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Patterns of inclusive education through the practice of student teachers

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For the purpose of moving towards more inclusive practices, the research literature argues that we have to investigate in greater depth the way in which universities respond to inclusive education. This paper investigates the nature of inclusive education through the practice of student teachers and sees how so-called inclusive education manifests itself in Cyprus. In particular, it tries to answer the question. ‘How does inclusive education feature in the practices, activities and behaviours of student teachers?’ This qualitative study uses open-ended initial interviews, observations, follow-up interviews and field notes. The data from these sources were analysed following a qualitative analysis. The results suggest that student teachers had positive attitudes towards children that tend to be marginalized, they encouraged participation of all children in classroom activities, they made efforts to overcome factors that acted as barriers to inclusion, and they developed collaboration with the purpose of pushing inclusion forward.

Introduction

Over the last decade, the idea of inclusive education has featured very highly in the educational priorities of many countries. In the discussions in which the educational policies of many countries are determined the issue of inclusive education very often dominates. Many of the efforts to promote inclusive education are exclusively focused on the activities of schools and on how they could be formed in order to become more inclusive (e.g. Clark et al., 1995; Ainscow, 1999; Ballard, 1999; Angelides, 2005). Despite the fact that these efforts take place and are gradually intensified, it seems that there is widespread dissatisfaction regarding their success. In order to move towards more inclusive practices, Booth et al. (2003) suggest that we have to investigate in greater depth the way in which universities respond to inclusive education. The way in which teachers are trained in their initial education.
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seems to have a serious role to play in the development of inclusive practices in the schools they will eventually work in (Nes, 2000). Many researchers have studied the ways in which higher education institutions educate student teachers in issues of inclusion and they have spotted a number of factors that prevent students from developing inclusive practices (e.g. Nunan et al., 2000; Booth et al., 2003; Angelides & Stylianou, 2005).

In this paper, I will go a step further than the above studies and try to study inclusive education from its positive side. Very often, in different researches, the barriers and difficulties that prevent the development of inclusive education appear. In this paper, however, I will try to investigate the form of inclusive education through the practice of student teachers and see how so-called inclusive education manifests itself. In particular, I will try to answer the following research question: How does inclusive education feature in the practices, activities and behaviours of student teachers?

With the term ‘activities’ I mean the teaching action that student teachers take in the classroom. With the term ‘behaviours’ I mean the ways students teachers act under given circumstances. ‘Practice’, according to Robinson (1993), is action informed by beliefs about how to achieve educationally important purposes in particular circumstances. Practices, Robinson continues, are more than behaviours since they incorporate beliefs about both what is important and about how what is important can be realized in particular circumstances.

In what follows I will briefly discuss the issue of inclusive education and then I will analyse in detail the methodology I used. After that I will present the analysis of data in which I develop and substantiate with data the four themes that emerge from my data. At the end I draw some conclusions that arise from the data analysis.

**Inclusive education**

Inclusive education is related to the effort of overcoming barriers that prevent the participation and learning of all children, regardless of their race, gender, social background, sexuality, disability or attainment in schools (Booth & Ainscow, 1998). Inclusive education does not only focus on the barriers that students face but also, as Booth and Ainscow (2002) argue, focuses on the development of cultures, policies and practices in educational systems as well as in educational institutions in order for them to be able to respond to the diversity of their students and to treat them equally. Inclusive education is related to curricula and the ways in which they could be organized in order to address the abilities of all children (Sebba & Ainscow, 1996). It is also related to school development where all, students and teachers, learn. In inclusive schools difference is welcomed and it is considered a source of learning rather than a problem.

Generally, inclusive education is a complex and controversial issue, a topic that often creates intense debate among the different stakeholders. Ainscow et al. (2000) argue that there is an indefiniteness and confusion surrounding the meaning of the term ‘inclusive education’.
Inclusive education, therefore, is related to learning and participation, to the acceptance of difference, to the school as a whole, to democracy and to society in general. Inclusive education means that all children have the right to learn in the school of their neighbourhood. Inclusive education is not limited to certain groups of students but addresses all involved (students, teachers, parents, etc.). In this sort of education all voices should be heard and change should happen to the school as a social institution and not to students as individuals. Inclusive education is related to the cultures of schools, to the educational policy in general and to social justice. The most important point of all though is that inclusive education is a continuous process and not a stage that we can reach at a certain point.

Like many other countries in the world, Cyprus is in a process of expanding provision for previously marginalized children through policies of inclusion. Under the current system of education in Cyprus many pupils who experience difficulties within schools are marginalized or even excluded from teaching. During the last decade the government of Cyprus has encouraged and supported the education of children considered as having special needs within the mainstream educational system. In July 1999 the House of Parliament passed the Education Act for Children with Special Needs (Cyprus Republic, 1999) and it was followed by the regulations that govern this Act (Cyprus Republic, 2001). According to this law all children with special needs have the right to be educated into their neighbouring regular school together with their age-mates. Mainstream schools, therefore, have to be transformed in ways that will increase their capacity to respond to all children. The implication of this is that all teachers have to modify their practice in order to be able to teach effectively all children and to put into operation policies of inclusion. However, there remains widespread dissatisfaction for those involved in the education process with the ability of Cypriot teachers to engage equally all pupils in teaching and learning. The reasons behind this failure have been attributed to the attitudes of teachers and the Ministry of Education (Angelides, 2004), to the cultures of schools (Angelides & Stylianou, 2005) and to the historical context through which what we today call ‘inclusive education’ in Cyprus was developed (Phtiaka, 2000).

Methods

Data collection and analysis followed qualitative research methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). I selected ten fourth-year students from the school of education of my university whom I studied for four months, which was the duration of their practical training. These students were selected on the basis of three criteria: (1) their willingness to get involved in the research project; (2) their having participated in a previous project aimed at providing experience of the type of research I intended (this project investigated the ways Cyprus universities that educate teachers respond to the challenge of inclusive education; Angelides & Stylianou, 2005); and (3) the agreement of the heads of schools and the teachers of classes where they were doing their practical training to participate in the project.
These students were mainly medium- to high-achieving teacher education students who were very conscious regarding their profession.

To begin with I conducted open-ended interviews with the ten students for the purpose of getting an initial idea about their attitudes towards inclusive education. In particular, I discussed with them in a general way about their experiences during their practical training, about their efforts to provide equal opportunities to all children, about their experiences with marginalized children and about their experiences regarding the function of inclusive education in their school. The interviews lasted about one hour each and they were conducted on the university campus a week before the beginning of the practical training (which usually begins in mid-February).

After this I observed the student teachers in an attempt to see them in their 'natural environment' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I did four 2-hour visits with each student during which I observed their teaching in the classroom. I also observed their activities outside the classroom, mainly in the playground while children were playing. During each observation I kept notes and tried to record the thoughts and feelings of our students (Delamont, 1992). Actually, these field-notes formed the basis of my study of the activities and behaviour of our students in the classroom.

Each observation was followed by an open discussion with the student involved, focusing on particular incidents and behaviours that occurred during teaching. These incidents were considered to be significant if they were related to inclusive education, in which case I investigated them further (Angelides et al., 2004). Through the discussion I tried to learn whether what I had observed was an exception or if it was something that happened on a daily basis. In this way I tried to understand better the practice of our students as well as trying to understand how inclusive education manifests itself through their practice, their behaviours and their activities. All interviews (initial and final) were returned to students for comments and to see if they agreed with what they had initially said (member check).

For the analysis of my data I followed the two stages recommended by Erickson (1986): inductive and deductive. In the first phase I tried to organize my data according to each participant. Thus, the different sources of data (initial interviews, observation, final interviews) were examined, analysed and categorized on the basis of each participant. I first analysed the interviews, trying to spot themes that dominated and appeared repeatedly (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Then, I studied my observation notes in order to detect relations between the behaviours in the classroom and the comments made during interviews. After that a forward–backward process in all data began so as to clear up certain incidents that beset the behaviours of students. In some instances I had to refer back to the final interviews in order to clear up some of my observation notes. At this point the patterns of inclusive education in each student’s practice began to appear.

As I have already said, in the first phase the data was analysed based on each individual separately. Then, similar ideas were put into some wider categories, having noted next to each idea the source from which it was taken (observation, initial interview, final interview). After that, whilst analysing the data from all participants I tried to find particular categories around which I reorganized my data.
In trying to establish the trustworthiness of my data I used different techniques. Initially I used two methods of triangulation. In the first, I cross-compared our data in order to confirm the different themes arising from the data that came from different research techniques (observation, initial interviews, final interviews) (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In the second, I examined my data from multiple angles and different perspectives, continually looking for alternative possibilities and different explanations, trying to develop a richer understanding of them (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Patterns of inclusion

Through the analysis of my data, as well as through my efforts to notice patterns of inclusive education through the practice of our student teachers, I spotted particular themes that I considered to be good examples of inclusive education. I developed these themes and substantiated them with data. I spotted four themes. Of course, there were many more that can emerge in another study.

Positive attitudes displayed by student teachers

The analysis of my data indicated that student teachers showed positive attitudes towards all children. My particular attention, however, was on groups of children who were vulnerable to marginalization (i.e. foreign children, children with disabilities, children categorized as having special needs, children coming from poor families). In many instances I observed our students displaying positive attitudes towards children who were coming from those particular groups. I observed, for example, one student who tried to talk to a child who had just arrived at the school from Russia and did not speak Greek. Another student complained to the head of the school when she learned that a quadriplegic girl who used a wheelchair would not go on a daytrip because the teaching assistant who was responsible for her was pregnant and had been advised by her doctor not to go on the trip. Thus, because there was nobody to escort the girl the head teacher had decided not to allow the girl to accompany her classmates on the trip. The student teacher in question insisted that the girl should go and offered to go herself in place of the pregnant teaching assistant.

In addition, the following vignette supports the assertion that the student teachers showed positive attitudes towards all children, particularly towards those who were marginalized.

Vignette

It was a fifth grade class at 8:00 in the morning. The lesson was Greek language and in the class a discussion on a text from their reading book was in process. The student teacher asked a question and Yiannis raised his hand to answer. Yiannis was a child whose parents were from Georgia and who had come to Cyprus within the last year. For this reason he didn’t speak Greek very well and made syntax errors. In this instance he gave the right answer but in poor Greek. The teacher said: ‘well done Yiannis, this is the right answer’.
Antonis, another boy, complained that he hadn’t understood anything that Yiannis had said. The teacher responded to Antonis as follows: ‘Antonis, Yiannis’ answer was right. As you know Yiannis came to Cyprus very recently and he doesn’t yet speak Greek very well but very soon he will do. We need to be patient and careful when he speaks because in this way we will help him to learn the language faster. If you had been a little bit more careful I am sure you would have understood what he said as I, and most of your classmates, did.

In the above incident we see a student teacher teaching Greek language. To one of her questions, Yiannis, a foreign child who does not speak Greek very well, raises his hand and gives the answer. Another boy complains that he did not understand Yiannis’ answer. The student, though, calmly and very aptly, reminds Antonis that Yiannis only recently came to Cyprus and does not speak Greek very well. She also stresses that everyone has to help him learn Greek better and also be a little bit more careful in order to understand what he says. What we can infer from the reaction of the above student teacher is that she developed positive attitudes towards all children and especially towards those who tend to be marginalized. Children like Yiannis are very often marginalized not only because of the difficulties they face with the language but also because of the attitudes of other children. Our student, though, gives the opportunity to Yiannis to answer; she listens to his answer carefully and reinforces his effort because it was the right answer. Then, she very calmly explains to the boy who complained that he did not fully appreciate Yiannis’ predicament and that he should take a different approach in terms of his behaviour towards him. I considered her action as demonstrating an inclusive practice because with her attitude she supports Yiannis, consults Antonis, and leaves the message of the need to have a positive attitude towards those who are ‘different’ to the rest of the class.

Discussing the above incident with the student after the lesson she said:

I’m happy that what I did was obvious ... I try to give equal opportunities to all children. ... In the lessons at the university we learned that we should be particularly careful with certain vulnerable groups ... and Yiannis belongs to one of such groups. ... When I spot such incidents I try to be calm and to explain to children how they should behave towards their classmates. ... Sometimes there are situations that are cultivated within the school workplace because teachers tolerate them.

The significance of the attitudes of teachers regarding the promotion of inclusive education is stressed by the international literature that focuses on this area. For example, Pijl (1995) claims that the attitudes and activities of teachers can determine the successfullness of efforts to promote inclusive education in schools. Similar findings have been reached by some other researchers as well (e.g. Vlachou Balafouti & Zoniou Sideris, 2000; Angelides, 2004; also Avramidis & Norwich, 2002).

Participation of all children in classroom activities

The second theme that arose through my data was that student teachers planned activities with all children in mind. It seemed that our students tried to give equal opportunities to teaching and learning to all children. For example, I observed a
student who organized her class in a novel way. In particular, she divided her class into groups of four. She gave to each group four questions (the same for all groups), one for each child. All children with the same question had to come together and create another group. Thus, four groups of six were created and each group had to answer its own question. The children had 15 minutes to do it. When they had finished and all groups had answered their question, the children went back to their initial groups, where each child had to inform the members of his/her group about the answer they had prepared in their previous group. This was done because all children had to know all the answers. When the student explained the reasons behind this organization she told me:

In my class I have got children who, for different reasons, tend to be marginalized. I have got two children who are considered as having special needs; I have got a Russian child who doesn’t speak Greek and I have got another four or five children who experience difficulties in learning. From the experiences I have gained within the last two weeks, it appears that these children do not participate in lessons as much as they should. By using this technique they are obliged to participate … moreover, children who experience difficulties and who are often marginalized, have the same responsibilities and obligations as the other children.

In another instance I observed another student plan activities that aimed at participation of all children. It was a fourth-grade class and she was teaching mathematics. The subject of the lesson was vertical three-figure multiplication (357 \times 468). At the beginning of the lesson she began with oral multiplication questions (2 \times 3 =, 4 \times 5 =, 9 \times 8 =). Then she explained that the new point of the lesson was to be the multiplication of two three-figure numbers (until then children had been doing multiplications of one three-figure with one two-figure number. After the children had done some exercises and solved them on the board, the student gave them a handout containing additional exercises. The exercises were graded; beginning with some simple ones and concluding with the point she had taught that day.

In observing the above lesson what I noticed was that apart from the fact that all children had participated in the lesson, the student had deliberately created activities according to the abilities of each child in order for all, even those who experienced difficulties in learning, to be able to participate. The handout she gave at the end contained simple exercises that gave the chance to the children who experienced difficulties in learning to be able to answer a part of it. In addition, it helped the rest of the children to consolidate the knowledge they had gained earlier. In the discussion that followed the lesson our student remarked upon her effort to give opportunities for participation to all children:

The curriculum that has to be taught is heavy and difficult. Some children cannot follow it and if I don’t do something they won’t follow and naturally they will be marginalized. … I did simple activities in order to give the right to all to participate. … When I posed a simple question I asked children that I knew experience difficulties; for those who have higher abilities I posed more difficult questions. … I have got children who cannot do subtraction; how are they going to do three figure multiplication? For this reason, in the handout I had some simple multiplication exercises that I was sure they could all answer
and then gradually the questions became more difficult. ... Thus, each child could do as much as he/she was able to.

Furthermore, I observed a student who began her lesson with very open-ended questions which all children could answer. In addition, she encouraged all children to answer her questions. When I asked her why she did this she answered as follows:

I have got children who are weak and do not participate in lessons. By asking questions that are simple and open-ended, and by encouraging them to answer, especially those who do not participate very often, I create a dynamic of participation in the classroom. Since my questions are open-ended all answers can be considered as being right; consequently, the children who answer are encouraged to continue their effort in the rest of the lesson.

The provision of equal opportunities to teaching and learning to all children and the planning of lessons with all children in mind is something that is pointed up in the related literature and research (e.g. Ainscow, 1999; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2000). For developing inclusive classrooms, Ainscow (1999) argues that we should, among others, organize our teaching in such a way as to address each child separately according to its abilities.

**Efforts to overcome factors that act as barriers to inclusion**

The third theme that arose from my data, and which of course emanates from the two previous ones, was that student teachers tried to overcome factors that acted as barriers to the provision of inclusive education. Throughout the interviews I had with student teachers they pointed out a number of factors that were considered to be barriers to inclusion. These factors arose from my own observation as well. The most important of them centred on the curricula; the technical knowledge needed to deal with certain children with special problems (i.e. a child with Asperger’s syndrome), or to deal with a group of children (eight out of the 27 children in one class were international and did not speak Greek very well); and the attitudes of head teachers and teachers at the schools in which the student teachers did their practical training. Of course, every student could spot his/her own factors. The significant point for me, and the issue that dominated in my data, was the fact that our students put a lot of effort into overcoming factors which they considered acted as barriers to providing more inclusive education.

For example, I observed our students, in different instances, differentiate the curriculum of their lessons in order to be able to address all their pupils. They differentiated their aims according to the abilities of their pupils. The example we saw above in the mathematics lesson could be associated with this issue. A more characteristic example comes from the observation I undertook in a fourth grade class where the student taught a history lesson about democracy in ancient Greece. Instead of using the text of the history book, the one that is usually used by most teachers, she prepared a new one that was based on the book but which was shorter, more structured and contained simpler words. The reason she did this, as she said, was:
In order for children to be able to follow what I say. Last week I taught the previous chapter and only three children participated in the lesson and I believe that it was an unsuccessful lesson. When I discussed it with the teacher of the class she told me that she also faces such problems during history lessons because the book generally is difficult and contains long texts. ... Yesterday, while I was preparing I realized that the text for today was too long and full of difficult words; I didn't even know some of them. ... Thus, I decided to transform it and bring to the level of most of my pupils and I think I have achieved that. My goal was to enable all children to say something during the lesson and I think that everybody talked, didn't they?

In another instance I observed a student try to overcome the barriers to participation for two children that he considered to be gifted. In particular, he differentiated a geography lesson, creating more complex activities in order to keep those two children interested in the lesson:

I observed how those two children were marginalised in some lessons because the exercises were easy for them. Thus, I organised the geography lesson in such a way that the activities would be non-stop. We studied the European countries and instead of presenting the curriculum myself I asked the children to do some research at home and bring their results to the classroom. All children have something to say ... those who don't have something to contribute or who believe they have learned everything there are resources in the classroom (encyclopaedia, internet) where they can continue their research.

The cultures of the schools the students trained in also presented barriers, as did the values and beliefs of teachers and head teachers. These cultures appeared to be influenced by the pathological model which promoted the notions that some children were different, that their presence hampered the teaching of other children, and that they should not be taught in the same classes as their age-mates. Despite the fact that their positions were very delicate, being merely temporary trainees, on different occasions I spotted our students trying to overcome this barrier. In one case, at a staff meeting, one student presented an essay she had written at the university about inclusive education. When I asked about this she commented as follows:

On different occasions I observed that it is not easy to implement what we have learned at university because the class-teachers with whom we do our practical training have different ideas ... and regarding the provision of equal opportunities to teaching, they have even more divergent ideas. Thus, when I found out that in each staff meeting a teacher could present an issue to the rest, I asked the head to let me present something about inclusion. I thought that in this way I may influence the other teachers and especially the teacher of the class in which I do my training.

The issue of overcoming factors that act as barriers to inclusion has been discussed by many researchers who consider it as fundamental for moving towards inclusive education (e.g. Clark et al., 1997; Booth et al., 2003). Ainscow et al. (2004), in particular, argue that one way of overcoming barriers to inclusion is by identifying and addressing barriers to participation and learning. This can be done more successfully, they continue, through the use of collaborative forms of inquiry that emphasize practitioner research as a means of understanding the development of inclusive practices.
Developing collaborations

The last theme that seemed to emerge from my data was the development of collaborations between our students and the different stakeholders. Despite the fact that they were still students, and they only had a few weeks at each school, they seemed to undertake initiatives towards developing collaborations on the basis of the principles of inclusive education. I observed our students collaborating with the heads of schools, with teachers, with special teachers, with parents and with pupils themselves. In each case the collaborations aimed at increasing participation, decreasing marginalization and providing equal opportunities to teaching and learning to all children. For example, in one school I spotted a student collaborating systematically with the special teacher in order to support a pupil who was considered to have special needs. The student suggested that the special teacher try a sort of co-teaching with the whole class instead of teaching the pupil in a separate room. The special teacher accepted the suggestion, they implemented it and it was successful, as the student later claimed:

It was something I learned at university ... when I first came to this school I made this suggestion to the teacher of the class. She did not reject the idea but she didn’t seem very enthusiastic about it either. Then I suggested it to the special teacher who accepted it immediately. After a lot of effort we implemented it and I think it went well.

In another instance I observed a student collaborate with a mother whose child did not do his homework. The student said she had tried to help this mother to develop ways to help her child:

From my first days in the classroom I noticed that this boy did not do his homework. One day I met his mother and we began talking about her son. She asked me to help her and I gave her some ideas ... the next day we discussed the same issue again ... the same happened on the following days. Finally she told me that her son had improved and I observed an improvement in the classroom as well ... now we communicate well between us and this helps all of us.

Another incident that supports this theme is the collaboration I observed between a student and the head of her school. The student said she had talked to the head about inclusive education and the ways it can be implemented. The head liked what she heard and asked the student to do a presentation on the topic to all teachers. Then, she asked all teachers to implement what they had heard. After that, the student collaborated with the head in providing more opportunities to four international pupils who were in the student’s class and in which the head taught Greek language.

Finally, I observed a student encouraging teachers to collaborate on curriculum issues in order to differentiate them for the purpose of making them accessible to children who experienced difficulties in learning. This encouragement, as the student noted, was something that teachers needed in order to collaborate:

I did it because that’s what I learned at university ... that there should be collaboration. Although there are many other things that should occur, this collaboration had some results. We managed to collaborate and we tried to help certain pupils.
The development of collaborations is considered by many researchers as a crucial factor for achieving inclusion (e.g. Ainscow, 1999; Tilstone & Rose, 2003). The key to success for inclusive education, as Ainscow (1998) claims, is the encouragement of teachers to develop collaborations with all stakeholders. In this way, he continues, teachers are complementary to each other, help each other and interact with all stakeholders, thus acquiring a better knowledge of the needs of their students.

Conclusions

In this study I have tried to study the patterns of inclusive education through the practices, activities and behaviours of student teachers who were doing their initial training. Through their practice certain patterns of inclusive education emerged; the ones we have seen above. Of course, there are many more which can emerge in another study. In addition, these themes are not clear and straightforward, and generally there is more complexity than is apparent in the article. These themes overlapped, were interrelated and interconnected, and generally were difficult to separate. Therefore, the separation I did was in order to help the reader understand my argument.

In the above analysis, the student teachers we studied seem to have developed some inclusive practices. The classes they took at university seem to have steered them in this direction. In some instances they seemed to undertake leading roles among the teachers of the schools regarding the promotion of inclusive education. According to Nes (2000) the way in which teachers are trained in their initial education seems to have a serious role to play in the development of inclusive practices in the schools they will work at in future. In addition, Haug (2003) argues that if student teachers develop inclusive practices at university these will then be transferred later to their practice as teachers. Therefore, the knowledge of certain patterns of inclusion, that are presented in this study, might be helpful for the better organization and planning of teachers in-service education programmes, which aim at developing better teaching skills in mixed ability classrooms, providing equal opportunities to teaching and learning to all children. At the same time though, it can have an immediate and direct impact on teachers’ practice. This study can directly influence the interested schools and teachers because it provides useful examples of inclusive education and at the same time contributes to the theoretical discussion regarding ways for developing inclusive practices.

Despite the fact that this is a rather short study, it could be useful for higher education institutions that try to design preservice programmes. A knowledge of the patterns that inclusion can form in the practice of student teachers could help towards the better focussing of their programmes and strategies, particularly those ones that aim at developing inclusive practices (Booth et al., 2003). Despite the fact that I do not claim that the patterns of inclusion presented in this study are the ones that will possibly appear in the practices of some other student teachers, in Cyprus or elsewhere, I believe that they can give the initial framework on which other higher education institutions, that train teachers, can base their efforts for developing more
inclusive practices. In this way, more inclusive cultures can be developed that can lead gradually to sustainable inclusive practices by student teachers.

Notes on contributor

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