

Schools as contexts for the development of social and emotional learning

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This study describes the developmental process in a secondary school which had taken up the challenge of responding more effectively to an increasingly diverse community of learners. The study was aimed at understanding the challenges faced by the school in this area and the ways it sought to create a more inclusive community, with a particular focus on social and emotional learning. A qualitative case study design was used, with semi-structured interviews held with various stakeholders, namely the school administration, teachers, support staff, parents and the students. Findings indicated that to be able to respond to student diversity, a school needed to restructure its culture, policies and practices. Teachers needed continual preparation and a vast array of skills, knowledge and pedagogical approaches to help them reach out to all learners. Structural barriers needed to be removed and collaboration encouraged at class, school and community level. The importance of parental involvement was also emphasized as was also the Head's commitment to inclusive values and a distributed style of leadership.

Keywords: responding diversity social and emotional learning policies practices

Introduction

Schools today have to face the challenge of responding to an increasingly diverse community of learners. This paper describes the developmental process in a secondary school which had taken up the challenge of mobilizing its resources to develop strategies to respond not merely to the different achievement levels and learning styles of students, but also to respond to the social and emotional competence and needs of its learners. Today's schools cannot ignore the benefits of concentrating more on social, emotional and mental health because 'effective social and affective education is directly

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beneficial to academic attainment, and can therefore help teachers be more effective in meeting the many demands they face' (Weare 2000, p.6). Promoting high academic standards and promoting mental, emotional and social health go hand in hand.

To respond effectively to the diverse range and needs of students, entails a change of culture in that schools that seemed to cater only for the academically able now need to be transformed into communities that respond to all learners (Ainscow 1999). Difficulties that children encounter during learning must be seen as arising from a multiplicity of factors. The fundamental belief is that all children can learn and achieve. While some students adjust happily and develop interests and skills related to school, others fail to engage in the life of the school and leave ill-equipped to lead an independent life. There are many reasons why children fail at school. Each child is an individual and each story is unique, but it is important also to realise that school system factors also play a role in unwittingly creating learning difficulties for the individual. Thus inclusion entails much more than isolated changes in a school. It requires changing a school so that all the needs of its students are met. Fullan and Miles (1992) suggest that for a change to be successful, it must 'focus on the development and interrelated relationships of all the main *components* of the system simultaneously – curriculum, student support systems, and so on' (p.11). They also add that 'reform must focus not just on structure, policy and regulations but on deeper issues of the *culture* of the system.' (p.11)

Reaching out to all students thus requires a school to make more than marginal adjustments. There is of course no one method for school improvement. Schools are 'complex and idiosyncratic places' and what works in one school might actually have a negative impact on another (Ainscow 1999). Each school must look internally and apply strategies according to its needs. This study explores the way in which one particular secondary school sought to translate the vision and challenge of inclusion into everyday practice. It was done contextually and holistically, relating to the school as a whole community and focusing on cognitive, emotional and social competence. The school senior management team had specific processes in mind to promote inclusion and positive behaviour and engagement among students. These included the patterns of leadership, processes of planning, policies for staff development, establishing collaborative initiatives with parents and students, promoting positive and consistent behaviour management, and providing a meaningful and engaging curriculum for all students.

Methodology

This paper presents one part of a larger study entitled *Developing Inclusive Practices in a Secondary School: Challenges and Opportunities for Responding to the Diversity of Students' Needs*. The study was intended to describe the process towards more inclusive practices as experienced in one particular school. The actual research questions were:

- How far are the cultures, policies and practices of this school responding to the diversity of the individual educational needs of students?
- What are the challenges and opportunities involved in responding to such diversity of needs?

A qualitative case study design was adopted to capture the development of inclusive practices in the school. This form of qualitative research enables the examination of the interplay of the many variables in order to try and provide as complete an understanding of the situation as possible. Different people with different roles in the school were interviewed to ensure representation of the various stakeholders and to embrace a wide and multiple, divergent range of perspectives. When choosing the sample, the goal was 'to select a group of respondents who were strategically located to shed light on the larger forces and processes under investigation' (Gerson and Horowitz 2002). The study sought to examine cultural norms, community values and ingrained attitudes and motives besides exploring actual school policies and practices.

Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were held with fourteen participants representing different groups of the school community, namely the school administration, teachers, support staff, parents and the students themselves. A list was first drawn up of potential participants on the basis of the different categories of stakeholders that were required for the study. A stratified random sample was then selected. The selected participants included:

- four teachers, each from a different department (subject area), and
- one Learning Support Assistant.
- four students and four parents were selected to represent the variety of cognitive, learning, emotional, behavioural and social needs, sensory and physical needs and communication and interaction needs of students.

This sample thus ensured representation of the different perspectives of management, teaching staff, students and parents and as far as possible also of the diversity within each group as well.

A substantial part of the research involved reviewing the literature in the field of inclusive

education. During this process, themes and aspects which were related to the research questions were noted and used as a basis on which to formulate the interview questions. The interview questions focused on inclusive school cultures, policies and practices; collaboration; parental involvement; leadership and staff development; and challenges and opportunities for the school. Six different versions of the interview questions were produced keeping in mind the different participants to be interviewed, their competencies and their different roles within the school. The questions were open-ended. Each interview was recorded and transcribed by the author. Qualitative thematic analysis was applied to all interview data according to the seven themes explored in the interviews, namely school culture, policies and practices, the curriculum, collaboration, parental involvement, leadership, and staff development.

Results and Discussion

A school culture promoting inclusion

Thirteen of the fourteen respondents held a broad view of the meaning of inclusion and believed that it involved the principle of all children learning together, including those with social and emotional needs. As one member of staff said:

Inclusive education means that you endeavour to include every individual in the system

For true inclusion to occur, it was not only the teachers who needed to accept and include all students and draw them into the group, but also peers who had to support each other. One learning support assistant in fact remarked that:

In my experience, I think that teachers do include but as they go along children exclude their peers

To one member of the administration team, inclusion also meant stretching every student to his/her full potential and giving them the attention they needed, not solely in terms of academia but in all activities going on in the school:

Inclusion in a school doesn't only mean inclusion in the academia but also inclusion in any activity in the school...so to me even somebody with....a very high achiever needs to be included.....sometimes within the norm not all people are included.

The school administration was generally proud of the diversity and differences of its students and saw this as a rich resource that provided an opportunity to move forward and become more effective:

We are proud to have this diversity and we believe it is an opportunity which we cannot miss out on, a rich resource.

Participants agreed that besides creating awareness, the diversity in the class helped both the students and the teachers learn how to empathise with and accept differences in people. Having such heterogeneous groups helped students and teachers understand that everyone had strengths and weaknesses. This appreciation of diversity would help students later on in their eventual adult roles in society. One parent felt very strongly about this and remarked that:

As soon as they are out of school, as soon as they are old enough, they are going to mix with everyone

The school diversity helped to bring about social integration, sharing of ideas and people assisting each other. It also provided students with more challenging needs with the opportunity to reach their potential.

Another positive and enriching factor of diversity that was commented on was multi-cultural mixing. It was beneficial to have students from different backgrounds learn together. Knowing about different cultures created more understanding among students. Benefits for the individual included the appreciation and acceptance of diversity including culture, religion and ethnicity, the promotion of equality, students sharing ideas and learning from each other, social benefits and emotional growth. One parent was especially happy because:

My son really benefited psychologically and I think academically as well by being told to mentor a low achiever

In an inclusive class differences and strengths were recognised and celebrated. Students learnt about equity through direct contact in the classroom and there was more awareness of students as individuals with different needs and strengths.

On the other hand, while being generally regarded as a rich resource, diversity was also seen as a challenge and sometimes a barrier because teachers found it difficult to provide differentiated teaching:

You tend to direct your teaching towards one kind of students with the higher ability sometimes being given less attention

While the social benefits of learning together were highlighted by the majority of interviewees, there was a concern that resources were being unfairly distributed towards the students who had most needs, whether these were academic in nature or behavioural and emotional. More significantly, disruption in the class was voiced as a concern by all the stakeholders. While students with physical disabilities and learning difficulties were generally accepted, students with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties were the least tolerated both in the classroom and in school as a whole. One student remarked that:

Students with bad behaviour can hurt you physically and they can be disruptive

Putnam (1998, p.68) says that ‘in schools, students can get to know each other, appreciate and value the vitality of diversity, learn how to use diversity for creative problem-solving and enhanced productivity, and internalize a common heritage’. However he also warns that putting people together does not result in automatic inclusion. In fact, it can result in ‘lower achievement’, ‘increased egocentrism’, ‘negative relationships’ and ‘prejudice’ among other unwelcome outcomes. A determining factor of whether positive or negative outcomes will be achieved ‘is the way social interdependence is structured within the classroom and the school (i.e. whether student-student interaction within learning situations is structured competitively, individualistically or co-operatively).’ The great majority of respondents, however, considered the diverse intake of students and the dismantling of segregating structures as generally positive. Many parents specifically chose the school because of its inclusive culture and ethos. As one teacher remarked;

This school is getting a good image because it is allowing all students to learn. I know parents who apply for this school especially because it is a totally inclusive school.

In spite of the many challenges, the school was committed and working towards the development of inclusive values in the school community. The school community was becoming more aware that inclusion is not about focusing on a particular group of students but that all students have issues that need to be addressed.

One main theme that emerged from this study was that if schools are to respond to the individual

needs of students and avoid the one-size-fits-all approach, they must first and foremost build an inclusive culture. This implies a paradigm shift in the way we look at educational difficulties, namely that the school adopts a child-centred pedagogy and adapts its provision to its children's needs. While participants underlined the benefits of such a culture, they also recognised the challenges it entails. Possible negative outcomes mentioned included the fear of a lowering of academic standards at the expense of the higher achievers, and the concern that resources were being unfairly distributed towards the lower achievers and those with challenging behaviour. One member of the administration remarked that:

I think sometimes we are focusing too much on these needs (of students with impairments) without recognizing the needs of the average and above-average child.

Teachers also needed to have a whole range of skills and knowledge in order to respond effectively. Many respondents, especially parents, understood that successful inclusion depended significantly on the attitude of teachers towards differences in students and on how prepared they were to deal with these differences effectively. Students with social, emotional and behaviour difficulties were considered by most teachers and parents as being the most difficult to teach and support. They were a major challenge because they exhibited inappropriate and non-compliant behaviour with the consequence of being rejected and excluded by peers and staff. One parent remarked that:

Those with emotional needs and challenging behaviour are the most challenging ...because I believe teachers are very poor on the emotional....it is more a do-it-yourself than because you've been trained.

The senior management team responsible for pastoral care embarked on professional development for teachers and staff to create an inclusive environment wherein the school felt committed to offering all students access to learning opportunities as well as cultivating respect for difference and diversity. The senior management team believed that teaching was no longer a vocation with simple goals and a straightforward methodology but that it was increasingly complex and multifaceted. Teachers had to move away from the idea of 'fixing' students and making them fit into an inflexible 'norm' (Fisher et al. 1999). The difficulties students encountered had to be seen as arising from a multiplicity of factors. Once this culture was accepted by the stakeholders, the challenge was translating this vision into everyday practice.

Policies and Practices

The school adopted certain principles of school organisation and classroom practice in line with the creation of an inclusive culture. This concerned most notably the removal of structural barriers between different groups of students and staff, the dismantling of separate programmes and services, and the development of pedagogical approaches which enabled students to learn together and support each other. The administration opined that;

The school should make sure to have policies, procedures, programmes of study to ensure that all students are gaining in the same way

The school used existing practices and knowledge of teaching and learning as starting points for development and continuously encouraged staff, students and parents to see differences as opportunities for learning rather than as problems to be fixed. The school made an effort to make more effective use of available resources to support learning. More significant than the written policy was the understanding by the staff of the commitment made by the school management to a policy of inclusion. Flexibility in the way the policy was practised was more important as was the staff's attitudes and values in the way they responded to challenging situations.

Students were expected to achieve in relation to their own possibilities and the climate was one where the staff were expected to value all students as individuals. One teacher reported that:

As a teacher I definitely value my students in relation to their own personal abilities. As a school we empathise with students who can't reach certain levels and we take action, we try to facilitate the learning process, with support teachers, with extra time and with discussions with parents.

Teachers were also encouraged to actively provide learning opportunities where students could show their strengths and participate in diverse school activities. Praise and encouragement were considered positive and effective methods of reaching out to individuals. The teachers that were interviewed claimed that they empathised with students, valued their individuality and used differentiated strategies to support them in their learning . The underlying philosophy was that once students felt safe, valued and challenged to their zone of proximal development, they would exhibit better school behaviour and learn more. Attending to social and emotional needs was felt to be important and indeed critical because students take risks intellectually when and if they feel safe in school. It was understood that the more the emotional needs of students are addressed, the less discipline problems the school would eventually have. As one teacher put it:

Students with emotional needs and challenging behaviour...I've always believed if you get students on your side, you don't have a problem with behaviour. I try to get students to trust me and confide in me and I treat them fairly and I can't honestly say that I've had very challenging behaviour; I've just taught them and they're fine.

Despite the above, however, some parents and students still felt that teachers were not fully accepting or responsive to the needs of students. One parent's remarks were that:

I don't think there is much recognition of the psychology in children. I think sometimes we have rules and we only think of the psychological impact when something happens, we are not proactive.

The curriculum

The core curriculum was aimed at providing a holistic education. Besides providing a wide range of knowledge, it aimed at giving all students a spiritual, environmental, social and emotional and health dimension to education. Besides subjects that included the arts, sciences and the humanities, there were also others such as drama, art and learning skills. Personal and Social Development lessons focused specifically on human relationships, emotions, developing friendships and caring attitudes and diversity, among other topics. Parents and students appreciated the variety of subjects taught. As one student put it:

There are a lot of subjects to study. You need to know how to organise your work so that you can cope. I think there are many choices and students can choose the subjects they like.

The individual needs of students were also addressed in relation to the curriculum in that a number of students had alternative timetables, curriculum options, adaptations and arrangements. One parent felt that:

If there are learning difficulties and the teacher realises that the student is not going to cope, it is good for the student to take less subjects.....but it has to be a genuine case

Every student was given full access to the curriculum and all respondents appreciated the access arrangements that could be granted during examinations: As one member teacher remarked:

The school supports the participation of all students during exams. Some students have extra time , readers, distraction-free rooms etc.

The link between curriculum, pedagogy and student behaviour was widely acknowledged amongst the staff. It is clear that ‘achievement in school in academic subjects is of vital importance to pupils’ happiness and self-esteem’ (Gordon and Grant, 1997). Teachers felt that they needed to know about and cater for students with socio-emotional needs and behavioural difficulties as these needed even more encouragement, consideration, empathy and a caring approach than some other students who adjusted more easily to the school environment. Although the school accepted all students, those with challenging behaviour were actually the most challenging for the school to support. One respondent from the administration suggested the need for more training for teachers in this area:

The teachers themselves might need training, might need investing in their own staff development, maybe they weren’t given enough exposure when they were trained, like I hardly had any training in inclusive education myself, so it could be because of lack of awareness more than anything else but I think they all mean well.

The methodology teachers employed during their lessons was another important aspect that needed continual development. Thus, teachers sought to employ a variety of teaching methods and effective instructional strategies informed by an ever growing understanding of how the brain works and how children learn and construct knowledge. It was understood that students will not engage wholeheartedly in the learning experience when they view tasks and activities as not having immediate and practical benefits and when teaching is uninspiring. In fact it was reported by the administration that teachers were:

very much encouraged to take students on visits.....once they are on site they will definitely learn and obviously you would be able to reach them better and they would remember more.

Besides adapting curriculum and instruction teachers made use of resources such as the audio-visual room and ICT. Educational visits, field-trips, projects and hands-on activities were part of the everyday curriculum. In this way, the school was endeavouring to reach all students with their different learning styles and needs. This approach was innovative in that most teachers in Maltese secondary schools still adopt a traditional one-size -fits-all approach to teaching. There is a “rigid syllabus for all students at each year-level for each subject, entrenched through the content of national examinations, and leading to prevalence of whole-class teaching methods.” (Bartolo 2001, p.69).

A support teacher was also available during some of the core lessons. This enhanced the students' learning and helped produce a calmer working environment. As one student put it:

Yes, I highly agree with it because then there will be better concentration by students, of course.

Individual support was provided as far as possible keeping in mind that poor literacy and numeracy often lead to disengagement and alienation on the part of the student with obvious effects on student behaviour. A collaborative approach ensured that students were the responsibility of all educators. The students generally liked the way their teachers delivered their lessons. However, students' recommendations showed that they sometimes experienced difficulties in following lessons, asking for the teacher to focus more on understanding the student and providing a pleasant experience:

The majority are good in the way they give their lesson. I think some need to come down to our level

The teachers should try to understand whether the students are really understanding or not, because not all students will be understanding

Collaboration

The school was committed to having strong collaborative relationships at all levels. The school management worked at achieving this by developing a trusting relationship with the staff, students, parents and other professionals and getting their commitment to joint work. Collaboration was not only encouraged but meetings towards this purpose were scheduled and formalised at both curricular and pastoral levels. On a curricular level, weekly meetings were held involving all subject teachers and subject co-ordinators. Curriculum issues were further discussed during meetings with the senior management team. On a pastoral level, weekly meetings were held involving class tutors, grade tutors, learning support assistants and the Individual Needs Co-ordinator. These meetings focused on discussing the emotional and behavioural needs of individual students or whole classes. Plans that were put forward in this direction were diffused to all concerned. This collaborative and supportive ethos and child-centred approach helped teachers and students establish an emotional bond, resulting in more positive behaviour on the part of the students.

The school administration reported that:

Teachers do co-operate within the teams, there is collaboration between members of staff, the parents, so it's a whole school community. I feel it's not just a matter of teacher-teacher or just within departments.

Collaboration was also encouraged among students especially in the form of collaborative learning and peer tutoring. Students were encouraged to work co-operatively rather than competitively. Students enjoyed working in groups as the following comment illustrates:

Students have sometimes helped me and it is very useful because students have a different way of teaching from a teacher

Besides promoting higher academic achievement, such experiences help impart social skills and teach students to value and respect one another (Putnam, 1998). Peer tutoring has been found to be effective in both cognitive and affective areas of students' learning and development (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2003).

Staff Development.

Teachers felt that they benefitted from ongoing professional development and support to gain new understandings of teaching and learning. They understood that they needed to widen their perspectives and become more familiar with inclusive philosophy, organisational models and pedagogical strategies. Teachers felt they needed continual professional development in all areas of education. As one teacher put it, "the more staff development, the better". The administration felt that the school itself had to educate its teachers in all areas of school life as the process of becoming an effective teacher was a long one:

I think we are teaching the teachers, they didn't come to us ready and it's a very long process

Teachers need to be supported to meet the fundamental changes happening in education (Bunch and Finnegan 2000). The long term aim was to strengthen the professional and personal development of the teaching staff as individuals undergoing a process of growth and as educators of the emotions of their students. Ainscow (1999) suggests that 'schools that do make progress in reaching all pupils do so by developing conditions within which every member of the school community is encouraged to be a learner.' Booth and Ainscow (1998) argue that a number of teachers still believe that student difficulties

arise because of student deficits or impairments. However, in order to respond to difficulties effectively, they suggest the need for ‘the identification and removal of barriers to learning, rather than diagnosing and treating the students’ deficits’. One of the goals of inclusive education must be to expand the circle of tolerance in a classroom so that a broader range of behaviours is tolerated and provided for through supports that are an ordinary part of the classroom.

Parental Involvement

Parent-school relationships were one of the school’s strengths. All the parents interviewed felt that they were directly involved in their child’s education with one parent pointing out that:

I am involved in every way whether she has a problem with a child, whether she can’t understand something or difficulties with a teacher, in every way.....I tell the teachers to keep me informed if anything goes wrong.

All respondents felt that parents were very welcome in the school and that the school was very responsive to their needs. The parents themselves felt directly involved and were satisfied with the opportunities for collaboration that the school provided:

Our Board of Governors is totally made up of parents and they are so responsible that they are the policy-makers and decision-makers, so to speak.

In the past, parents were kept at arm’s length behind school gates and education was largely tended by omniscient experts. In today’s more inclusive society, the need for effective partnership is crucial and supportive families are critical for most children to achieve and behave well at school. Parenting has become an increasingly complex task and the school needs great sensitivity and skill to work with parents. ‘Schools should build close relations with parents and communities based on developing a shared commitment to inclusive values’ (Dyson, Howes and Roberts 2002).

Some members of staff had mixed views on parental involvement pointing out that a small percentage of parents were not particularly interested:

The majority, 90% take an interest, a genuine interest but others just try to put the blame on the teacher when they know that they are not involved in their child’s life.

Thus parents had the possibility of being involved at all levels of learning and policy making. In a real sense they were the policy makers and were often potential agents of change. They were regularly involved through Parents' days, curriculum meetings, school activities, talks, individual appointments, phone calls, circulars and e- mail. When required, action planning sessions were held for individual students together with case conferences involving outside professionals.

School Leadership

All respondents strongly agreed that school leadership was critical for the success of inclusive education with one student describing the Head as the “key to the school’s success”. The style of leadership that was adopted was collegial and participative. The approach that was used was not the traditional one of hierarchy and control but intended to distribute and empower all the stakeholders. The Head felt that her role necessitated influencing and monitoring the staff rather than dictating what should be done:

My role is not to dictate but I have a very distributed leadership. I feel that if you help other people own the decision themselves you can sell it to them.....the more people you have believing in what they are doing, the stronger the message will come across and the more efficient things will be.

Thus the responsibility for students' behaviour was not the sole responsibility of the Assistant Head, whose main responsibility was pastoral care, but of all the teachers and staff. Leadership becomes a function to which many of the staff contributes, rather than only a small number of individuals (Ainscow 2000). The Heads' vision was that individuality should not only be respected but indeed celebrated. The role of the Heads was intrinsically to guide, support and motivate. They were the 'keepers of the vision' (McLeskey and Waldron 2000) and encouraged risk-taking, becoming the leading advocates at the school to allay fears and concerns.

The respondents believed that the Inclusion Co-ordinator had a very significant role in motivating and guiding the staff towards more inclusive values. The excellent teamwork between these the Head and the Inclusion Coordinator and its positive impact on the school, was noted by all respondents.

Conclusion

This qualitative case study attempted to examine how one particular secondary school was developing inclusive cultures, policies and practices and the challenges and opportunities it faced in the process. Although one cannot generalize from a single-case study, the goal of this study was ‘to expand and generalize theories (analytic generalization) and not to enumerate frequencies (statistical generalization)’ (Yin 2003). The results of this study may provide insights to school staff, parents and policy makers in their efforts to create more inclusive communities in schools.

These findings reported here, however, must be considered within the limitations of the study. In particular, the study was based on a single case and thus the findings are highly related to that particular context. Secondly, the number of participants was limited to four teachers, one Learning Support Assistant, four parents, four students and two members from the administration. Although this showed an effort to examine the different perspectives of the stakeholders, this number was a very small minority of the school community.. Since the author herself was part of the school administration,, the participants could have been biased in their responses although great care was taken to ensure confidentiality and differentiate the researcher’s role from that of an administrator. Similarly the researcher herself could have been biased in her interpretations by virtue of this dual role, though again steps were taken to avoid bias through a constant interrogation of the research process.

Has this school achieved real inclusion for its members? All those involved in education know that inclusion is an ongoing process. The stakeholders themselves suggested that the school should keep on struggling to address the needs of all its students. The inclusive adventure that the school has embarked on will never end. However, on the way, it is educating a population of children to be proactive problem solvers, critical thinkers and more importantly, sensitive, tolerant, loving and accepting of difference.

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