

Searching for a model of inclusive practice

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Abstract

In this article, Colin Gladstone describes his leadership of a Young Enterprise Scheme project, linking Year 12 students with severe learning difficulties with students from a mainstream secondary school. He describes how this project laid the foundations for his current work developing practice and contributing to policy as a teacher in Christchurch, New Zealand.

I am currently working as a teacher in a special school in New Zealand and had previously been a teacher at Greenside Special School in Hertfordshire, UK. My interest has always been to try to make a difference in the lives of young disabled people as they make transitions across their school life and beyond. In 2001 I embarked on a project, linked to my participation in the Herts MEd in Leading Teaching and Learning, that would take me beyond philosophical debates about inequality and the rights of students and to something practical that might move the inclusion agenda forward (Dyson, 1999). I wanted to develop ways of enabling students from both a mainstream and a special school to work together in an atmosphere of mutual understanding. For me, inclusion is about process rather than location. Students with severe learning difficulties can be located within a mainstream school, but may not be included in that community or in appropriate learning activities (Mittler, 2000). Real inclusion requires a change of culture and values.

The students at Greenside School have 'severe learning difficulties' and 'profound and multiple learning difficulties'. These terms can be traced back to the Warnock Report on Special Educational Needs (DES, 1978). Some of the students featured in my project had specific language difficulties in addition to more general cognitive or sensory impairments. These difficulties may be mainly in their ability to interpret language or in expressing themselves. Some of

the students communicate with signing and by writing with symbols. Some students exhibit behavioural difficulties.

Designing my project

I found the official guidance on inclusive schooling interesting (DFEE, 1997; DFES, 2001). It suggests the formalisation of ways of encouraging schools in the mainstream and special sectors to build new relationships and share their experience and expertise. In my experience, a crucial issue when considering any collaboration between students from different sectors is finding ways of enabling a shared discourse. This can be problematic in several ways. Mainstream students can be limited by their lack of knowledge about their special school peers and lack the skills with which to communicate with them. Special school students have their own communication difficulties (Hewett, 1998). I was therefore looking for a vehicle which might help both sets of students to overcome these difficulties.

The Young Enterprise Scheme appeared to offer a way forward. Young Enterprise, since its inception in 1963, has become a very popular scheme both nationally and internationally. According to its website it currently reaches more than 350,000 young people a year from primary school right through to university (www.young-enterprise.org.uk). The key principle underpinning the programme is 'Learning by Doing' in which volunteers from business work with teachers and students. A typical activity is to support students in setting up and running their own real company. The aim is to use active learning strategies to enable young people to become more enterprising and able to make a real difference to their own and other people's lives. For my project, a Young Enterprise company was registered – 'The Green Team' – consisting of 16 students: nine Year 12/13 students with severe learning difficulties from my school and seven Year 12 students at a nearby mainstream community school.

The students' task was to set up and run the company. They met on a weekly basis in the autumn term and worked on a company logo, a letterhead, shareholders letters and product design and production. Shares were floated and capital generated to support the company over the coming months. The group met on both school sites and were supported by business and education advisors and other interested staff. The students chose the company name by voting from a short list. The product they chose to make was novelty clocks and then we decided to add a horticultural element with the growing

and selling of bedding plants. The clocks were sold at a trade fair and the plants from school-based stalls. At the end of the school year The Green Team announced a share dividend of 40% and liquidated the company after a directors' lunch to celebrate the company's success.

Constructing the project as a form of inquiry

For me the project was not just about providing an educative experience for the 16 students involved. I wanted to address the inclusion agenda by exploring the nature of the relationships between the mainstream and special school students and the cognitive and affective outcomes for all students involved. I wanted to see if the Young Enterprise Scheme could be used to promote teamwork and to learn more about its potential for equalising power relations between students and others. I therefore built in to the process the use of evaluation and research tools partly to inform the direction of the project itself and partly to be able to evaluate the project as a vehicle for inclusion.

I involved the students in the design of my data gathering tools and in the evaluation process itself. It would require ingenuity to allow all participating students to have an equal voice given the obvious impairment in some students' communication capacity. The students worked with me to develop questionnaires which combined words, symbols and photographs. These were complemented by interviews which were supported through the use of verbal and visual prompts. Focus group discussion was entirely led by the students themselves.

Key outcomes of the project

Towards the latter stages of the project I was able to sit down and reflect quite systematically on the issues, the impacts and outcomes of this collaborative Young Enterprise project. I explore some of these in outline below.

The promotion of dialogue

The company generally held a weekly board meeting to make decisions. Outside of this they worked in small, mixed-school groups. Students were proactive in their endeavours to learn more about effective ways of communicating with one another. Computers and augmentative communication systems, for example, the 'Signalong' signing system and 'Widgit' symbol system were used to aid the communication process. Generally the students with

severe learning difficulties who were more skilled communicators formed closer relationships with their mainstream peers although there were exceptions to this. The mainstream students and more communicative students with severe learning difficulties actively considered ways to involve everyone.

There was a common understanding amongst the students that working in small groups on practical tasks supports the process of collaboration and enables them to develop a shared discourse. Paired interviews supported students with severe learning difficulties in articulating their views. Students readily joined in and helped their co-interviewees to articulate a view even when they did not share that view themselves.

From collaboration to friendship

The Young Enterprise Scheme advocates teamwork, self-determination and a common goal. Working in this collaborative way on the 'Green Team' project appeared to reduce the stigma which often proves problematic in contact between students from mainstream and special schools. This experience was one where some initial apprehension and nervousness gave way to a mutual respect and genuine willingness to see things from others' perspectives. Students used language such as 'care', 'friends', 'communicate', 'contact', 'learning from each other', 'develop new skills together', to express their experience of the collaborative programme they had taken part in. Students also began to see the 'sameness' in one another rather than the differences.

Chatting to them and being friendly and they'd talk to me and R. I was making pots with her and she started talking to me about her mum and dad separating and I thought it was really nice she felt she could talk to me about it. Because my mum and dad separated, we were just having a conversation.

(Mainstream student)

Some research has suggested that, in collaborative learning projects involving students from both special and mainstream schools, the tendency is for relationships formed within the project to be limited to the context of the project itself (Shevlin and O'Moore, 2000a, 2000b). In contrast to this, my experience leads to me to be more optimistic in that the students in the Green Team expressed a wish to extend these relationships into the social and post-school environment. Developing friendships were both appreciated and nurtured as the extract from my interview notes below indicates.

Teacher: *What have you enjoyed about working with students from the H school?*

Student: *Talking and laughing.....She told me a joke ... she's coming to the discoYeah, on Friday*

Sustaining relationships was not always easy however, often due to operational constraints within school. Timetables, particularly for post-16 students are usually fairly full, with free periods at a premium. The mainstream students were proactive in giving up their free time to attend sessions devoted to the development of their company. Students were motivated to come together after school, but this meant staff from the special school supervising and arranging transport home.

Supporting a developing mutual understanding

Students' comments showed how timetabling, staffing, resources and time were crucial factors that schools needed to consider in an inclusive partnership. Students expressed a desire to work on both sites to help them to forge new understandings about each other's schools and how they operate. They saw the schools as very different, not only in physical size but in the level of resources. The students with learning difficulties were perceived as having closer, more intimate relationships with their teachers whereas the greater student numbers and size of school meant more distant relationships between the mainstream students and their teachers.

Developing a sense of agency

Students developed a greater autonomy and control through the opportunities for collaborative processes provided by the Young Enterprise Scheme. Handing control over to students in this way appeared to increase their motivation and independence.

It's all lessons whereas here we kind of go through the stages together, what we need to do next, how's it's going to be done. We get left to do that.

(Young Enterprise student)

Students also appreciated the opportunities for self-determination.

... it's flexible, because no one tells you that you need to do this next, we get on with things in a kind of order. When things need to be done we do them.

(Young Enterprise student)

In the special school environment it is tempting to allow the imperative of care to outweigh the need to allow students to develop this essential aspect of human development. Being human is about being an agent and developing a powerful sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1989). There were clear signs in this project that all students were able to make significant progress in this regard.

Reflections on the inclusion agenda

This project highlighted for me the huge potential of the Young Enterprise Scheme to contribute significantly to the inclusion agenda. As a vocational education programme, the scheme offers young people with differing needs an opportunity to work together towards a common goal. Working collaboratively with the teacher was also a feature of this particular project. Students became partners in the inquiry process and in this way their 'voice' is not tokenistic; they have real power to influence and alter the shape of the project as it emerged. Although this proved sometimes to be a difficult path to follow, the benefits far outweighed the difficulties. The Young Enterprise scheme promoted an inclusive approach to the developing project. It encourages feelings of equity and collegiality. It promotes the idea of students experiencing a variety of roles within the company structure thus ensuring that all students have something to contribute. In addition, the widespread use of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) in running the company provided an equalising tool for students from both schools. The issue of sustainability of the links between mainstream and special school is tackled organically through the necessity of the company running for a protracted length of time.

Developing my agenda for change

Through my experience of the Young Enterprise project I became convinced that if greater partnership between mainstream and special schools is to be achieved, schools from both sectors need to be encouraged to build new relationships and share their experiences and expertise. The powerful message this project encapsulated for me was that listening to students' views and empowering them to explore strategies for collaboration will further the pursuit of the inclusion agenda.

In the year following the project, the two participating schools pledged to build on and expand the links between them. My personal and family plans meant that I had to leave the planning of

further projects to others. My wife and I had been planning for some time to take a break from teaching and take our children on a world tour. We travelled around the world for one year, crossing five continents and experiencing things that would define and shape who we are today. I visited a number of schools on our travels and saw how other countries and education systems tackle the issues and dilemmas in educating young disabled students. Many of the debates were familiar but some of the solutions were often creative in the most difficult of situations.

Our visit to New Zealand led to a decision to emigrate and settle in Christchurch where I now work in a special school. In recent months I have been developing a programme to help young people with the transition to the post-school world and have also been working with the Wayne Francis Charitable Trust and the New Zealand Ministry of Education on projects relating to the transition of disabled students from school into post-school life. This appears to me to be the most difficult transition that children and their families have to make and yet it is not well supported. To underpin this work I have enrolled in a doctoral programme at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch. My study focuses on improving post-school outcomes for disabled young people, a group who have been historically marginalised. I want to explore what control and choice disabled students have at this time of their lives and come to understand more about how they can actively participate in the transition process. I hope that, through promoting student self-determination, student aspirations will rise and lead to them reviewing the nature of their role in the community.

In approaching this new project I am able to draw on a few studies related to transition for disabled young people in New Zealand (e.g. Bennie, 2005; Bray, 2003; Cleland, Rickerby and Morton, 2004; Hornby and Witte, 2008) and there is also an international literature on transitions. However, perhaps the most important resource for me are the values that drew me to the Young Enterprise project at the beginning of the decade and the principles that I was able to clarify for myself through that project. The New Zealand Disability Strategy, launched in the same year I began my Young Enterprise project (2001), clearly articulates the desire of government to improve outcomes in relation to greater employment opportunities and quality of life, but there is still much to be done to develop the practical strategies that will help young people with disabilities to

make the transition from school to the wider social and economic world.

Recently, there have been some exciting developments. I have been working with the Ministry of Education on creating National Guidelines for the Transition of Disabled Students which should be published and distributed to schools by mid 2009. My school is to become the lead school in providing a service across Christchurch secondary schools for 'high needs' students. I will manage this new initiative which fits well with the transition support group I set up twelve months ago. It is now about spreading good practice across schools and building the structure and framework that will prevent these students from slipping through the net. The next important step is to encourage dialogue between the government ministries so that the 'seamless' part of a young disabled student's transition into adulthood is in place. It is hoped that the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Development will establish a partnership that allows for continuity of services and support from school into post school life.

My career has taken some interesting turns and my relocation has been dramatic, but I am happy to say that there has also been a great deal of continuity. I feel that I am still pursuing the agenda I clarified when I was a teacher in Hertfordshire and I am finding new ways to influence practice not only in my own school, but in other schools and in wider policy contexts.

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