

SCEL Fellowship Programme  
Area of Enquiry

# Recognising and Justifying the need to provide leadership training for inclusive school practice

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**SCEL**

Scottish College for  
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## **Recognising and Justifying the need to provide leadership training for inclusive school practice**

It is recognized globally, that making significant progress toward closing the gap in terms of equity and attainment by authentically meeting the needs of our most vulnerable learners and families, represents a considerable challenge. It is also recognized that leaders have a critical role to play in school innovation to bring the aspiration of equity and inclusion to reality (Schleicher 2014). Leaders who engage with and promote high quality pedagogical practice in a culture of equity, social justice and inclusion, are more likely to create schools that are stimulating and motivating for all learners. The reality is that many leaders know how to create good learning environments but lack the tacit knowledge and confidence to effectively promote inclusion as a central strategy (Giorcelli 2012).

i) Governments have only recently adopted a strong inclusive element in their policies allowing inclusion to rise to pre-eminence as part of the social justice/equity agenda whilst also recognizing the economic imperative of utilizing all of a country's available human resources to facilitate competitive advantage in the global economy. (Scottish Educational Policies of Curriculum for Excellence and GIRFEC).

ii) The fundamental tenet of such policies requires children with additional support needs to be enrolled in mainstream schools. This has increased the challenge presented by diversity of abilities within the classroom. (Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004).

iii) This has impacted upon school learning outcomes and their measurement in terms of the percentage of pupils obtaining qualifications at higher and advanced levels.

Inspection regimes have also focused on how schools meet the needs of all students across the widened spectrums of ability, disability and ethnicity as well as more fundamental learning challenges.

iv) These issues have changed the make-up of schools and have significant implications for leaders responsible for attainment in schools; their roles and priorities have thus been re-oriented. Inclusion implies that leaders need an esoteric specialist knowledge and skills to be effective with greater diversity and challenge.

v) However, I contend that few leaders have substantial background knowledge or skills in additional support needs and with decreasing numbers of Special Schools, few are likely to

acquire these through careers progression. Few have received training and preparation to enable them to be high performing leaders of such inclusive schools or have worked in schools where leadership for inclusion is modelled. Instructional leadership was emphasized in the late 1980s, gave way to other priorities in the 1990s, and was re-established as learning-centred leadership in the 2000s (Dimmock 2012). Rarely, however, does this recent incarnation of learning-centered leadership incorporate inclusive education. Instead, focus is placed on effective pedagogy, assessment and new forms of curriculum delivery. However, leaders are rarely trained in the application of these imperatives as they apply to the particular needs of students, especially across a broad ability spectrum.

vi) The preparation and training of leaders in mainstream schools rarely incorporates the skills needed to lead and manage schools with diverse student bodies, especially in regard to inclusion. This critical vacuum is a fundamental problem and is the focus of this project. The evidence and argument will be assembled around two guiding questions, as follows -

1. What is the evidence that most school leaders are presently ill-equipped to provide high-performing leadership of inclusive schools?
2. What strategies and training for Inclusive Leadership are necessary to improve the quality of inclusive education in our schools in terms of culture and equity, instructional leadership and capacity building?

## **Literature review**

Research on Inclusive Education, (Giorcelli 2012), suggests that schools are more successful when they use four specific practices to develop effective inclusion: having a culture and ethos of inclusion; using robust academic research to translate theory into practice; enabling effective collaboration within, between and beyond schools; and providing opportunities to be self-improving through reflective self- evaluation.

Booth and Ainscow (2011) and Cologon (2013) agree on the main principles of inclusion which are consistent with an understanding of inclusion in schools being one aspect of broader inclusion in society. They also argue that Inclusive Education is not only an intellectual ideal, it is a practical everyday process which can be understood as on-going critical engagement with flexible and child-centred pedagogy that values diversity, and holds high expectations for all children.

To achieve this, it is essential that all leadership training takes account of how to implement inclusive practice to achieve the required inclusive outcome.

The fundamental question may be defined as how a system-wide approach to Inclusive School Practice, taking account of the values, philosophies and knowledge available, can support the development of high-performing Inclusive leaders who can consistently provide Inclusive Education in today's climate of fast changing, economic, political and educational environments. Such an approach has been in place in Queensland, Australia, for two years and is worth considering for Scotland.

The Queensland Quality Schools Inclusive Leaders Program (QSIL) has been delivered state wide with a view to meeting the following:

- **Cultural and Equity Leadership in Inclusive Schools**
- **Instructional Leadership in Inclusive Schools**
- **Learning, Teaching, Behaviour and Social Skills in Inclusive Schools.**
- **Working with Families of Learners with Disability in Inclusive Schools.**

The programme aims to deliver a consistency of approach within and between schools with leaders having a shared understanding, language and skills-base and where inclusion is not seen to be about disability or supporting additional support needs, but as a matter of social justice (Sapon-Shavin 2007).

**Cultural and Equity Leadership in Inclusive Schools** provides opportunities for leadership teams to collaborate developing a shared vision and culture based on the values and beliefs of an inclusive approach which recognizes the needs of all learners, reduces barriers to participation and learning, differentiates the curriculum, promotes understanding of the legal framework and statutory obligations and provides “Heart, Healing, Hospitality and Hope” (Giorcelli 2012).

**Instructional Leadership in Inclusive Schools.** Research on Inclusive Education, (Cologon 2013, Ainscow, Dyson Weiner 2013) suggests that schools are more successful when leaders actively guide schools towards more inclusive practices and meet their specific responsibilities to keep their school Instructionally inclusive. To do this leaders collaborate to develop skills in Instructional Leadership in action, high level self- evaluation, creating robust and effective professional learning communities, data analysis and planning.

**Learning, Teaching, Behaviour and Social Skills in Inclusive schools** is widely agreed by a number of authors to be critical for improvement through capacity building (Dimmock, 2012; Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012; Fullan 2013; Hattie 2011). Key for leaders is development of practice which supports courageous and distributive leadership and builds capacity through whole school approaches.

### **Working with Families of Learners with Disability in Inclusive Schools.**

Research demonstrates that success in schools is increased in terms of inclusive practice when equity-aware leaders understand not only the needs of the learners but also those of their families (Schleicher 2014). This involves an understanding of parental grief issues, the role of siblings and the importance of relationships, trust and partnership working.

The premise for this system-wide training in Queensland – having observed it at first hand myself - develops the creation of a culture where leadership teams can actively engage in conversations about instruction with teachers as part of the routine of the school.

Research asserts that it is very challenging to measure the impact of the effectiveness of learning-centered leadership, (Goldring et al, 2007). For this study it was important to engage with leaders who have participated in this training and are now in a position to evaluate some of the impact in their schools.

While in Queensland in 2014, I asked leaders to identify, for the purpose of this report, what they had perceived as the relevant issues in advance of the QSIL training. They identified their aspirations as follows: that the training would -

- help with the creation and implementation of one inclusive learning system to address the learning needs of all students.
- support growth mindsets around inclusive and proactive differentiation.
- ensure that all data is gathered with the purpose of informing teaching.
- encourage collaboration and self-reflection among staff.
- build capacity to ensure system wide equity.

My evaluation of the impact of leadership training on student achievement, instruction, leadership behaviours, change management, shared vision, collaboration and personal leadership growth produced the following:

- Principals highlighted a greater emphasis in all schools on a broader range and consistency of methodologies to meet the learning needs of all young people.

- Principals reported an increased skill-set in terms of the use of research information, collaborative working, planning for building capacity, data gathering and analysis.
- Leaders describe greater skills in developing relationships, a shared vision, have a new willingness to explore thinking and strategies and are better able to consider the personalities, skills and needs of current staff.
- Leaders believed this process increased understanding and overcomes challenges, highlights the need for creativity and exploration as critical to quality teaching and has impacted on how they view, approach and assess student learning. However, there are still challenges in meeting the needs of all learners conflicting with current systemic priorities, indicators and benchmarks (NAPLAN- National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy).
- Principals reported greater confidence and an increased commitment to and participation in work with all stakeholders which is leading to increased confidence in communities and increasingly positive feedback from parents.
- Leaders reported that colleagues are energized and are working together between schools more effectively, have been developing the four Rs of Reflection, Refocus, Resources, Reinvigorate, and report a reforming of teams, fostering discussion and a passion for change.
- Leaders now have collaborative networks with a positive impact allowing for data driven decisions, shared ideas, shared responsibility for learners, effective problem solving where all decisions are about all learners.
- Leaders indicated that there was an enhanced sense of self-efficacy, confidence in tackling engagement and were gaining skills in supporting staff to support the most vulnerable learners. They felt better able to support staff to work collaboratively to understand learners' needs and design learning at the point of need.

This snapshot of 120 leaders and schools from Far North Queensland indicates some success in meeting the underlying aspirations and outcomes of the Inclusive leaders training for equity and social justice. I believe there are significant implications for inclusive practices in Scotland's schools.

## Conclusion

We know that effective leadership is essential to creating Inclusive schooling practices and while the literature has provided an increasingly rich description of not only what effective leaders do, but how they do it, we have still not progressed to a point where as a profession, we are capable of developing the number of effective Inclusive school leaders necessary to meet the excellence and equity challenges. Evidence from recent HMIe reports identifies few schools as very good through QI 5.3 on meeting learners' needs and virtually none as excellent.

It may be argued that there several factors influencing this:

- i. Few leaders in Scotland have a background or wide ranging experience in Additional Support Needs; supporting children and young people with severe and complex needs. It is suggested that this lack of experience is becoming even more chronic due the legislative context of the presumption of mainstream enshrined in legislation.
- ii. This diminishing skill base leads to aspiring leaders having fewer effective role models.
- iii. The declining number of Headteacher candidates means that, increasingly, staff are moving into leadership roles in Primary Schools without having had an element of responsibility for Additional Support, hence as leaders relying on tacit knowledge, they lack experiential learning on which to rely.
- iv. Supporting our most vulnerable learners and families often presents the highest challenge, and as proposed by (Dimmock 2012), unless leaders have high self-efficacy it is challenging for them to be successful in the school transformation and innovation needed to create authentically inclusive schools.

Therefore, in preparation for an increasingly complex and challenging role we must consider strategies which create conditions where leaders are able to build from basic school leadership skills. I am convinced that the development of programmes similar in concept to the QSIL program which aligns well with Curriculum for Excellence, and the Scottish Standards of Teaching in the 21st Century, would be desirable and beneficial to system-wide improvement in Scottish schools.

High quality inclusive policy frameworks and guidance to support authentic inclusion are in place in Scotland. However, what is lacking is a consistent and coherent training and preparation programme of Inclusive Leadership development to take account of the practical tasks of how to build inclusive vision and purpose based on the principles of social justice; understanding and developing people. Such a programme should facilitate the design of an

inclusive organization, promote inclusive learning and teaching for all young people and help to forge effective links and partnerships with families of learners with disability.

To support the learning of our most vulnerable young people requires the highest quality of teaching and leadership. We must aspire to nothing less to enable the teaching profession to make a positive impact on all learners, allowing us to achieve the aspirations of Scottish Education; to allow us to Close the Gap, build skills fit for learning, life and work and allow all of our young people to reach their full potential and follow their dreams.



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