activities in the *Index* process involve reviewing the existing school culture through questions and indicators. The third and latest (2011) edition contains optional questionnaires for staff, parents/ caregivers and children, and schools are encouraged to adapt these review aids to suit their particular location and community. 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 process of change

Acting as facilitator and 'critical friend' I helped the school principal establish a team of staff interested in furthering inclusion within the school. This core of eight teachers (out of a staff

team of 45) met regularly to explore the Index process. Wider discussions were brought to the whole staff team, such as using the questionnaires, reviewing current practice and identifying areas for improvement. In this manner the nature of inclusion and the expression of values in which the school prided itself were explored critically.

For example, the school had an ethos of "a place for every learner"--what the process enabled the staff to consider was what type of place they offered. As the school operated a special needs unit staff directed their gaze to that part of the school. What they saw in practice did not agree with how they were now interpreting school values. Whereas when the unit was established, the separation of students with high needs was seen as a way to offer a safe and protective learning environment, over time the wider consensus changed to view that practice as segregation and exclusion.
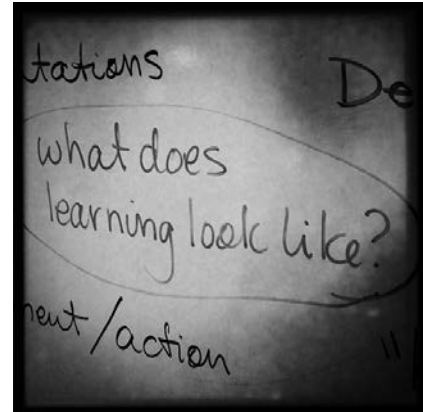
As a result staff sought to incorporate the students of the unit more meaningfully into the 'mainstream' of the school. By the end of the year the 'unit' no longer existed as a separate class but only as a learning resource and the former students became part of a larger department.

Here is a real strength of the process. Given the time to explore and reflect on school values and practices meant also reflecting on just what was meant by concepts such as 'mainstream'. A term that was used without thought at the beginning of the year became one that was contentious. Just who was 'mainstream'? Does 'mainstream' mean 'normal'? Do I have to fit into a 'mainstream'? Why can't it change to fit me? The concept of inclusion began to increasingly apply to other populations within the school, such as Pasifika students, those with reading and literacy needs, and the place of departments such as Maori and Learning Support. A focus for school development became creating a learning environment that was 'relevant and inclusive for all.'

This process of negotiation and re-negotiation allowed for the development of a shared vision and a common definition of inclusion. It provided a process of leaning through reflection and experience that created sustainable change, and that change took place at the level of school culture. The process at times created dissonance, but the framework provided by the Index for Inclusion provided a way to support this dissonance.

Elements of inclusion

During the project essential core elements that allow inclusion to flourish became evident. The first element is *relationships*—inclusion reduced to the most basic of questions: Do I know you? The more teachers had an opportunity to get to know other students, the more

ownership they took of those students. Through developing a relationship with students, teachers were more able to spot their non-participation during school events.

Linked closely to relationships is the element of *advocacy*. Advocacy can be seen as the voice of inclusion, whether it is from a student or a group of students speaking up for themselves, or friends or teachers ensuring there is voice. This advocacy is similarly linked to the element of *identity*. A sense of identity can be seen as an expression of self-confidence. Whether it an individual, a department, or even the unit within a school, a positive sense of identity encourages, even demands, a more meaningful participation in the school.

Through *shared experiences,* inclusion is experienced. Shared experiences such as participating and celebrating together create a familiarity in which those who are unknown become known. Through sharing experiences inclusion becomes the 'norm', the commonplace. Every school week or term provides opportunities for shared experiences, and every school term affords enough time to plan and create such celebrations. All that is required is imagination and facilitation.

Running throughout each of these elements is the notion of *transparency*. Transparency, in this sense, is seeing what is present, but also seeing what is not. With an increased awareness of inclusion (and its flip side, exclusion) how values are put into practice in a school community become more visible.

An essential element of whole school re-culturing programmes, such as the *Index for Inclusion*, involves a period of self-review and reflection, of making the school community, its values and aspirations, more transparent. For the advocate and for the self-advocate, this means being able to see what is not present *and* having a vision of what is desired. Developing relationships enables people to see the 'other' and bring them into a widening circle of friendships. During shared experiences it becomes clear who is and who isn't participating. Creating and strengthening a sense of identity requires being able to see oneself and one's department or unit as an entity deserving of worth.

The lessons learned during this year showed the Index for Inclusion to be a useful tool for developing inclusion. More than that, however, the time set aside for the process of reflection and exploration of core values regarding inclusion helped make any change more resilient. The framework and the process helped the school move from being a good school towards being an outstanding school.