

Exploring Inclusive Education Through Reflection: A Personal and Professional Journey

This reflective account explores my personal and professional development so far on the Foundation Degree course *Inclusive Education*, in the context of my role as a Learning Support Officer in an all-through school. I have returned to formal education after an 18-year gap, having left school at the age of 16, and this is my first experience of studying at university level. This reflection explores my expectations upon entering the course, my engagement with academic content and learning activities, the development of my employability skills, the challenges I faced, and how my academic journey has informed my future career aspirations. I will also consider the further skills and knowledge I need to develop and enhance my employability and effectiveness in inclusive educational contexts.

Reflective practice is a critical component of professional and academic development (Sevimli-Celik & Güvelioglu, 2026), particularly in education, where individuals are required to continually assess their learning, beliefs, and actions in order to grow and adapt (Li, 2025). To structure this reflection, I will use Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (1988), a six-stage model designed to guide individuals through a comprehensive process of reflection. The stages—description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, and action plan—support a systematic and thoughtful approach to reviewing personal experiences, identifying areas of strength, recognising challenges, and planning for future development.

Inclusive Education focuses on the theory and practice of creating accessible, equitable learning environments for all students, including those with Additional Learning Needs (ALN), as well as those from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2022). The programme combines modules in inclusive pedagogy, educational policy, classroom practice, and critical issues such as intersectionality, differentiation, and universal design for learning (UDL).

Before enrolling, my expectations were largely shaped by my experience as a Learning Support Assistant (LSA), I anticipated that the course would equip me with the theoretical knowledge and practical tools necessary to pursue a meaningful career in inclusive education, potentially as a deputy ALNco or educational consultant. I also expected a strong emphasis on contemporary policy, classroom-based strategies, and reflective practice. However, I was initially uncertain about how well I would adapt to the academic demands of higher education, particularly in terms of critical engagement with literature and theoretical frameworks.

Initially, I experienced a mixture of excitement and apprehension, I was enthusiastic about the opportunity to explore inclusive education in depth, but also anxious about whether I possessed the academic capability to meet the demands of the course. I was particularly concerned about public speaking and contributing to group discussions, especially where peers appeared more confident or better informed. Having not been in formal education since I was 16, I questioned whether I would be able to cope with the academic expectations, especially writing essays and reading theoretical texts. However despite these concerns, I felt a strong sense of motivation, my desire to contribute meaningfully to inclusive educational practice, to succeed and make the most of this opportunity. I was surprised at how quickly I began to re-engage with learning, and I found that my real-life experience as a Learning Support Assistant gave me a strong foundation for understanding many of the topics.

One of the most significant learning experiences so far involved exploring the Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 1990) and its implications for practice in schools. We examined how the shift from the medical Model of Disability (World Health Organization, 1980), which views disability as a problem within the individual that requires treatment or correction, to the Social Model of Disability, which focuses on removing barriers within society and promoting inclusion, has transformed educational practice. This change, alongside the introduction of Individual Development Plans (IDPs), places the learner at the centre of decision-making and aligns closely with the person-centred principles outlined in the ALNET Act (Welsh Government 2018). As someone already working with pupils with ALN, I found this directly relevant to my role. The sessions involved analysing case studies, participating in group discussions and reading policy documents, all of which encouraged me to reflect critically on how inclusive our current practices are, and how they may still be influenced by medical-model thinking.

So far, my experience has been largely positive. The course content is both challenging and relevant, and I have been able to apply much of what I have learned directly to my role. For example, I now have a better understanding of how to support the development of IDPs in a way that aligns with the person-centred principles outlined in the ALNET Act (Welsh Government 2018). I've also begun to think more critically about how our setting supports (or sometimes unintentionally excludes) learners with complex needs. One of the challenges has been adjusting to academic study, especially reading academic papers and understanding educational theory, such as Skinner's theory of Operant Conditioning (1953) but with the support of tutors and study skills resources (UWTSD No Date), I've started to build more

confidence in developing employability skills, particularly in communication, collaboration, and leadership. These all felt daunting but necessary. I recognised that these skills would not only support my academic progress but also enhance my professional credibility in future educational settings.

Several aspects of my experience on the Inclusive Education programme have been particularly positive. Firstly, the course has significantly developed my academic writing and critical thinking skills. Assignments that required the application of theory to case studies or educational policies encouraged deeper engagement with key texts, including those by Florian (2014) on inclusive pedagogy and Norwich (2013) on the dilemmas of difference in special education. This process enabled me to move beyond descriptive writing toward more analytical and evidence-based arguments.

Secondly, I have benefited from the opportunity to receive constructive feedback from tutors. This feedback has helped me refine my academic voice and identify areas for improvement, such as developing clearer arguments, statements and integrating sources more effectively.

My engagement in lectures has also improved significantly over time. Initially hesitant to participate, I gradually began to contribute more regularly by preparing discussion points in advance. I found this approach especially effective during sessions on The Medical Model of Disability (World Health Organization, 1980), and The Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 1990) where I felt more confident linking theory to practice.

However, there have been challenges. One of my main challenges was around time management, I found the complexity of the Inclusive Education course along with working full time, and family commitments to be particularly challenging. However I am not alone in this as according to the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI, 2023), many students report struggling with balancing academic commitments and personal wellbeing, especially in post-pandemic learning environments, managing workload and maintaining a healthy work, life balance has been a challenge. The breadth of reading required, combined with multiple assignments and personal responsibilities outside university, has occasionally led to periods of stress and fatigue. I also found that the transition from theory to practice was not always straightforward. While I appreciated the conceptual frameworks provided, I sometimes struggled to see how these could be implemented in real-world classroom settings, especially when examples such as Carl Rogers Person Centred Practice (1961) were abstract or generalised.

Several factors help explain why I found certain aspects of the programme have been more successful than others. From a personal perspective, I began the course with relatively limited experience of academic writing or educational theory, which initially hindered my confidence. However, as Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory suggests, reflective practice supported by active engagement and feedback has enabled me to move through the learning cycle from concrete experience to abstract conceptualisation and experimentation.

Furthermore, the structure of the course, with its combination of lectures online and in-person, along with independent learning, has provided a range of opportunities for different learning styles. Lectures offered foundational knowledge, independent learning offered a chance to enhance my critical thinking skills. I noticed that I was more engaged in sessions that included group work, such as planning and creating a group video presentation. My increasing confidence has also been influenced by the supportive learning environment fostered by lecturers. The culture of mutual respect and encouragement made it easier to take academic risks, such as challenging ideas or sharing personal perspectives. This aligns with the findings of Timmis et al. (2020), who highlight the importance of dialogic pedagogies in inclusive higher education contexts.

This experience has helped me see inclusive education not just as a set of strategies, but as a whole-school approach underpinned by values of equality, respect, and participation (Isyattirradhiyah, et al, 2025). Drawing on the social model of disability (Oliver 1990), I now understand that many of the barriers faced by learners are created by systems, not by the learners themselves. The work of Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) around inclusive pedagogy has particularly influenced me; it has made me question some of the assumptions I had about differentiation and the use of withdrawal interventions. I realise now that inclusion is not just about helping individual pupils 'fit in', but about changing environments so that all learners can thrive (Talusán, 2022). Being a mature student has also given me a unique lens — I can connect the theory to real experiences and see how policies play out in everyday school life.

Reflecting on my learning journey so far, I feel proud of the progress I've made — both in returning to education after many years, and in developing a more informed, critical understanding of inclusive practice. My confidence has grown, and I now see myself not just as a support assistant, but as an active contributor to whole-school inclusion. The course has also encouraged me to be more reflective and to question the practices I see around me, even

if that feels uncomfortable at times. This process has confirmed that inclusive education is not a fixed destination, but an ongoing commitment to improvement and equity.

Reflecting on my journey so far, I recognise significant personal and academic growth. I have developed a clearer understanding of inclusive education not merely as a set of strategies but as a philosophy and practice grounded in social justice (UNESCO, 2020). I have improved my ability to think critically, engage with complex texts, and articulate informed perspectives. More importantly, I have begun to define a professional identity that aligns with my values: equity, access, and meaningful participation for all learners.

While challenges remain, particularly in relation to confidence in public speaking and managing competing demands, I now view these as areas for ongoing development rather than insurmountable obstacles. The experience has taught me the value of resilience, self-awareness, and adaptability, all of which are essential qualities for inclusive educators (Ahmad and Ismail, 2024).

Going forward, I plan to continue building my academic skills, particularly around reading and critically engaging with research. I also want to become more involved in whole-school discussions around ALN and inclusion, and advocate more confidently for the pupils I support. I intend to make better use of reflective tools like Gibbs' model in my day-to-day role, and to seek out further training on the implementation of IDPs and inclusive classroom strategies. Most importantly, I will continue to develop my practice with the belief that every learner deserves to feel valued, supported, and included — regardless of their starting point.

This reflective account, structured using Gibbs' Reflective Cycle, has allowed me to critically examine my experiences as a student of Inclusive Education. I have explored the interplay between personal feelings, academic development, and professional aspirations, recognising both the progress I have made and the challenges I continue to navigate.

Ultimately, the degree is not only providing me with essential knowledge and skills but is also fostering a deeper sense of purpose and professional identity. As I continue my journey, I am committed to maintaining a reflective and proactive approach to my learning, in line with the principles of inclusive practice that I hope to embody in my future career.

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