In this article, Lani Florian, Professor of Social and Educational Inclusion at the University of Aberdeen, examines the relationships between 'special' and 'inclusive' education. She looks at the notion of specialist knowledge among teachers and at the roles adopted by staff working with pupils with 'additional' or 'special' needs in mainstream settings. She explores the implications of the use of the concept of 'special needs' – especially in relation to attempts to implement inclusion in practice – and she notes the tensions that arise from these relationships. She goes on to ask a series of questions: How do teachers respond to differences among their pupils? What knowledge do teachers need in order to respond more effectively to diversity in their classrooms? What are the roles of teacher education and ongoing professional development? How can teachers be better prepared to work in mixed groupings of pupils? In seeking answers to these questions, Lani Florian concludes that we should look at educational practices and undertake a thorough examination of how teachers work in their classrooms. She suggests that it is through an examination of 'the things that teachers can do' that we will begin to bring meaning to the concept of inclusion.

**Key words:** inclusion, special needs, educational practices, teacher education, teacher development.

**Introduction**

A policy of inclusion is generally understood around the world as part of a human rights agenda that demands access to, and equity in, education. However, there are many interpretations about what constitutes educational rights, as well as how these should be assessed, evaluated and so on. Is there a difference between a right to education (access) and rights in education (equity)? Does the guarantee of a school place mean that the right to education has been achieved if the form of provision for a student who has been identified as having special educational needs is different from what others of a similar age receive? Do different forms of provision guarantee equity? Is special education part of the problem or part of the solution in fulfilling rights and answering questions of equity in education?

Thirty-five years ago, when this journal, then entitled *Special Education: Forward Trends*, was launched, the Government was about to embark on a landmark enquiry, chaired by Mary Warnock, into the education of ‘handicapped children’. A few years earlier, the responsibility for children who remained excluded from education, then described as severely educationally sub-normal, was transferred from health to education authorities. A cursory look at the early issues of the journal reveals excitement and hope about the educational possibilities that would now be available to every child. Thirty-five years ago, special education was seen more as a ‘solution to’ rather than a ‘problem of’ social justice in education, but not for everyone and not for long. Sociological critiques of special education (such as Tomlinson, 1982) showed the injustices that can occur in systems with separate forms of provision for learners who deviate from what is considered to be the norm. Historians and other scholars began to write about the paradox of special education being something that fulfilled both humanitarian and controlling aims of society (for example, Cole, 1989; Lazerson, 1983).

A frustration with the paradoxical nature of special needs education led many to embrace the idea of inclusive education as an alternative. Inclusive education is based on the principle that local schools should provide for all children, regardless of any perceived difference, disability or other social, emotional, cultural or linguistic difference. But if special education was not the answer, how were schools to provide for everyone? If inclusive education was to be a process of responding to individual differences within the structures and processes that are available to all learners rather than something separate from them, what would be the role of specialist teachers, and what should be the nature of their expertise? Then, as now, there were no easy answers to these and other questions that have fuelled debates about special versus inclusive education.

The aim of this article is to consider questions of teacher and specialist knowledge, and how teachers of students identified as having ‘special’ or ‘additional’ educational needs can work within mainstream education environments that are sometimes unsupportive to the processes of inclusive education. The article briefly considers the well-documented tensions between special and inclusive education. This is followed by some thoughts about how colleagues can work more productively in support of learners when they experience difficulty, coming to the conclusion that it is what teachers do, rather than what they are called, that gives meaning to the concept of inclusive education. A final section considers the implications of this argument for those who train teachers.
Special or inclusive education?
In ‘Reimagining special education’ (Florian, 2007), I argued that the positioning of special needs education as both a problem for and a solution to injustice in education has highlighted the dilemmas of access and equity inherent in education systems that rely on different forms of provision for different types of learners. As many commentators have pointed out, special needs education is widely seen as one of the mechanisms by which students who experience difficulties in learning are both included in and excluded from the forms of schooling that are otherwise available to children of similar ages.

For some, the ends have justified the means – access to different forms of provision where individual needs might be met is seen as preferable to education in a mainstream environment for those who have been judged as failing in that environment, or to no education at all. Others have rejected this view and have sought new means in the form of inclusive education as a replacement for special needs education and its associated problems of marginalisation and exclusion. Colleagues such as Tony Booth (1998) have written forcefully about the need to reject special education and replace it with explorations of the processes of exclusion and inclusion for all.

However, while research on inclusive education has indeed embarked on such an exploration, it has not brought about a rejection of special needs education. While there may be many reasons for this, one important justification for the continuation of ‘special’ or ‘additional’ support for some learners is that, in reality, school systems are utilitarian in structure and are organised around the discredited but widely-held idea that intelligence is fixed, measurable and normally distributed (see Figure 1).

These questions highlight the tensions between the structure of schooling – based as it is on ideas about the greatest good for the greatest number and the assumption that the population is normally distributed – and the issues of equity raised by this structure. In other words, there is a tension between schooling for ‘most and some’, and ‘schools for all’; between ‘mainstream and special’, and ‘inclusive education’. Is it possible to reconcile these tensions? Does it matter if what Thomas (2008) calls ‘the flawed assumptions behind thinking on difference’ remain unchanged? Of course it does, but, as Hart and her colleagues (Hart, Dixon, Drummond & McIntyre, 2004) have convincingly demonstrated, there is also evidence that ‘things can change, and change for the better on the basis of what teachers do in the present’.

Individual differences between learners – what matters in education?
Historically, educationally important individual differences between learners were thought to be associated with specific types of learning difficulties or impairments. Observations of the loss of mental functioning in people who had acquired brain injuries led to the development of theories about how the brain works and, on this basis, educational interventions were recommended to remediate or compensate for hypothesised underlying impairments. Early work in special education reflected the influence of these ideas on the development of tests and interventions based on a model of ‘process training’, which assumed that underlying abilities could be enhanced by training (Kavale, 2007). The Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities, Frostig’s visual perceptual training, diagnostic-prescriptive teaching and other tests and interventions advertised or discussed in the pages of Special Education: Future Trends promised much more than they were able to deliver, as research on the educational effectiveness of these interventions did not produce encouraging results (for a review, see Kavale, 2007).

In response, many researchers began to focus more specifically on learning itself, leading to the development of new strategies intended to support students in accessing the curriculum, rather than aiming to remediate underlying cognitive deficits. As it turns out, many of these strategies are associated with theories of teaching and learning that stress the importance of fitness-for-purpose; that is, selecting intelligence, such as mobility training and sign language, these are often associated with ‘learning difficulties’, thereby reinforcing bell-shaped curve ideas about ‘some’ and ‘most’ learners (see Figure 1).

As a result, it is proving particularly difficult to articulate a process of inclusion as practice. Instead, as Norwich (2007) has recently explained, teachers and other school staff face dilemmas about how to respond when learners experience difficulty. How can they provide for all learners without perpetuating the stigmatising effects of marking out some students as different? Are there differences that can and should be ignored? Which differences matter, and how will teachers know?

Figure 1: Bell-shaped curve

Thus, in the familiar educational parlance, what is ordinarily provided will meet the needs of most learners, while a few at the tail ends of the distribution may require something ‘additional’ to or ‘different’ from that which is ordinarily available. Indeed, this is the definition of special needs education and additional support in many countries. While there may be some necessary ‘additional’ and ‘different’ kinds of support that are not specifically related to ideas about
strategies on the basis of what is to be learnt rather than what is wrong with the learner. The most important thing is that objectives and content are made accessible to the learner. However, programmes of research conducted within disability classification systems that examine interventions by type of impairment have obscured these important findings. While historically understandable, such an approach makes it hard to see that similar strategies are often recommended for teaching different ‘types’ of learners. A review by Ysseldyke (2001) convincingly shows the lack of evidence in favour of a ‘diagnostic-prescriptive’ approach to teaching those who experience difficulties in learning.

Thus, rather than concentrating on the differences between learners, it might be more helpful to think in terms of learning outcomes. Indeed, many teachers and specialists do just that in practice. Kershner (2000) has developed a typology of learning aims to enhance achievement, active learning and participation and for responding to individual differences. Her model clarifies the link between the teacher’s role and learning in making sense of individual differences, without relying on disability categories. In this model, learning is defined as a holistic notion in which the teacher ‘uses a combination of strategies to set appropriate work’. What is important here, as argued in ‘Inclusive pedagogy’ (Florian & Kershner, in press), is that inclusive education is distinguished by an acceptance of differences between students as ordinary aspects of human development.

The key point is that, while there are differences between learners, the salient educational differences are found in learners’ responses to tasks and activities, rather than in the medical diagnostic criteria that have been used to categorise them in order to determine their eligibility for additional support. However, if neither ‘process teaching’ nor ‘diagnostic-prescriptive teaching’ are helpful strategies for supporting learners when they experience difficulty, this then raises questions about what does work, who holds this knowledge and how it can be used in support of learners when they encounter difficulty.

Teacher knowledge

It is often argued that a lack of knowledge on the part of classroom teachers, attributed to a lack of training, is one of the main barriers to inclusion (see, for example, Forlin, 2001). However, attempts to identify the actual nature of the required knowledge are often meagre. My own attempt in Promoting Inclusive Practice (Florian, 1998) suggested that teachers need knowledge about learning difficulties and that they need to be skilled in using specific instructional methods, but what does this mean? Evidence on teaching practice and pedagogy in special and mainstream education suggests that the teaching strategies used in mainstream education can be adapted to assist students who have been identified as having special educational needs. Cook and Schirmer’s (2003) review, which sought to identify what is ‘special’ about special education, showed that teaching practices that are effective for students identified as having special educational needs also work with students who are not identified as having special educational needs. Lewis and Norwich (2005) came to a similar conclusion in their review of specialist pedagogy. They suggested that teaching strategies might be arranged along a continuum from high to low intensity, rather than being arranged according to their association with a particular type of special educational need. Once again, the emphasis is on the use of a strategy rather than apparently different teaching approaches. This is important because it challenges the notion that mainstream classroom teachers do not recognise or know how to implement effective teaching practices for pupils with special needs.

However, responding to differences between pupils is not just a matter of ‘good teaching’, because we know that what works for most does not work for some. Indeed, that is the reasoning that originally led to the development of special needs education as a separate form of provision; but this is also the point where difficulties arise in articulating what is distinctive about either special or inclusive education. What do teachers need to know and do? What is the role of specialist knowledge and how should it be used?

Firstly, teachers need to know that it is important to differentiate between forms of provision and the teaching and learning that occurs within them. This is an important distinction because often they are confounded in the literature on special educational needs. As the places where formal learning occurs, forms of provision are the contexts within which teaching and learning take place. The actual teaching approach adopted by the teacher is generally determined by the teacher’s beliefs about how people learn. Some schools, such as Steiner Schools, develop an approach to teaching around a particular philosophy of education, but generally teachers are attracted to working in these types of schools because they agree with the philosophy that underpins the educational approach. Because special needs provision was historically organised around types of impairment, teaching approaches and forms of provision are often confounded. The conventional wisdom is that teachers who work in specialist forms of provision use specialist teaching methods and procedures that cannot be used or found elsewhere. In reality, as discussed above, it is not the actual teaching methods or procedures that are different, although the context may be quite different. This begs a number of questions about the relationships between forms of provision or context, theories of learning and teaching approaches. While there are many important discussions to be had about these relationships, this article will focus on teachers in mainstream classrooms.

A central challenge for teachers who wish to develop inclusive practice is to consider the way they think about the problem of inclusion. The challenge is not to defend the need to accommodate learner differences, as has been the case so far, but to challenge our collective complacency about what is not ‘otherwise available’. Individual teachers may not be able to change the organisational structure of schooling, but their work can be informed by the knowledge that it is possible to support the learning of all students.
There are two things that teachers need to know in order to implement such an approach. One is that teaching strategies are not differentially effective for different types of learners. Effective decisions about teaching strategies are as likely to be informed by what is being taught as much as by who is being taught. Secondly, teachers must also recognise that not all learners are the same. Learners vary across many dimensions and teachers are constantly making multiple decisions about how to respond to all kinds of differences. Differences themselves are a matter of degree rather than of categorical distinction, so that a learner is considered to have special or additional needs when the magnitude of difficulty experienced by that learner exceeds the teacher’s capacity to know how to respond.

Therefore, when learners encounter difficulty, teachers need to work out what they can do to support the learner. Hart (2000) has outlined a useful series of questions that teachers might ask in order to move themselves and the learner past the point of difficulty. These ‘interpretive moves’ do not rule out the use of specialists or specialist knowledge, but they do not require the identification of special educational need within individual learners. Where specialists are consulted, this is done in support of the teacher’s effort to ensure that the learner is meaningfully engaged in the classroom activity that is intended to promote learning.

Inclusive practice is about the things that staff in schools do which give meaning to the concept of inclusion (Florian, 2008). It does not mean that teachers and learners are left on their own without support. Rather, inclusion involves the use of support, the ways in which teachers respond to individual differences during whole-class teaching, the choices they make about groupwork and how they utilise specialist knowledge. In ‘Reimagining special education’ (Florian, 2007), I argued that it was necessary to bring about this cultural shift in the field of special needs education – in other words, that the structural problems of the past need not determine the future:

‘These three things, clearer thinking about the fulfilment of the right to education, the challenge to deterministic beliefs about ability, and a shift in focus from differences among learners, to learning for all, set an agenda for special needs education that can change the nature of what special education is and might become in the future. In time it may also help change the organisation of educational provision and prevailing concepts of schooling so that the reimagining of special education becomes a reimagining of diversity in education. Then research on the difficulties students experience in learning might lead to pedagogical practices that are inclusive of all learners.’

(p. 18)

While, for many scholars, the concept of inclusive education involves a rejection of special needs education, systems of schooling are organised around the idea that some learners will need something ‘additional to’ or ‘different from’ that which is otherwise available to students of similar ages. This additional provision is within the professional domain of teachers to determine. They have many choices to make about what to do when students experience difficulty. Of course these choices are influenced and constrained by many factors, some of which have been discussed here, but one of the least well understood is the role of the professional training that they have received, and how well it has prepared them to take up the challenges of teaching diverse groups of students who vary on many dimensions, and to work with and through other adults.

Preparing teachers to respond to difference: a new direction for inclusive education?

One of the many difficulties associated with ensuring educational equity in the creation of ‘schools for all’ concerns the preparation of teachers to meet the challenges of social and educational inclusion in increasingly diverse societies. Rouse (2008) has suggested that the challenge of professional development might be expressed as a reciprocal triangular relationship between three elements, as shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Knowing, believing and doing**

![Diagram](attachment:Figure_2.png)

In this model, any two of the three elements of knowing, believing and doing are thought to influence the third. This means that if, as is often the case, a teacher believes in the rights-based philosophy of inclusion and is willing to try it out by including learners who might otherwise have been excluded, then the teacher’s knowledge about inclusive practice will develop. Likewise, another teacher who believes in the principle of inclusion may lack confidence in ‘doing’, but by taking a course about inclusive practice develops the knowledge that gives him or her the confidence to engage in inclusive practice. Other teachers may know about inclusive practice but still be unsure about whether they believe in it, but by working in a school that has an inclusive ethos (‘doing’), they come to see that the practice can be effective. These examples show that one does not have to wait for all of the elements to be in place – teachers will be in different places in terms of their knowledge, beliefs and practices. Therefore, the important question is how teachers can be supported to develop the knowledge, beliefs and practices that support inclusion. In this final section, I outline three key concepts that have formed the foundation for such a project in current work on teacher education at the University of Aberdeen.
First, teacher education and professional development must take difference into account from the outset. One way of doing this involves a rejection of the determinist views of ability that dominated the educational landscape during the twentieth century. There is an emerging literature (for example, Hart, 1996, 1998; Hart et al., 2004, 2007) that addresses the subject of what might replace determinist views, and this literature makes suggestions that might usefully inform initial teacher education. Peters and Reid (2006) in the USA have been collecting examples of activities, called ‘discursive practices’, that teacher educators are developing in the hope of disrupting and challenging beliefs about concepts like normalcy, in order to bring about the necessary changes in thinking and practice. This is important work that serves to uncover and expose what is in some cases a firmly held belief that disability and the learning difficulties experienced by some children are tragic because they are abnormal.

Secondly, teachers need to be disabused of the notion that they are not qualified to teach disabled children or others with “additional needs”. I would argue that they have much of the knowledge and many of the skills required to teach all children, but they may not have the confidence to put this knowledge into action in helping children who are experiencing difficulties in learning. Literature on the question of ‘specialist pedagogy’ (for example, Davis & Florian, 2004; Kavale, 2007; Lewis & Norwich, 2005) and what teachers need to know about meeting special educational needs (for example, Kershner, 2007) provides guidance to teacher educators about the use of teaching strategies that can support all learners.

A ‘more rounded appreciation of how to deliver inclusive practice’ begins with an understanding that inclusive practice is more than differentiation. It involves an understanding of the interactive socio-cultural factors that interact to produce individual differences (biology, culture, family, school), rather than explanations that stress a single cause. Inclusive practice involves understanding how to sort out the relative contribution of each of these factors in determining appropriate responses when children experience difficulty. Moreover, it involves the understanding that not all children will experience difficulty despite being affected by such socio-cultural factors. Teachers can make a difference. These are the foundations of evidence-based practice, and it is the foundation of ‘specialist’ knowledge – knowing when, why and how to respond to difficulty is not a simple matter of ‘what works’.

Finally, teachers need to learn new strategies for working with and through others. If the concept of ability is replaced with a view of the learning difficulties experienced by children as problems of teaching for teachers to solve – and if teachers are indeed to be considered qualified to teach all children – how might the expertise of colleagues who specialise in learning difficulties and those from related disciplines be used to support teaching and learning? Different models of collaborative teaching are suggested in the literature (Thousand, Nevin & Villa, 2007). Trainee teachers and those wishing to develop collaborative practice need opportunities to engage in collaborative teaching as part of their professional development. Procedures for analysing the effectiveness of collaborative teaching are being developed at the Centre for Equity in Education at the University of Manchester (CEE, 2007), and there is scope for further research and development work in this area.

The task of teacher education for inclusive education, as it is being conceptualised by the Inclusive Practice Project at the University of Aberdeen, is to develop a new approach to training teachers to ensure that they:

- have a greater awareness and understanding of the educational and social problems/issues that can affect children’s learning;
- have developed strategies that they can use to support and deal with such difficulties.

To date, the professional studies strand in the PGDE (Primary) and PGDE (Secondary) programmes have been combined into one single initial teacher education programme with an enhanced university-based curriculum designed to ensure that issues of inclusion, as outlined above, are fully addressed within the core of the programme, rather than as an additional element or an elective selected by only a few student teachers. During spring 2007, staff in the University of Aberdeen School of Education, along with colleagues from area schools and programme graduates, undertook a review and recommended changes to the structure and content of the Professional Studies element of the course in order to achieve this. Thanks to the support of the Scottish Government, Aberdeen’s reform of initial teacher education includes a research project that is attempting to identify and replace ability-focused practices with an alternative pedagogy, and its implications for working with others.

**Conclusion**

The concept of inclusive education has come to mean many things: from the very specific – for example, the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools – to a very broad notion of social inclusion as used by governments and the international community as a way of responding to diversity among learners (Ainscow, 2007). Unsurprisingly, there is confusion in the literature about the meanings of inclusive education and many of these meanings are themselves contested.

There is uneasiness about the term ‘inclusion’. On the one hand, it has been observed that narrow conceptualisations have resulted in simply replacing the word ‘special’ with ‘inclusive’ and nothing much has changed. On the other hand, there is a fear that the definition has become so broad that it is meaningless or, worse, that educationally important differences are being overlooked. Indeed, a rejection of models of provision that depend on the identification of individual differences does not mean that there are no educationally important differences. This paper has considered how can we both respect and respond to human differences.
in ways that include rather than exclude learners in what is ordinarily available.

What does this mean for teachers’ practice? My answer is that teachers on their own are not in a position to bring about the radical reforms to the structures of schooling that are required in order to enable inclusive education to replace special education. However, as has been shown (for example, Ainscow, Dyson & Booth, 2006; Black-Hawkins, Florian & Rouse, 2007; Hart et al., 2004; O’Hanlon, 2003; Skidmore, 2004), they are very well placed as individuals to choose to change the way they work in their own classrooms, even within the constraints of national curricula and systems of assessment. Regardless of school structures and their positions within them, teachers are free to think differently about the nature of the problem of ‘learning difficulties’ and the responses that they might make when students encounter barriers to learning. Thus future trends in research on inclusion should be focused on practice: ways of working that help teachers to make sense of the exclusionary structures that differentiate learners on the basis of characteristics such as ‘ability’, and support in developing the confidence to know what to do when their students experience difficulties in learning.

This article has focused on the issue of practice and what might be done better to prepare teachers to respond to differences in ways that go beyond the methods that are currently available. It acknowledges but does not resolve the dilemmas of difference. Rather, it suggests that a starting point is in practice: the things that teachers can do that give meaning to the concept of inclusion, regardless of, or perhaps despite, the often restrictive structures of schooling and the constraining nature of target approaches to educational outcomes.

References


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