Are we all prepared for inclusion?
(A study of initial teacher education in further education)

by Gill Richards

Abstract
This article examines the issues raised through an eight year research study undertaken for a PhD. Data was collected from 102 further education colleges and 9 universities. Student teachers' attitudes towards inclusion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities were investigated and compared with the content and delivery of their initial teacher education programmes. The issue of disability equality and inclusion was a central theme throughout the study.

Introduction
As the further education sector continues to widen participation and promote a more inclusive learning culture (FEFC, 1996; FEFC, 1998), increased demands are placed upon its lecturers. Recent legislation (SENDA, 2001; Race Relations (Amendment) Act, 2000) compounds these demands, emphasising individual and institutional responsibilities. This raises tensions for staff as they attempt to respond to policy initiatives linked with the competitive market, whilst meeting increasingly diverse learning requirements.

Inclusive learning was endorsed by the Tomlinson Report (1996) which stressed the importance of matching flexible provision to the learner's needs. This led many colleges to expand their learning support teams and become more responsive in their style of delivery. Although this did not result in what some advocates (CSIE, 2002; AIE, 2001) argued for in terms of full inclusion for all learners, it did significantly increase opportunities for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities within mainstream provision. Subsequent demands made on lecturing staff raised issues about the effectiveness of training in initial teacher education and continuing professional development. The Inclusive Learning Quality Initiative (1998) provided a framework for colleges to audit and plan their progression towards inclusion. Some colleges embraced this initiative enthusiastically, consolidating inclusive policies and practice. Others responded less positively, with staff development sessions attracting the attendance of few lecturers and minimal changes occurring.

Initial teacher education in further education currently focuses upon a set of standards expected to indicate proficiency in a comprehensive range of teaching and learning competences (FENTO, 1999). Concentration on these leave little time for examining deeper issues of individual and institutional values, particularly where these are contentious, like exclusion and inclusion. As a result, when student teachers attend initial teacher education programmes, often franchised to their own college, they have little exposure to ideology that differs from that of their colleagues and tutors. So, if they lack experience of inclusion and they have had little contact with disabled people, their attitudes may reflect institutional practice rather than result from reflective examination of a range of perspectives. Additionally, as supervised teaching experience is often undertaken within students' own colleges, the prevalent attitude towards inclusive learning may expand or diminish opportunities for personal development.

Strategies used to prepare students to meet increasingly diverse learning requirements differ within the context provided by Further Education National Training Organisation's (FENTO) standards. Information is commonly offered through specific options, mandatory sessions or permeated through generic modules. The quality of these approaches varies, as does their success (Swindells, 1998), raising anxiety levels in staff. By their very nature, optional modules imply that the subject matter is not essential for all teachers and permeation can dilute input when covered by tutors with minimal knowledge (Equal Opportunities Commission, 1989; Garner, 2000). Special sessions that rely on 'specialists' to cover inclusive teaching and learning issues can further reinforce the message that not all teachers can deliver this (Mason, 2000). Tutors on initial teacher education programmes may not have worked in inclusive classrooms themselves and so have little practical advice to pass on. As a result, students are likely to either decide that inclusion has nothing to do with them or that they need extensive information and practical experience to enable them to work with disabled students.

Research has shown that teachers' attitudes are a critical factor in their behaviour towards including diverse learners (Stewart, 1990; Clough, 1998; Mittler, 2000; Farrell, 2001). Negative attitudes to diversity acquired early in teachers' careers are difficult to change (Nel, 1992), so the role of initial teacher education in promoting a positive approach is crucial. FENTO expressed its support for inclusion, stating that:

'equality of opportunity is a crucial foundation upon which good teaching, learning and assessment are based …. Consequently, the values of entitlement, equality and inclusiveness are of fundamental importance to teachers and teaching teams' (FENTO, 1999 p2).

Despite this rhetoric and seeming governmental commitment to 'comprehensive and enforceable civil rights for disabled people' (Blunkett, 1997 Foreword), demands for meeting national targets and lack of financial resources for support has resulted in differing rates of progress towards inclusion and the perceived need for special education providers.

It was against this background that the study was undertaken for a Ph.D. It explored issues of inclusion, equality and disability and initial teacher education in further education. The major focus moved away from earlier research work on preparation for teaching learners described as having special needs, to preparation for inclusion and the acceptance of the natural diversity of learners. Of particular importance to the study was the views of disabled advocates from the inclusion movement, voices often absent from teacher education initiatives, despite the argument (Mason, 2000) that it is interaction with disabled trainers that has produced the most profound effect on teachers' attitudes and practice.

The study
The research study investigated initial teacher education in further education. It explored student teachers' attitudes towards, and preparation for, inclusion (Richards, 2000), reflecting upon programmes offered and tutors' own levels of training. It examined how far the inclusion of disabled learners was addressed as an equality issue, like other disadvantaged groups. The impact of initiatives such as 'Inclusive

Learning' (1996), the 'Inclusive Learning Quality Initiative' (1998) and the 'Standards for teaching and learning in further education in England and Wales' (FENTO, 1999) was reviewed with tutors and student teachers. In particular, the study sought to establish whether an optional module on including learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, attended by some of the students, made a difference to their attitudes.

The data was collected from 102 further education colleges in one region, using qualitative and quantitative methods. This provided a sample of approximately 25% of the sector's colleges, drawing on establishments from both rural and urban settings. Questionnaires were used to identify:
- Equal Opportunities and Learning Support managers' roles, experience and qualifications
- college principals' expectations of these managers
- the curriculum and tutors provided for initial teacher education
- student teachers' views on their programmes and inclusion.

This data was further supplemented by information gained through interviews with:
- tutors who co-ordinated the franchised initial teacher education programmes, to discover their perception on the curriculum content
- initial teacher education programme managers, to verify earlier questionnaires and explore the impact of latest initiatives
- student teachers from the optional 'inclusion' module and others, to compare their expectations about inclusion
- the Director of The Alliance for Inclusive Education, to reflect upon the research study findings and implications for developments.

Results

a) Equal Opportunities and Learning Support Managers (EOM/LSM)
Responses were received from a total of 144 managers. These included 30 (21%) EOMs, 49 (34%) LSMs, 1 (1%) with a dual role, and 64 (44%) who had alternative titles that included responsibility for at least one of the roles. Most were female (68%), white (96%) and had been in post for under five years (75%).

Most managers (75%) did not hold a qualification that was relevant to their management role, although 88% stated that they had attended some form of training. Few gave details of this (21%), with those that did, describing a range from in-service courses to a short session during their own college induction. 65% of managers had received relevant experience before appointment, whilst the other 35% had no previous experience. Some managers (7%) stated that they did not have any qualifications, training or experience relevant to their role.

Data from the 68 principals who completed a questionnaire, indicated that most (86%) expected both sets of managers to be responsible for training. Different requirements were evident for the two roles. Whilst relevant experience was stated to be important for both (84%, EOM and 82%, LSM), academic qualifications were less important (23%, EOM and 36%, LSM). Good knowledge of equality issues was required by some principals i.e. EOMs were expected to have a strong knowledge base in race issues (69%), gender issues (68%) and disability issues (66%); LSMs were expected

to have a strong knowledge base in race issues (40%), gender issues (37%) and disability issues (57%). This left a significant number of principals for whom relevant qualifications and experience was not an important issue for these management post-holders.

Despite many of this group of managers' lack of traditional expertise in their field of responsibility, most (79%) were involved in some form of staff development delivery within their own college. For 31% of these, this included input onto initial teacher education programmes. Individual's expertise did not appear to be a factor in their responsibility for training; managers with alternative titles and additional responsibilities were the most likely to be involved in training despite being the least likely to have relevant qualifications themselves.

b) Initial teacher education programmes
Out of the original 144 colleges in the study, 31 offered the Certificate in Education (FE) programme. These were franchised by nine universities, three of which were based outside of the region. Most colleges (87%) covered issues of race, gender and disability, usually as a specific unit supported by permeation through other modules. Six colleges used only the permeation model. Colleges generally (75%) described their chosen method as effective, basing judgements on assignment content, observation of individuals in class discussions, teaching practice and 'intuition'. Others were unsure of their effectiveness, stating that it was 'difficult to judge' or clear that it was ineffective and dependent upon the tutor ie 'Equal opportunities is delivered on an ad hoc basis, depending on who is teaching'.

Equality issues were covered in most colleges by the general teacher education tutors. Disability issues were more likely (50%) to be covered by a specialist tutor brought into the programme. These usually covered impairment specific information and teaching strategies, rather than wider issues of inclusion and civil rights. In contrast, such issues were often covered in relation to race and gender. Some college tutors spoke of their views on the importance of the issues within teacher education, arguing that:

> 'Without an understanding of, and commitment to, Equal Opportunities, people should not be in teaching';

> 'Most students are very aware. Perhaps the problem lies with staff who feel they have the experience to carry them on any issue';

> 'There are more important/urgent issues for teacher education';

> 'I am always shocked by the (bigoted) attitudes of the teachers that I train, considering their professional background, and we are currently reviewing the equal opportunities training in light of this'.

Despite these views, tutors admitted that the Tomlinson Report and the Inclusive Learning Quality Initiative had made little impact on programmes, with only one college describing changes to their curriculum.

The franchising universities expected the colleges to take responsibility for the curriculum content and tutor delivery. Few university tutors had any knowledge of how

issues of equality and inclusion were covered, expecting colleges to employ 'specialists' or 'someone with an interest'. Most were aware that they did not have anyone with expertise in these areas themselves, so were not able to make a sound judgement on the quality of delivery. Equal opportunities were generally viewed benevolently, although one university tutor clearly differentiated between the issues, arguing that 'SLDD is done under quality assurance rather than equal opportunities as it is less threatening'.

c) The students' views
Data was collected from 50 students based at one of the franchising universities. They were all on a full-time programme that offered some optional modules. Group A (29 students) had attended an optional module entitled 'Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in further education'. This module focused on a rights approach to inclusion before covering issues of impairment and strategies for inclusive teaching. The student group had selected this module for a range of reasons; some were keen to expand their knowledge in this area, whereas others had chosen it as a last resort as their preferred modules were full. Group B (21 students) had attended a range of alternative modules.

Results from the two groups indicated clear differences in relation to the inclusion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. 93% of Group A expected to teach disabled students routinely in their classrooms, in contrast to 48% of Group B. Reasons for not expecting to teach these students differed. The 7% from Group A explained that they worked for the Armed Forces who were unlikely to recruit disabled personnel. Students in Group B spoke of concern about not having enough training or experience and a lack of expectation that disabled students would enrol on their courses of advanced study (eg Management Studies, Business Studies and post-graduate work). 69% of Group A felt reasonably confident about teaching these students, in contrast to 29% of Group B. Several students in Group A spoke of the importance of linking inclusion with civil and human rights. Most of Group B expressed concern about receiving proper training and not to have too many demands placed on them.

Both groups stated that students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities should be included within further education and that the initial teacher education programme should prepare them for this. How this would be achieved, again differed. Most of Group A (78%) wanted the programme to cover inclusion as a compulsory subject, delivered by a tutor with significant experience. 99% of Group B wanted a permeation approach, covering teaching strategies in the Teaching and Learning module, with several stating that they wanted more information about 'disabilities' and 'what to do'. Some of this group challenged the idea that disability and inclusion had anything to do with equality, stating that equal opportunities were about race.

d) A view from the Director of Alliance for Inclusive Education
This interview focused on the factors that enhanced teachers' preparation to work inclusively. The Director argued strongly for a new approach to initial teacher education, moving away from the idea that it was 'OK to learn on the job'. It was time, she stressed, that 'teachers became more accountable', recognising that 'being trained matters and that disability training must be taken seriously'. This training, she explained, needed to move away from 'Disability Awareness' sessions to disability

equality, emphasising rights, medical and social constructions of disability and the impact of historical practices, which the Director claimed was 'just under the surface and still clouds thinking'. Only after this should issues of impairment be covered, and then by the real experts, disabled people. This, for the Director, was the key issue. In her experience, it was imperative that disabled people should be involved in all aspects of inclusion training. This would enable participants to experience a 'disabled person as a leader rather than someone who needs help'; providing a significant move away from traditional practice where non-disabled academics and professionals dominate training.

Discussion

This study identifies the different experiences that student teachers have within Certificate in Education (Further Education) programmes, despite a common set of assessment standards. In relation to disability, equality and inclusion issues, this difference is affected by the expertise and ideology of the tutors. Government support for the inclusion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities into further education through recent reports and initiatives, have had little impact on initial teacher education. Whilst the reason for this may be connected to confusion raised by statements about inclusion that also separate learners with labels and support special (and separate) teaching environments (FEFC, 1996; DfEE, 1997), the effect has been that disabled students' inclusion has not been approached in the same way as other equality issues.

Managers with responsibility for race, gender and disability in colleges would usually be expected to drive forward staff development on inclusion. Findings from this study indicate that although this happens in relation to learners disadvantaged because of attitudes towards their race or gender, it rarely happens with disability. This would seem to imply that the inclusion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities into the mainstream of provision is perceived as less of a right than for other students. As many of the tutors lack qualifications and training themselves on these issues, it may become difficult for them to deliver the new training standards, preparing student teachers to work inclusively. The use of specialist tutors to provide the input on disability can still suggest that this knowledge is 'special', although it does at least ensure that it is covered.

None of the programme tutors had taken advice from disabled trainers and so were unaware of the recommendations for effective practice. This meant that wider, ethical issues of inclusion were not covered, leaving the emphasis on impairment and remediation strategies. As most student teachers saw this part of the curriculum as optional, its importance for all teachers was not accepted. More critically, even when some did receive training, they did not absorb the information because they saw it as irrelevant. This raises the question as to how can student teachers be convinced that they need to know about disabled learners if they are not convinced first of these students' rights to be included in mainstream provision?

The module 'Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in further education' was designed in line with the recommendations from disability equality trainers; issues of equality, ideology and rights were covered before teaching strategies. This appeared to have a significant impact on the student teachers' attitudes. Despite

Group A comprising those who had selected the module as a first choice through to those who had not had any choice left to them, consistent results were found within the group. Group A were more accepting of inclusion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and felt more prepared to teach them. They also strongly asserted that all student teachers should receive similar, compulsory training. Most admitted that when they had started the module they had expected information about impairment and coping strategies, but having covered other inclusion issues, recognised the importance of understanding the wider context.

Conclusion

This study raises issues about student teachers' preparation for meeting the needs of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in their classrooms. It is over eight years since the Government signed the Salamanca Statement (1994) supporting the inclusion of learners within the regular education system and six years since the Tomlinson Report (1996). There are new standards for teaching and supporting learning (FENTO, 1999), but still student teachers are not prepared for inclusion; they are at best presented a view of a 'special' group of learners for whom they need special training. Approaches to inclusion for these learners are generally far less concerned with equality and rights than other disadvantaged groups, reflecting the ideology of even the latest Code of Practice (2002) which sets conditions upon a learners' readiness for inclusion.

This presents considerable challenges for teacher educators. Programmes for initial teacher education need to be responsive to FENTO's standards, seen as relevant to student teachers and reflect effective disability equality practice. Tutors need to be cognisant with the complexities of these requirements and sensitive to the covert messages sent to student teachers through the delivery of the programme. Currently, there are increasing opportunities for student teachers to gain expertise in the latest initiatives like ICT, but however proficient they become in these areas, many lose confidence when faced with the requirements of a disabled student. If newly qualified teachers are to be ready to meet the demands of widening participation and truly inclusive learning, they must be provided with the necessary skills to meet diversity in their classrooms, but first, they must be convinced that all teachers have a responsibility for inclusion. Involving disabled trainers in this process could prove to be a fundamental development for teacher education in further education.

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