RESPONSIVE PROFESSIONAL EDUCATORS

The movement from segregation to inclusion (integration) of students with disabilities into general education classrooms has presented teachers with a challenge to expand their knowledge and skills, and to cross philosophical and methodological boundaries separating general and special needs education (O’Brian & O’Brian, 1996).

An increasing diversity among student populations in general and a minimum level of participation by teachers towards changing and recreating educational environments were the two circumstances that led to the present inquiry. The purpose of the study was to gain a better understanding and knowledge of how Icelandic teachers facing these challenges: (a) shape and develop their teaching practice and (b) work to improve their professional know-how.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS
The following questions guided the design and implementation of the study:
1. What is the teacher’s professional understanding of his/her role?
2. How do teachers understand and use theory to influence and inform their practice?
   a) How do they decide what to teach, and when? What influences their decisions?
   b) How do they respond to diverse learning styles, the abilities, disabilities and cultural backgrounds of students?
   c) How do they evaluate and improve their practice?
3. How do teachers’ values and theoretical understanding manifest in practice?

My research questions led to a qualitative approach because of (a) the need for a holistic view of classroom teaching that encompasses theory, practice and ethics, (b) the need for an in-depth inquiry concerning the theoretical
underpinnings of teaching, and (c) the need to understand teachers’ own perspectives on the phenomenon of teaching. The qualitative research approach emphasizes collaboration and tends to remove the distance between researcher and “subject” (Anderson, Herr, & Nilhen, 1994; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982; McCutcheon & Jung, 1990; McKernan, 1988). This was an especially valuable tool in my attempts to understand how teachers plan, conduct and evaluate their inclusive practices. The study was an inquiry into the practice of six teachers who successfully included students considered to have disabilities in their classrooms. My purpose in choosing to work in partnership with such experienced teachers was to learn from and with them, and to be able to share this understanding with other educators.

Inclusion
Some educators, professionals and researchers believe there has been a paradigm shift in special education. A shift from the functionalist ideas that emphasize fixing, improving or preparing students for life after study to ideas related to the integration of schools within the community (Skrtic, 1995), i.e. a movement to create schools that are respectful of the environmental, psychological, spiritual, political and economic needs of families and the communities they serve (Noddings, 1997; Rivera & Poplin, 1997). Skrtic (1995) proposed that inclusion was more than a model for special education service, it was a change in paradigm and a demand for thinking and acting in ways that included everyone in a society where diversity was the norm rather than the exception. Skrtic reasoned that in a diverse society schools must educate people to become socially responsible, appreciate uncertainty and become interdependent. Although the inclusion movement has its roots in special education, some believe it should become a part of general education and school reform (Ballard, 1999; Skrtic, 1995; Stainback & Stainback, 1996).

Instead of relegating students who do not meet school or classroom requirements (or who do not fit in) into separate settings, we can adapt, improve or create educational environments to address the needs of all students. In the past, physical and environmental segregation, identification and labelling have been ways of distinguishing and isolating students with disabilities from community participation. By contrast, there is currently an opportunity for developing an educational community that welcomes all students within neighbourhood schools (Ainscow, 1991; Bjarnason, 1992; Ferguson, 1994; O’Brien & O’Brien, 1996; Stainback & Stainback, 1996).

The main goal of inclusive schooling is to serve sufficiently all students and live up to the school’s responsibility of adapting its education to the diversity of student needs. Accordingly, all students, including those with disabilities, should be able to attend their neighbourhood school. The challenge is to extend the theory and practice of inclusion to more schools and communities, while at the same time keeping in mind the primary purpose of facilitating and assisting the learning and adaptation of all students – the citizens of tomorrow (Ballard, 1999; Biklen, 1992; Bjarnason, 1995; Ferguson, 1994; Guðjónsdóttir, 1994; Karagiannis, Stainback & Stainback, 1996; Schnorr, 1990; Udvari-Solner & Thousand, 1995; Ware, 1995).
Some scholars and researchers argue against the inclusion movement for the following reasons: (a) general education is not yet prepared for students with disabilities, (b) integration is a way to reduce funds to students with disabilities, (c) there is a necessity for more investigation and research, (d) there is a need to maintain a continuum of services, (e) students with disabilities need special treatment and interventions, and (f) educational achievement is more important than placement. It is important to recognize these criticisms and to be aware that including all students within the environs of schools today is not an easy task (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994; Gresham & MacMillan, 1997; Kauffman, 1993; Kauffman, Gerber & Semmel, 1988; Kristjánsdóttir, 1994; Marinósson & Gunnarsdóttir, 1992).

Inclusive practice in Iceland
Through the inquiry, I learned about the diversity of students in the classrooms that I studied; the vitality, complexity and challenges facing the teachers, and the holistic nature of their approaches to curriculum design, assessment and evaluation. The common thread running through each of these inquiries is the manner in which teachers support the education of all students through development and the use of theory.

SUPPORTING AND ENHANCING THE EDUCATION OF ALL STUDENTS
These teachers do not live in an ideal world. Along with their students they deal with challenges and setbacks on a daily basis. They work passionately to get to know and understand their students and to develop programmes to maximize each student’s opportunity to learn. They are flexible, responsive and committed to each and every one of their students.

Flexibility and responsiveness: Although these teachers and their practices differ in many ways, a common thread in the data is the flexibility and responsiveness of the teachers to the situations they faced in their work. As they critically reflect, analyse and act in the light of their professional knowledge, they are able to incorporate into their practice the pedagogical knowledge, understanding and skills that enable them to differentiate between students, contexts, methods, materials, resources and outcomes as they create a curriculum for all students (Bigge & Shermis, 1999; Kovalik & Olsen, 1997; Pijl, 1995; Udvari-Solner & Thousand, 1995).

Knowing each individual: The ability of teachers to differentiate between students is grounded in their deep personal knowledge of each student – a knowledge based on the teachers’ moral commitment to the education of their students, as well as their organization of teaching and learning in the classroom. Important elements of their teaching include the comprehensive and systematic way they gather information about students, the connections they make between their teaching and the students’ lives, and the flexibility and open-endedness of the curricula which provide the opportunity for all students to succeed.

Commitment to the learning and welfare of each student: Teachers are committed to the learning and welfare of each and every student. Care and cognition is not a separate part of either the design of the curriculum or the classroom organization and atmosphere. It is
not so much the practice itself but the professionals who perform it and the context in which they work that makes the difference as the teachers include all learners in their classrooms. It is the combination of pedagogical knowledge, applied, responsive-professionalism and supportive educational environments that produces significant results.

Responsive Professional Practice
The teachers have in common their responsiveness to situations they come across in their professional practice. Nevertheless, it is hard to see how they could accomplish this without a strong foundation in professional skills, pedagogy, educational theories and ethical beliefs. The basis on which their professional identity and practice is formed begins with their initial teachers' education, but is built on by experience and continuing education. Their classroom practice is child centred and grounded in educational theory (pedagogy, subject knowledge and child-development) and learning. These are experienced teachers; their knowledge and understanding of pedagogy did not develop overnight, but through years of practice. By adding to their education they expanded and deepened their professionalism.

PATHWAYS TO RESPONSIVE PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE
In becoming responsive professional educators these teachers not only share the strong foundations on which they built their profession, in addition they share certain directions or pathways to responsive professional practice and these are active school community, collegial practice, teachers creating new knowledge together, continuing education, creating learning communities for diversity, and support from legislation and policy.

1. ACTIVE SCHOOL COMMUNITY
An active school community and support from school administrators for innovative practices is critical. Conditions, facilities, framework, structure, leadership and time for teachers to collaborate with colleagues in and out of school are essential. Although the teachers do not always experience solidarity or agreement on particular school reforms with all their colleagues, they find support and interest in their schools for innovation. They experience their work situation as innovative and progressive as they collaborate with their colleagues in school change. However, they also experience drawbacks in school reform, and stagnation as some of the innovative programmes fade out or do not develop in the way they hope.

The teaching environment is open for respectful discussion on educational issues and the teachers rarely have problems that they cannot themselves resolve quickly, although some do try more than one job until they find one that matches their desire for innovation.

The teachers are not afraid of risk-taking and continually question their own actions, evaluating and renewing their practice. They are open for critical dialogue about learning and teaching, using opportunities that come their way.
2. COLLEGIAL PRACTICE
The second pathway is the space (framework, structure, leadership, time, and conditions) for a close dialogue and collaboration on educational issues and cooperative practice. It is clear that none of the teachers believe they can be responsive educators on their own. They all express strongly the requirement of collegiality, not a need for friendship but a need that provides an opportunity for critical reflection and professional betterment. The teachers find this at their school through team teaching or shared practice. They systematically and critically reflect on their teaching practice in relation to theory and practice through collegial dialogue. They plan their teaching along with their colleagues at their grade level, plan with other teachers as they integrate different subjects within their class, and along with their colleagues they write the class and school curriculum.

3. TEACHERS CREATING NEW KNOWLEDGE TOGETHER
The third pathway to reflective professional practice is constructing new knowledge in dialogue with colleagues. The teachers realize the importance of making the tacit knowledge of teachers become more apparent, and that their values, opinions, skills, knowledge and experience are made available for use in educational problem-solving. They have the capacity to continually examine, analyse and integrate the good ideas available at any given time. They share their experience of how children learn, develop ideas and expand on the ideas of others. They use their professional knowledge and experience to create their own educational programmes.

4. CONTINUING EDUCATION
The fourth pathway is the ongoing and never-ending learning that has become a part of the teaching profession. Teachers take every possible opportunity to add to their professional knowledge. They are constantly open to learning from their students, the parents, professionals and other colleagues. They learn from consistently asking critical questions about their practice. They read, they study, take courses, participate in different kinds of programmes and in service offered to teachers.

5. CREATING LEARNING COMMUNITIES FOR DIVERSITY
The fifth pathway they take is responding to the growth in diversity of the students attending compulsory schools in Iceland. The diversity is reflected in the differences in age, gender, abilities, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and individuality found in each classroom. Their attitude toward equity and secretion is strongly grounded in their ethics. The teachers do not believe in tracking students, but they collaborate with their colleagues using everyone’s unique knowledge and support to respond to their students.

Pedagogy and educational theories affect their planning and teaching, as they structure learning communities for all children to be successful learners. They are aware that the curriculum needs to be flexible and contain variety so that they can respond to the
differences in each class. The teachers structure classrooms and teaching that offers mixed ability teaching with alternatives and multiple opportunities for success.

6. SUPPORTED BY LEGISLATION AND POLICY
The development and implementation of law and policy is based on community involvement and therefore builds a climate of expectation. The law supports ethical beliefs of the teachers and they regularly refer the rationale for their decision-making to the law and legislation. The teachers are well aware that the law on education and legislation in Iceland support inclusive practices and enable them to ask for resources for their practice.

SUPPORTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF RESPONSIVE PROFESSIONAL EDUCATORS
This study was an inquiry into the practice of six teachers who successfully included students considered to have disabilities into their classrooms. This last section outlines the factors that contributed to their effectiveness in their roles as teachers.

FOUNDATIONS OF TEACHING PRACTICE IN CLASSROOMS FOR ALL STUDENTS
The teachers’ openness to diversity and their responsiveness as professionals were the critical elements in creating learning for all students. As teacher researchers they were stimulated by the diversity in their classrooms. They created curricula for the entire group of learners, curricula that were responsive to each student. A critical element of this response was their openness to children and their recognition that individual differences in children contributed to the richness of the learning environment.

Diversity means different races, different interest groups, different power bases and basically different lots in life. To achieve moral purpose is to forge interaction and even mutual interest across groups. Yet the problem is that there are great tendencies to keep people different than ourselves at a distance (Fullan, 1999, p. 2)

It was clear that the teachers had a strong ethical and moral commitment to the value and abilities of each student and that led them to build a pedagogy appropriate for mixed-ability groups of students.

The number of schools and classrooms that are inclusive of all learners will not increase if the educational discourse continues to focus on categorization of students, identification of their limitations, and the generation of individual programmes and social interaction. An understanding of the term “diversity” must be expanded beyond disability or ethnic difference to focus on the value of differences in gender, socio-economic status, cultural group, abilities, learning styles and interests (Booth & Ainscow, 1998).

Learning from these teachers, I recommend that the development of inclusive education be supported by (a) an ethical and moral understanding of diversity and discrimination, (b) educational environments that value diversity in the learning community, and
(c) responsive professional educators who have the pedagogical abilities to create learning for diverse group of students.

CRITICAL CHALLENGES FOR TEACHERS
The responsiveness in the daily practice of the teachers coupled with pedagogical skills enabled the teachers to use student differences, contextual issues, cultural and community events, subject matter, and problems and challenges as opportunities for teaching and learning. If the majority of teachers are to become responsive professional educators, they will need to:
1. Be prepared to understand and use responsive pedagogical approaches for the education of all students.
2. Become articulate contributors to professional discourse, research and knowledge creation.

RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY
Fullan (1999) highlighted the importance of pedagogical knowledge in enhancing learning for all students:

We are still at the beginning of an intellectual burgeoning of the quality and depth of pedagogical knowledge and means of enhancing learning for all. This revolution has barely touched schools (Fullan, 1999).

The teachers in this study identified their lack of pedagogical preparation as a major obstacle in their efforts to create curricula that included all students in their classrooms. They managed to create a climate of learning for all their students, but were sometimes unsure of their decisions. They were critical of the lack of focus by professional educators and administrators on pedagogical responses to individual difference.

A pedagogy that forms the basis for teaching diverse groups of students must include more than a skill in using prescribed instructional practices. It must integrate a professional knowledge base about teaching, learning and child development, and involve an ethical and social commitment to children. As a result of this study, I have developed a definition of the pedagogical qualities of the responsive professional educator:

Responsive pedagogues are educators who: (a) understand child development and individual difference and are committed to the education of all students, and (b) have a knowledge base which enables them to differentiate between students as they develop curriculum for all students.

Responsive pedagogues go beyond acknowledging and respecting differences as they create curricula. They focus on the children and what they bring into the classroom (ability, attitude, background, experience, interest, knowledge and skills), and respond
to individual differences as they create a learning environment that encourages all students to expand their learning. Responsive pedagogues are skilled in creating a curriculum of learning activities and environments in which all students have the opportunity to succeed.

UNDERSTANDING CHILD DEVELOPMENT
Children enter schools with a variety of skills, knowledge and experience. They naturally develop at different rates and in different ways. Teacher preparation must include a comprehensive grounding in major theoretical perspectives on child development and their practical applications, and an understanding of the social and moral issues inherent in individual differences, as well as the opportunity to build a strong professional commitment to the education of children.

DIFFERENTIATING BETWEEN LEARNERS AND RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF ALL STUDENTS
Teachers must have a comprehensive grounding in pedagogy that enables them to (a) base their teaching on detailed knowledge of each student, (b) construct learning activities that are both challenging and enjoyable, (c) differentiate between students within integrated curricula and programmes, (d) use the physical and social environment to support learning, (e) support students to develop a growing sense of responsibility for their learning, and (f) work in partnership with students to monitor and modify teaching, learning and assessment.

If this is to happen, teachers need to gain knowledge, understanding and skills in the following key areas of teaching, learning and professionalism.
1. Activity-based learning
2. Differentiated curriculum design, learning and assessment
3. Inclusive classroom climate
4. Professional collegiality
5. Connection with families.

I have outlined important elements of each of these below.

Activity-based Learning
Students achieve most when they are actively engaged in the learning experience. This includes reflecting on those experiences, using authentic opportunities for problem-solving, decision-making, analysing, evaluating, and acting. Responsive pedagogues will understand and use rich learning opportunities and hands-on activities that are based on students’ experiences and interests, and encourage them to be active, inquiring and reflective learners.
I collect worthless things at home and bring them to school for students to use. My students are very interested in different board games, and one day they began to create their own. In doing so, they needed to use different knowledge and skills. (Greta)

The teachers emphasized the importance of developing problem-solving strategies in the context of “real” problems that are built on students’ interests. Greta gave good examples of this when she took the students to the beach to construct islands shaped according to the concepts they had learned. Nina, who built her reading project on problem-solving for elves, also provided many examples. In collaboration with her colleagues, Helga created learning opportunities that integrated different subjects as students wrote and illustrated their own books.

Curriculum Design, Differentiated Learning and Assessment

The school and class curricula in Iceland are based on the National curriculum, which each school community adapts according to its unique facilities. These curricula recognize the strong connections between learning design, assessment and the learning environments:

A school’s curriculum covers all the arrangements the school makes for students’ learning and development. It includes the content of courses, all student activities, teaching strategies, assessment approaches and decisions on the facilities provided and the ways in which teachers and classes are organized. It contains goals for enhancing or expanding the curriculum for individual students (Menntamálaráðuneytið, 1999; Victorian Ministry of Education, 1988).

Curricula must be built on holistic approaches in which subjects are integrated and the emphasis is on both content and process. The purpose should be clear, with learning experiences personalized according to each student, and multiple teaching strategies used.

The goal for each student was to compose a story, write the texts on the computer as well as make the illustrations. They also made the paper for the cover of the book, which they bound, and at the completion of the project, they read their story to the class. (Helga)

Teachers must be prepared to use varied teaching and assessment strategies that take into account the unique abilities, characteristics, pace and styles of learning of all students. The strategies should be balanced according to the whole class, small groups and individual learners:

I divided the learning into core work that all students must do. I then organize the curriculum into work alternatives and play alternatives, where students themselves
plan their activities. I make sure the students have many varieties to choose from.
(Nina)

Assessment needs to be ongoing, related to teaching and learning, and structured by teachers, students and peers. This requires that authentic and holistic methods of assessment be developed. Such approaches build on real and challenging activities where students have the opportunity to use their knowledge, understanding and skills, as well as their imagination and intuition.

Classroom Climate

The classroom is the potent cultural and contextual milieu of learning and collaboration. A necessary element of learning and teaching is the quality of the learning partnerships between students and teachers. As teachers and students learn together; they are able to take risks, explore new frontiers and relate new knowledge to classroom practice.

Cooperation and cohesion in the classroom are critical to students’ success. All the teachers in the study found it significant that they were able to teach the same group of students for more than one year. They felt that both they and the students needed time to develop the trust, cohesion and mutual respect that are essential for effective learning. However, cohesiveness cannot be based on student similarities or length of relationships alone. Instead it must be grounded in respect for others and their unique and different characteristics, experience, knowledge and gifts. Teachers need to know how to support open discussion about the values, attitudes and behaviour that challenge students to (a) examine issues from different points of view, (b) understand their peers, (c) value individual differences, and (d) be critical of ideas rather than people.

Professional Collegiality

Teaching strategies arise not only from the education and experience of teachers, but also from cultures of teaching, beliefs, values and community expectation. More subtle influences include the habits and expectations that emerge and become institutionalized in the educational community in response to demands and pressures place on teachers over the years. It is difficult for teachers to plan relevant and interesting learning for students if they do not work in collaboration with other educators and professionals.

Teachers learn from each other as they share and evaluate their professional knowledge and experience. However, this will not happen unless they use collaborative models based on the expectation that each member in a collaboration will contribute unique knowledge and skills, and also share in the information, responsibility and action. It is important that professional education and work environments support collegial collaboration between teachers.
Family Connections

Parents have the primary responsibility for bringing up their children, ensuring that they attend school and are open to the education offered by the school. The context in which children learn includes the influence of their family as well as of school. It is therefore essential that teachers understand the importance of including families in their children’s learning and become skilled at developing opportunities for parents to share information, discuss aspects of teaching and learning, and express their views.

I use the Activity Based Assessment guide as I interview children and their families about children’s abilities and interest. I then use the information from the families as I create the class curriculum and create learning activities based on children’s interest. (Greta)

Parents are important allies of teachers in curriculum development, as they know their children and can contribute useful information about their interests, approaches to learning and educational needs.

This inquiry brought me to the understanding that to create inclusive practice teachers not only need to be open to diversity, they must have the pedagogical knowledge on which to base their responsiveness to the variety of situations they face in their daily work. By exploring the pathways the teachers journeyed to become Responsive Professional Educators, I recognized and clarified the actions that need to be taken to expand inclusive practice to more classrooms and schools.

This study focused on the individual professional work of six teachers. To go beyond individual teachers’ practice, to understanding whole school practice, it would be necessary to expand on studies such as this to reach entire school communities. This would involve not only teachers, but students, parents, other professionals and administrators.

The third step could be to study the support for diversity and anti-discrimination in education in the broader society, and the appropriateness of the preparation provided for schools and teachers.

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