



RAISING ACHIEVEMENT FOR ALL LEARNERS QUALITY IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION KEY PROJECT MESSAGES

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide a summary of the key messages from the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (the Agency) project on Raising Achievement for all Learners (RA4AL).

Inclusive education is associated with principles of equity, social justice, democracy and participation, and reducing school failure and inequity is crucial not only for economic growth and competitiveness, but also to reduce poverty and foster social inclusion (Council of the European Union, 2010).

Raising the achievement of all learners is an ethical imperative. The RA4AL project aims to move on from a focus on inclusion and the justification of such an approach to address the ways in which inclusive policy and practice can raise the achievement of all learners.

The RA4AL project rationale

In recent work, UNESCO (2012) reinforce the role played by education in creating more inclusive and just societies and state that '*... international consensus is converging towards a view that if there is a phenomenon of exclusion in an education system, then it is not considered to be a quality system*' (p. 1).

The OECD (2011) show that improving the performance of the lowest performing students does not have to be at the expense of higher performers – school performance and equity can go hand in hand.

While policy development is strongly influenced by the values and aspirations of society and increasingly by the recognition of children's rights, evidence for the differential effectiveness of processes and outcomes is also required (Lindsay, 2007).





Despite positive developments in many Agency member countries, there is still a lack of clarity about the meaning of inclusive education and consequently about what action should be taken to bring about positive attitudes to diversity and increase the capacity of education systems and schools to meet the needs of all learners. Transplanting 'special education' thinking and practice into mainstream contexts is not the way forward – there is a need to challenge many assumptions about the way education systems and schools currently work.

The RA4AL project explicitly targets all learners – any idea that some learners are destined to fail must be challenged. In project discussions, participants highlighted that learners from groups known to be vulnerable to underachievement were of particular concern. While learners with special educational needs and disabilities and migrants may be particularly at risk of underachievement, Agency country representatives and conference participants added the following vulnerable groups: learners from lower socio-economic groups, those looked after by the authorities or living in difficult circumstances, e.g. victims of abuse or violence, Roma and travellers, learners who do not regularly attend school or who have caring responsibilities and learners who may be more able and talented.

The project position paper posed the questions: How should a focus on the needs of learners who may be vulnerable to underachievement and marginalisation be managed in the context of inclusion, without the use of potentially limiting 'labels'? How can outcomes for such learners best be monitored and evaluated to ensure that their needs are being met?

While the idea of learners vulnerable to underachievement aims to avoid the use of categories and possible stereotyping, further consideration must be given to these questions to ensure that policy responses and subsequent monitoring and evaluation take account of individual circumstances.

The Agency RA4AL project

In 2010, the Agency conducted a survey among member countries to identify the long-term priorities for their work. This survey identified raising achievement for all learners as a key issue for investigation.

As a result, in Spring 2011 the Agency submitted an application for Raising Achievement for all Learners – Quality in Inclusive Education as a project to be supported under the European Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme Comenius funding. In Autumn 2011, the Agency was awarded the grant and the project ran from December 2011 to November 2012 (Project number: 517771-LLP-1-2011-1-DK-COMENIUS-CAM).

The main target group for project information and outcomes is national policy makers who are in a position to ensure that inclusion becomes an integral part of all education policy making, and that the necessary collaboration between education and other government departments is further developed.

The RA4AL project has drawn upon:

- Findings from a range of thematic project work conducted by the Agency involving all member countries and recent research, including work published by international organisations such as UNESCO, UNICEF and OECD.





- The outcomes of the RA4AL conference planned in collaboration with the Danish Ministry of Education and the Odense municipal authorities and held in Odense, Denmark from 13–15 June 2012 as an official event under the Danish presidency of the EU.

In order to explore the project's key questions and develop a clear rationale for future work, three groups of experts were nominated by the Ministries of Education in Agency member countries: policy makers for general compulsory sector education and policy makers and researchers in the field of inclusive education. All participants shared views and experiences on quality education in inclusive settings as a strategy for raising achievement for all learners through the conference exhibition, inputs, seminars and informal networking and discussion.

A RA4AL position paper drafted by Agency staff was sent out to all participants prior to the conference. The paper reviewed recent Agency work and other international research and outlined some key issues for the RA4AL project and conference.

The position paper and a full report on the conference proceedings is available at: <http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/ra4al>

The challenge of raising achievement for all learners

Dyson and colleagues (2004) state that 'solutions' that lead to initiatives that are simply overlaid or bolted on to an inherently unfair system will inevitably fail. Although policy makers are intent on closing the gap in educational achievement, recent strategies aiming to achieve this, either by raising aspirations or diversifying the market, are significantly flawed.

Hanushek (2004) shows that increases in funding for schools have had, with few exceptions, little impact on educational outcomes over many decades. Resources can be used in different ways to benefit all learners, for example through improved staff ratios in the classroom, increased teacher competence through professional development and flexible use of counselling and mentoring.

In recent years, market-based reforms have been introduced in many countries. However, Whelan (2009) doubts the value of choice and competition as drivers of improvement, as they divide the system into units that are too small to innovate and often increase academic, ethnic and social stratification.

As early as 1996, the International Commission on Education for the twenty-first Century identified seven tensions in countries' education systems – including the tension between competition and equality of opportunity and the need to balance competition that provides motivation and incentives with co-operation that promotes equity and social justice for all.

Therefore the need to find ways to overcome these challenges and develop high quality, responsive provision for all learners remains. Leadbeater and Wong (2010) express this in the following statement: *'Disaffection with school, evident in high dropout rates and exam failure, suggests there is a pent-up demand for a different kind of school experience – an experience that is more engaging, rewarding and relevant to the skills people will need in the century to come'* (p. 3).





A common language of inclusive education

As the rationale above suggests, there is a need for a common language to use when talking about inclusive education, and this has been a recurring theme in RA4AL project activities. Education systems in countries are highly individual (Meijer, 1999, 2003) – any examination of inclusive education in any country therefore needs to be considered within the context of wider educational reforms occurring in that country.

The Agency report *Teacher Education for Inclusion across Europe* (2011) outlines some recent developments, including the use of the terms ‘heterogeneity’ and ‘diversity’, but points out that a change in terminology does not always reflect a change in thinking or practice. If the language used continues to promote the separateness or difference of diverse groups within society, policy is also likely to be in the form of ‘added’ measures needed to change original policies that were not inclusive.

In the RA4AL project, country representatives raised the need to clarify the meaning of specific terms in the context of the project. These terms include: quality, raising and achievement and the working definitions used in the project are set out below.

The definition of *quality* set out in the RA4AL position paper is as follows:

‘Quality must be seen in light of how societies define the purpose of education. In most, two principal objectives are at stake: the first is to ensure the cognitive development of learners. The second emphasizes the role of education in nurturing the creative and emotional growth of learners and in helping them to acquire values and attitudes for responsible citizenship. Finally, quality must pass the test of equity: an education system characterized by discrimination against any particular group is not fulfilling its mission.’ (UNESCO, 2004, Foreword)

Regarding *achievement*, Wallace (2010) uses the term to mean *‘the outcome of effort, learning, perseverance, self-belief and encouragement. It involves the individual experiencing challenge, making discoveries and reaping the rewards, either intrinsic or extrinsic of effort and application.’* (p. 6) This broad definition can be contrasted to *attainment*, which is usually used to refer to learners attaining grades or levels on more formal, standardised assessments or examinations. Consideration must also be given to the fact that valued achievements or attainments may vary between countries and cultures.

Closely related and relevant to the RA4AL project is the definition of *under-achievement*, which is often seen as a discrepancy between an assessment or test result and actual performance. However, it has been suggested that while the societal and environmental factors that may disadvantage learners must be considered, the capacity – and resilience – of all learners must be raised and any low attainment addressed.

Finally, the term *raising*, in the context of the project, refers to increasing or improving the attainment and/or achievement of individuals and groups. How such increases are measured will depend on the area(s) in which the learner(s) are felt to be under-achieving – but it is clear that closing the gap between high and lower achievers does not mean lowering standards – but maintaining high expectations for everyone.





Project findings and recommendations

Drawing on past Agency projects, recent international research, materials presented at the RA4AL conference exhibition and inputs, seminars and discussions held at the conference, the following ‘themes’ have been identified as critical in raising the achievement of all learners:

1. Collaborative policy and practice. To engage and support all learners, in particular those who may face disadvantage, services should be provided in local communities through close collaboration – in policy and practice – between education, health, social services and other agencies. Co-operation and networking are needed at all levels – national, local area, school and classroom – between all stakeholders, learners and families, to ensure both co-ordinated responses and effective use of resources.

The many facets of collaborative working across different levels of the system – from collaborative assessment and learning in the classroom to professional networks at international level – are highlighted in the RA4AL synthesis report, demonstrating the importance of social capital in school and system reform. As collaborative policy and practice is a common element across all themes, it may provide a suitable framework for future investigations.

2. Support for school and system leaders. School and system leaders should receive support to ensure that they have the vision and the necessary competences to establish a positive ethos and provide appropriate leadership for inclusive practice. Planning to meet the diverse needs of all learners should become an integral part of the whole area/school development process, which should in turn bring together all current priorities in a coherent way.

The RA4AL project findings stress the need to move away from top down leadership towards distributed leadership that emphasises teamwork and collaborative problem solving.

3. Inclusive accountability. Approaches to system and school accountability should include a strong element of self and/or peer review to empower stakeholders to see accountability as professionally owned rather than externally imposed.

In order to move towards greater equity in education, a variety of performance indicators are needed, suited to the local situation and focusing on input, resources, processes and output/outcomes. Such developments should measure what is valuable for all learners to ensure consistency and reinforce inclusive values and practice.

4. Personalisation through listening to learners. The voice of the learner is key in shaping all policy and practice. Personalisation also involves working more closely with parents and families to address any support requirements in a more holistic way. A clearer focus on personalisation would recognise the need for more flexible systems of assessment, rather than trying to ‘drive up’ standards through testing and would value excellence in all areas of learning.

5. Professional development for inclusive education. Teachers must be active agents in any system/school change and their competences should be addressed through both initial





teacher education and continuing professional development. All teachers must develop the necessary values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and understanding to ensure the learning and full participation of all learners in every classroom.

The four areas of competence included in the Agency *Profile of Inclusive Teachers* (2012): valuing learner diversity, supporting all learners, working with others and personal professional development are those needed by teachers likely to be successful in raising the achievements of all learners.

6. Pedagogical approaches for all. In view of work by the Agency, further supported by recent international research, it is evident that there are pedagogical approaches that benefit all learners, for example team teaching and peer assisted learning.

Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) note that extending what is ordinarily available to all learners is a complex pedagogical task that requires a shift from an approach that works for most learners (with something additional to or different from for some) to an approach that involves *'the development of a rich learning community characterized by learning opportunities that are sufficiently made available for everyone'* (p. 814).

These themes are discussed in greater detail in the full project report available at: <http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/ra4al>

Emerging issues for future work

The outcomes of the one-year RA4AL project will form the basis of a longer-term project to be conducted by the Agency, starting in 2013. With this in mind, all project activities have been reviewed to identify key issues to be considered in future work, related to the above themes.

The key issues include the need to:

- Gather practical and cost-effective examples of networking and collaboration in classrooms, schools and local communities as well as at national/international levels, and examine the contribution that such practices can make towards raising the achievement of all learners.
- Build on existing work on leadership for inclusion to examine the competences needed for leadership in inclusive systems/settings.
- Conduct further work on appropriate accountability mechanisms for the education system and for schools that empower stakeholders and reflect inclusive values and practice by measuring what is valued for all learners, and provide concrete evidence of effective practice leading to more equitable achievement.





- Investigate how education systems and services are organised, taking account of the key role of teachers and the need to consider the voices of learners and their families to offer a truly personalised experience.
- Undertake further work on the areas of competence needed by teachers to meet the diverse needs of all learners and investigate the best ways to achieve this in initial teacher education and on-going professional development.
- Carry out research on pedagogical approaches and strategies that go beyond teacher-led 'differentiation' to learner-centred, personalised classroom practice.

Concluding comments

The RA4AL project work has identified the need for a stronger evidence base, in particular on effective approaches to raise the achievement of all learners and an investigation into the factors that enable learners who have experienced disadvantage to develop resilience and achieve well. The RA4AL conference rapporteur Bengt Persson stressed in particular the lack of research at system level.

The value and cost-effectiveness of co-operation between countries and the importance of learning from existing policy and practice in this area has been widely recognised. By sharing knowledge at all levels of the system, inclusive learning communities can be developed and strengthened by partnership and collaboration to ensure that all learners have the opportunity to develop their learning capacity and raise their levels of achievement. As Fink (2008) observes: *'Education is more than preparing students to make a living, although that is important. It is also about preparing them to make a life.'*





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