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Y Drindod Dewi Sant
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ASSIGNMENT TITLE:

Create strategies to support inclusive classroom practice and a reflection of their effectiveness in the classroom (4,000 words).

AI Acknowledgement

I confirm that I have not used any AI tools in the research and creation of this assignment.

I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated materials as my own work.

I confirm that I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used, which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

Introduction

The Salamanca statement of 1994 created an international commitment to inclusive education (UNESCO 1994) demanding quality education must be provided to all students whilst taking notice of their needs. In the UK, the Warnock report (1978), 2015) recognised the right to education for all, whose goals for education were to increase each student's ability to interact with and contribute to the world as independently as possible (Lindsay et al., 2020). This is captured in Welsh government policy (2023) aiming for fully inclusive education system and the development of the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) code (Welsh Government 2021).

The concept of inclusion has many interpretations, resulting in many modes and methods of delivery (Florian, 2008). There has been a movement from a narrow conception of inclusion to mean access and engagement in school communities, with a focus on the needs of the individual student, to a broader perspective, considering systemic inclusion within society for all learners of all backgrounds and abilities (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018). This has led to confusion in the implementation of programmes to support ALN students. Migliarini et al (2020) highlight how even in Italy, where the European model of inclusive education developed and has been promoted since the 1970's, the role of engaging ALN students in individualised activities, described by the national plans for inclusion is given to support staff rather than general education teachers, and is a form of micro-exclusion of ALN identified students. Cook (2024) highlights expectations of normalcy, related to the medicalised model of disability rather than the social model, and the need for individualised learning opportunities for neurodiverse students.

The setting for this piece is a specialist FEI in South Wales, and one of only nine in Wales or on the Welsh border (Natspec, undated). The college is one year old in its current format and caters for approximately 32 students with a broad range of ALN, ranging from profound to moderate learning and physical difficulties and disabilities. All students engage in a non-accredited curriculum addressing the pathway to adulthood scheme (NDTI 2025), and some students also work towards accredited units (e.g. Agored, City & Guilds) between entry levels 1-3. Staffing levels are approximately 80% teaching assistants and 20% teaching or management staff.

The class where the investigation was conducted has eight students (four second years at the time of the study, and four were first years). with six Teaching Assistants (TA's) and one class teacher. The range of learning disabilities and difficulties include autism spectrum disorders (ASD) attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) Global Development Delay (GDD) and epilepsy, in addition to physical, sensory, social and emotional support requirements. Some learners are on residential placements (38 weeks, Monday-Friday) whilst others travel in daily with an approximately 30-mile catchment radius. Socio-economic data of learner background was not available for this study.

Two reflective models were used in this assignment. To identify opportunities to develop and improve inclusion in my classroom and college, I first had to reflect on inclusion in what may be a hyper inclusive setting, To do this I considered how practices in the classroom and college may be excluding students from learning opportunities and experiences for which I used Brookfield's reflective model (Brookfield 2017). Then to implement and reflect upon the strategies used, I employed Gibbs' reflective model (Gibbs 1988).

Description

Given pressures of timetables, staffing availability and the individual requirements of students, I must engage the students in learning activities as a group. I have become aware that at times students cannot access the learning opportunities I provide. I use a social constructivist informed philosophy in my classroom, and although this approach has improved interaction between the students and me, and in terms of engagement with the resources/lesson, some students are still excluded. This applies to all students at different times, regardless of the topic or manner of engagement. Reflection on this identified several forms of exclusion which require addressing.

Problem 1 TA exclusion

Some lessons would flow well, engaging the students in conversation and activities, however, despite the small class size, other lessons, which were structurally similar would struggle. Liaising with my more experienced and senior support staff I was able to identify a form of micro-exclusion which may be the cause of the difficulty. The range of ALN in the class, and the high staff: student ratio resulted in interactions which were not channelled through me as the expert in the room. Multiple explanatory conversations between TA and student interrupted conversational flow, and the use of analogies or explanations by TA's which did not assist in the journey towards understanding/sense making were inhibitory. I also did not have the opportunity to explain my goals to TA's other than brief outline of my aims which I delivered to the students at the beginning of the session.

When teaching a group or running a group activity/learning experience, I observed that I was having to manage the TA talk and interactions which they had with the students. The presence of a TA frequently created a bubble around them and the student, where they had a semi-private interaction which I had to break into. Sometimes students would prefer to engage with the TA rather than the teacher, and the TA's voice or opinion would become more prominent. I would have to exert my presence and authority on both TA's and students when I needed to direct the conversation, deliver instruction or correct or guide interpretations.

Strategy 1

I rearranged the seating in the classroom according to whether I was delivering content and assessing it's understanding or uptake, or whether the students were engaging in activities assisted by TA's. The first 15-25 minutes of the lesson were in the form of a discussion dialogue between me and the students. TA involvement with students was restricted to two TA's at the table and was closely managed by me. The other TA's sat behind the learners and observed during the instruction phase. This arrangement allowed me to assess knowledge and understanding specifically of the students and not of the TA's interpretation in an ongoing context and also allow the students to explain their own interpretations and constructions of the topic we were discussing. For example, when discussing the role of emergency services, one student expressed fear of the police, and was able to express this was due to a sibling having was involved with them. If this lesson had been held in the earlier format of the lesson, it is unlikely I would have been able to pick up on it during the monitoring of the multiple conversations around the table, and it may have been hidden by TA opinions or interpretations.

However, it is also possible that TA conversations can help construct other ideas or analogies that I may not. The positioning of the remaining TA's behind the students helped keep the background noise to a minimum whilst I was talking and enabled the TA's to understand the lesson and design/consider appropriate strategies to apply with the students when they were reintegrated. When I decided the teaching was accomplished, I reintroduced the TA's to students to work together/aid in exploring the topic through associated activities. I could then interact with individual students where required or assist in the class more generally. This second half of the lesson also gave an opportunity for the students to work towards the session objectives and for me and the TA's to create learning opportunities which we could record and acknowledge.

Problem 2 Teacher exclusion

Secondly, I considered how I exclude students from accessing learning. The continuum of learning ability in my class is very broad, which makes teaching a whole class difficult, despite providing differentiated material when required. A decision must be made whether to teach the majority and have students unable to engage with the prepared lesson taught separately by a TA. When this happens, it is unlikely that I will have an opportunity later in the week to catch up with the student and provide a lesson more suited to their ability. Furthermore, as the class teacher it is my responsibility to teach and guide the students based upon my qualifications and experience, whilst the pedagogical and subject knowledge of the TA's is understandably less developed.

Strategy 2

I decided to run 1:1 sessions with myself and each student during periods when the students were in the main classroom or within the college building i.e. not when off campus swimming, shopping

etc. This was to make myself available to guide the main group if required, and to allow the student with me to rejoin the main group when required. The sessions were timetabled to occur on the same morning as other specialist interventions (e.g. speech and language therapy) where a class was generally interrupted. By having a dedicated session with each student, I have also been able to investigate in a more private setting concerns the students may have (i.e. anxieties) and identify goals and strategies which I can implement. Furthermore, I have been able to work on specific student targets and take the time to reflect on their progress and record their achievements.

Problem 3 TA professionalism

Aspirations to raise the academic and experiential bar for TA's who apply for such positions is constrained by a shortage of staff with the necessary emotional and interactive capacity to work with ALN students. Therefore, it appears to be more the case of taking on people who are available to work, rather than any desire on the part of the applicant to work in this specific area of education. In addition, the poor career development opportunities mean TA's who develop a professional attitude and wish to pursue a career in this context must identify and apply to a teacher training pathway, which may not be desirable for all TA's.

Strategy 3

To foster a professional atmosphere and increase the self-confidence of my staff, I gave them low risk activities to initially assist me with and then lead themselves. The activities were designed to have a repetitive format, with the planning and preparation done by myself. For example, during cooking sessions, I developed a format of; discuss the activity-clean-prepare ingredients-cook-clean established during the first term, with a clearly defined list of instructions. Staff were then given opportunities to lead the sessions with my support as and when I considered it necessary. This was then extended to other sessions including arts and crafts, swimming, sports and shopping. Although it has been necessary for me to continue leading these sessions when reinforcement of student focused education is necessary, it is evident that the TA's can run a preplanned session competently in my absence. This has been demonstrated when I have been required to attend meetings during the college day or run 1:1 sessions, and the students have continued in their activities without requiring teacher coverage. The lessons may not have the same educational and developmental focus as those led by a teacher, But the aim of having a TA cohort capable of running a planned session appears to be a realistic aim.

In addition to these strategies, I implemented a system of weekly targets with objective steps requiring to be witnessed and recorded a defined number of times in different contexts before I accepted that they had been assimilated into the student's behavioural repertoire. Targets were set for the week and written on the board and in the student diaries. By clearly explaining to the

TA's what the session learning objective was and modelling evidence gathering methods for them, attention and effort were focussed on the creation of opportunities for the students to demonstrate their abilities and learning. However, care had to be taken not to encourage an atmosphere of task completion. This was managed by frequently discussing with the TA's my teaching philosophy and classroom aims, and engaging TA's in the creation of lessons and activities to help do this.

Feelings

Initially there was some resistance which may have been uncertainty on the behalf of the TA's to having responsibility for running a session. However, when it was explained that I would be planning the sessions and would also be present this was accepted. Confidence grew quickly and an unexpected benefit was that I could focus on individual students within a session without leaving other students excluded from staff attention.

There was a personal sense of guilt when I felt I was asking for more from the TA's than might be expected in other areas of the college where pay and conditions were the same. I addressed this by drawing attention to the quality of educational experiences that the TA's were now collaboratively participating in delivering to and with our learners. I also began including staff in reflecting on how lessons or interventions went and highlighted pedagogical techniques when appropriate. In effect, a type of esprit de corps has developed. I have discussed openly with the TA's about the expectations in the classroom and of the group in general, and they seem happy with the situation and prefer to be in this class.

Evaluation

The strategies to reduce distractions whilst I was delivering content and engaging with students, and improving my focussed interactions with students worked well in two ways. Firstly, I was able to achieve my aim of interacting and managing the learning group whilst not having to simultaneously directly address the TA's. Secondly, without further interventions, the TA's have reacted to this enforced separation in space of learners and TA's, meaning overtalking, and interrupting instances have reduced to the point where the intervention is no longer required. This effect may be associated with the development of the TA's as discussed below.

The development of TA professionalism, autonomy and confidence has given me the confidence to be able to have individual 1:1 sessions with the learners without fear of learners becoming disengaged with learning when I am not present, which had happened prior. These sessions provide opportunities for in-depth interactions and targeted interventions in areas of need or

learning, as well as providing opportunities for me to reflect upon the effects of my practice in the presence of the students, and to be able to listen more attentively to the student's voice.

Analysis and action plan

When reviewing the literature, it became evident that the inclusion/exclusion debate is dominated by mainstream secondary *contexts*, and less exclusion/inclusion in education *systems*. There is also limited representation of FEI's (Meir 2018), including research on the implementation of inclusive practices in FEI's, and no research focussing on specialist FEI's were found. Although this study was conducted in a context which provides systemic, societal inclusion for learners with ALN, exclusion may exist even in overtly inclusive environment (Wiltgren 2023).

Inclusion in this paper is taken to mean the broader concept of community participation, both social and physical, and therefore inclusive education should aim for the development of learners' ability to prepare themselves to actively participate in society. Furthermore, inclusion is considered to exist beyond the classroom, to account for the level, type and degree of inclusion and exclusion as discussed by Qvortrup and Qvortrup (2018) and Leijen et al (2021). This aligns with the definition of inclusion promoted by NATSPEC that, it is the system rather than settings which should be making provision for the broadest range of learners (NATSPEC 2022).

This paper supports many of the findings more broadly in the literature regarding the role of TA's and similar roles in education but in a specialist FEI context. For example, Porrino et al (2025) found that TA's working closely with SEND students frequently led to overattachment, over supporting, and task completion, characteristics of TA interactions which I have witnessed in classes.

Given the broad range of needs of the students, educational paraprofessionals spend more time with students than I do. For example, whilst I may spend 5hrs per week in direct teaching (i.e. lessons) and 4hrs per week in 1:1 session with individual students, on an average day a TA will spend 6-8hrs of interaction with a single student. Educational and experiential requirements for TA's are relatively low compared to requirements for teachers, with many TA's starting the role with no prior experience. Pedagogical, medical/care and behaviour management strategies relevant to the role are generally taught on the job, with only statutory required courses being provided by the institution. Similarly, Breyer et al (2021) identified that requirements for TA's are general, often no specific training is offered for working with SEN students, there are limited professional development opportunities, and TA's are excluded from planning & organisation. Mansaray (2006) also identified TA's having to work from and at the boundaries of education with their voices often marginalised.

Any further development of TA's at the institution where this study was carried out is done in-house and is dependent upon the will and interest of the TA and the classroom teacher. There is no defined career path for the TA's, and contracts are term time only, slightly above the UK minimum wage. Discussions with TA's has convinced me that this situation is both demoralising (i.e. they are not valued) and discourages personal development and professionalisation. This perspective is supported by research which shows TA's feel they have low pay, low status, lack of job security, and stressful working conditions. (Giangreco, 2013).

The ALN code (Welsh Government 2021) recognises the benefits TAs can bring to the classroom and the importance of utilising them appropriately for the benefit of learners. Mclachlan (2014) identified four subthemes in a study of TA's in further education supporting SEN students; the vocational curriculum, conflicting classroom styles and procedures, TA social isolation and limited pedagogical knowledge. Balshaw (2010) identifies benefits of in-house training programmes, development of TAs, including joint approaches to teaching and interestingly, in a similar vein to the aim of the strategies used in this paper, creating contexts where the teacher focuses on all students with help of TA's, not just those who are able to engage at the time. TA development is also supported by research by Higgins & Guilliford (2014) who identified the development of training, closer involvement of TA's in whole school practices, adequate resources and awareness of self-efficacy as beneficial to learner, staff and institutional development. Greenbank and Artzi (2025) found that the way TA's are employed in the classroom also impacts upon the self-efficacy of TA's, which has implications for the way in which teachers use, and are a trained to use and develop TA's.

Finally, the ALN code (Welsh Government 2021) also states that the responsibility for training of TA's lies with the ALNCo. Unfortunately, at the institute where this study was conducted the role of ALNCo does not exist as a named position, instead the responsibilities are assumed by a member of senior management. This raises further questions about how seriously the role of ALNCO is taken at FEI's, and particularly specialist FEI's where every learner may have an Individual Development Plan (IDP) which identifies a learner's additional learning needs provision.

This paper has searched for and found examples of exclusion with an environment which itself exists within a systematically inclusive context. If we accept the premise that wherever inclusion is promoted (whether at physical, social or psychological levels) there will always be exclusion present, research into where these forms of inclusion/exclusion exist, and strategies to address them will be beneficial to pedagogues. Given the time, effort, ability and availability of specially trained/adapted teachers for special education roles, the roles of the TA in additional learning needs contexts are of immense importance and should be given higher status and training priorities than they currently receive.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore how inclusion in a specialist FEI may be hindered by teacher/TA exclusions due to a lack of investment and development in their roles. Specifically, how can we best improve and support the inclusion of our diverse student body in their educational aims through the effective development of the TA body and teacher's time/interactions with students. Three classroom strategies were employed to support inclusive classroom practice and were analysed and discussed using a reflective model. Although the strategies used were positive in their proximal outcomes, an emergent requirement was identified, namely the need to develop and value the teaching assistant workforce in this context.

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