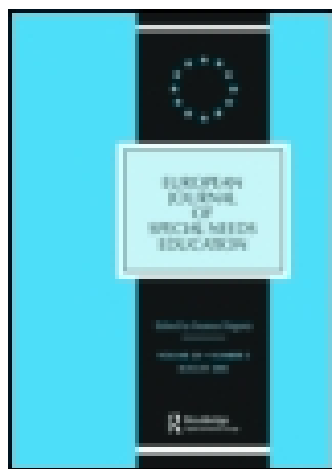


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Dianne L. Ferguson ^a

^a Teaching Research Institute , Western Oregon University School of Education, Chapman University , USA

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International trends in inclusive education: the continuing challenge to teach each one and everyone

Dianne L. Ferguson*

Teaching Research Institute, Western Oregon University School of Education, Chapman University, USA

Inclusion began in the United States and Europe as a special education initiative on behalf of students with disabilities as early as the 1980s. Now, more than two decades later, schools in these countries are changing as educators, parents, politicians and communities try to prepare for the new challenges and promises of the twenty-first century. Advances in technology, the global economy and politics, changes in what “counts” as knowledge, and the skills and abilities demanded by the businesses and industries of the future all combine to render obsolete much of what schools have been up until now. The new educational conversation centers on how to design schools and student learning for a future that many educators find nearly impossible to even imagine. How students with disabilities and special education continue to fit into this future is the ongoing challenge of inclusion. While much progress has been made, trends point to some troubling results especially for minority students, and students with some kinds of disabilities. The newest challenge is to make inclusive practices available to *everybody, everywhere and all the time*. This paper reviews the status of the efforts being made to meet this challenge. In the course of that review, I also describe the five broad changes that systemic school improvement efforts must achieve to continue making progress toward fully inclusive schooling.

Keywords: inclusive schools; inclusive practices; school improvement

One of the greatest problems facing the world today is the growing number of persons who are excluded from meaningful participation in the economic, social, political and cultural life of their communities. Such a society is neither efficient nor safe. (UNESCO)

Early developments in inclusive education

A little more than 10 years ago, I “confessed” to being an advocate for inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms and schools (Ferguson 1995). At that time, the focus of special education reform was essentially structural. The debate was over *where* students with disabilities should receive education (Skrtic 1991). A burgeoning minority, drawing heavily on social justice and political discourse, argued that no students with disabilities should be excluded as the price of appropriate schooling. Advocates sought for students with disabilities the status of any minority group that was widely disenfranchised and discriminated against; and with that status, the solution of access to general education classrooms and schools where improved learning and social outcomes would follow (e.g., Gliedman and Roth 1980). While not as influential in the US, by the mid-1990s the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994) focused the majority of Western countries on the need to *include* students with special educational needs as the core agenda of broad-based educational innovation.

Inclusion opponents decried the resource limitations of the general education classroom, arguing that specialised instruction and other services were best provided in separate settings

*Email: dferguson@chapman.edu

where the specific amount and type of student deficit and disability could be matched to appropriate services (e.g., Fuchs and Fuchs 1994; Kauffman 1999; Sasso 2000). Without one-to-one specialised instruction, opponents argued, disabled students would simply not learn and futures would be sacrificed. Debates over *where* students with disability should be educated grew, as more and more disabled students were in fact integrated into general education classrooms, to debates over *time*: should “all students” spend “all of their time” in general education classrooms (e.g., Brown et al. 1991)? Or is there a continuing need for separate environments for many students for at least part of their school day?

In Europe as well as the United States, different patterns emerged (Meijer 2003). Some states/countries simply instituted the laws and policies that made students with disabilities no different than any other student – the general education classroom was meant for all, or nearly all, students. Other states and countries have retained parallel systems for general and special education. In some countries and a few states and locales, these two systems are very distant, with operations, funding and sometimes regulations all working on dual tracks. There are many other countries and states that are somewhere in the middle, with parallel systems that are gradually transforming into various kinds of partnerships and collaborations with the general education system offering a range of options for students with disabilities, only some of which involve any participation or presence in general education classrooms (e.g., Dalmau, Hatton and Spurway 1991; Ferguson 1998; O’Hanlon 1995). One analysis of trends in the early to mid-1990s (Vislie 2003) found that while some changes were occurring toward more inclusive provision for students with special education needs, most countries had remained stable in their practices, concluding that “inclusion has not gained much ground in the Western European region”.

Through the 1990s results of the special education inclusion initiatives generated a wide range of outcomes – some exciting and productive, others problematic and unsatisfying (e.g., Berres et al. 1996; Ferguson 1996; Schnorr 1990). As a field, we learned that children and youth with disabilities, including those with the most significant disabilities, could participate and learn in general education classrooms (e.g., Berk and Winsler 1995; Pugach and Johnson 1995; Jackson, Ryndak and Billingsley 2000). We learned that general and special educators could blend their professional knowledge and skills, work together to adjust their roles and reorganise their practice to provide groups of quite diverse students with the ongoing supports for learning they needed (e.g., Armstrong 1993; Bauwens and Hourcade 1995; Booth and Ainscow 1998; Ferguson et al. 1992; Pugach and Johnson 1995). We also learned, that some of these gains erode over time, students move on the new schools, teachers and administrators change and the comfort of old ways can gradually take over the enthusiasm of innovation and change, cycling schools back to the status quo until the cycle of change is renewed by a new group of parents or teachers.

The mixed results led me to that “confession” in 1995. Along with others (e.g., Ainscow 1994; Lipsky and Gartner 1997; Pugach and Warger 1996; Vislie 1995), I called for a more systemic approach to changing schools so that they might better educate each and every student. At the same time, some in special education sought a new approach to changing schools in ways that challenged long-held normative assumptions about students and learning, the larger general education community was struggling to respond to growing student diversity in race, culture, language, family structures and other dimensions of difference beyond ability or disability. While the examples differed, the challenge was always to rethink schools’ practices in order to better prepare an increasingly diverse student population for a new and only partly known future. It is a work still in progress, but one response to this growing student diversity has been a call for schools to become more “inclusive” (e.g., Fullan 1991, 1994). As this new inclusion agenda grew and became dominant, the special education inclusion agenda on behalf of students with disabilities began to merge with ongoing reforms in general education. While the rhetoric of inclusion in general education did not initially include the diversity of disability, over time the inclusive

practices pursued have been shown to also benefit and “work” for disability (Bauer and Brown 2001; Kugelmass 2004; Pugach and Seidl 1996).

Current trends in inclusive education

We have learned and accomplished a great deal through the 1990s. Within the United States, according to the 2004 Annual Report to Congress, the national average for the percentage of students (ages 6–21) who spent at least 80% of their time in general education classrooms grew from 31.6% in 1989 to 51.9% in 2004. Some states (e.g., Vermont, North Dakota, Oregon, Colorado) significantly exceed this national average by supporting more than 70% of their students with disabilities in general education settings. In parts of Canada (e.g., New Brunswick) nearly all students with disabilities receive their schooling in general education classrooms. In Europe, most countries identify many fewer students than is typical in the US, where the national average hovers between 11% and 12% (Meijer 2003; Organisation for Economic and Cooperative Development 1995). In most European countries the average is between 4% and 5%. Others identify SEN students in higher numbers, ranging from 9% (Luxembourg) to a high of 26% in Finland, where many students receive special education supports even without an official label. Countries such as Norway, Greece, Portugal, Spain, Estonia, Lithuania, Luxembourg and Italy, have affected large-scale reforms that are dismantling separate schooling in favor of more inclusive schooling for most of their students with special education needs. In these countries, 80–90% of identified students are in inclusive environments.

Of course, the numbers tell only a small part of the story. At best, the numbers can tell us the students who have access to inclusive education by virtue of being at least present in general education classrooms and schools. But the numbers say nothing about what happens to students in those environments. In some countries like the UK and Norway, it might just mean that students are in a “mainstream” school, but spending most of their time in separate classes within that school. We know that all too often when students are assigned to general education classrooms and spend most (or even all) of their time there, the real outcomes can be limited by the very special education supports designed to ensure their success. Too many students with disabilities remain set apart not so much because of any particular impairment or disability but because of what they are doing, with whom and how. Students can be “in” but not “of” the class in terms of social and learning membership. The numbers say nothing about how the teachers share, or fail to share, responsibility for students’ learning and instruction, or how students are succeeding as learners.

Nevertheless, the numbers can tell us some important things, even though definitions vary from country to country and many countries do not collect much information on the schooling experiences of students with special education needs. In the United States, for example, the picture of access and presence changes quickly when you examine the percentages of students with access to general education classrooms by disability. Students with learning disabilities in general education classrooms have grown near the national average for all students (on average across the nation) from 31.6% in 1989 to 51.9% in 2004 (at the 80% or more per day level). Yet, only 6.8% of students with intellectual disabilities were present in general education classroom in 1989, and in 2004 it was still only 13.1%. Students with emotional disabilities fare slightly better: 14.9% to 32.3%, while students with orthopedic impairments mirror the overall national average. Clearly, progress has been much more meager for students with intellectual disabilities. While similar data for other countries is not available, the question of whether or not similar patterns are present needs to be asked and answered.

The number story is more troubling when data are examined across states and countries. While some countries place less than 1% of their students with special needs outside of general

education, others place most in separate settings. Similarly in the US the opportunity for access to general education environments can be dramatically different across states, with some offering the opportunity to as few as one-fourth (e.g., Hawaii) and many more including between 40% and 50%. In fact, of the 51 states, 23 fail to meet the national average and many others barely exceed it. Similarly, in Europe, some countries (e.g., Germany, French and Flemish Belgium, Latvia, and Denmark) include less than 10% of those identified as having SEN, even though in some of these countries students with milder learning difficulties may be supported without official designation. *Despite differences in data collection and definition, clearly where students live, as well as their type and degree of disability, are both important determinants of whether or not they will experience access to and presence in general education.*

In the United States the numbers reveal at least one more troubling trend that may, or may not, be mirrored in other countries – though, again, the questions should be asked and answered: when you disaggregate the data by race, a pattern of more segregated options exists for some groups (e.g., black and Hispanic¹) as compared to white students. Although there is variability across states, roughly 7–10% fewer black students have access to general education classrooms compared to white students. While Hispanic students fare better, they are still slightly less present in general education classrooms than white students. Further, the US has a long history of disproportionate representation of non-white students in special education and persistent achievement gaps between white and non-white students that continue to plague school improvement efforts (see e.g., Klingner et al. 2005; Ferguson and Mehta 2004).

Moving beyond the numbers, at least one research effort in the United States is examining the results of special education for students with disabilities. The first National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) identified a large weighted (by type of disability) sample of students with disabilities finishing schooling in 1987 and then revisited them 2 years and 5 years after school completion. Results from that first study were sobering. Students with disabilities were dropping out of school at a high rate and the majority were neither going on to post-secondary schooling or getting jobs. At that time special education students experienced mostly segregated schooling where they pursued a very different course of study than their non-disabled peers. Among all students with disabilities, those with emotional and behavioral disabilities were least likely to experience positive schooling outcomes. But those students who had been in inclusive settings, even in the late 1980s, tended to experience better outcomes, especially employment outcomes. (Wagner et al. 2003, 2005).

The current NLTS 2 began in 2000 with a weighted sample of 12,000 students from across the nation and will follow the cohort until 2010. Emerging reports provide some good news. The percentage of special education graduates going on to post-secondary education has doubled (to a still modest 32%) and graduates employed for pay 2 years after completing school is up to 70%. At the same time, students with disabilities are experiencing less segregation in separate schools and have gained access to higher-level academic courses. While these and other emerging results are promising, still sobering is that students with emotional and behavioral disabilities still experience less than acceptable schooling and the positive results have occurred for white and higher-income students. Of still greater concern, the study reports continued limitations in outcomes for students from lower-income households and decreasing, but persistent, differences for youth who are African American and Hispanic.

Taking stock

Clearly much progress has been made. In more and more countries, students with disabilities are gaining access to general education classrooms, schools and curriculum. The more recent reauthorisation of the US legislation (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act

2004), now requires that students have access not only to general education curriculum, but also those environments. This is only the latest change since 1975 in a law that many believed has always strongly urged participation in general education classroom through the provision of the “least restrictive environment”. Outcomes in the United States for students with disabilities are improving, at least for some. More and more countries in Europe have made great strides toward at least restructuring education for students with special educational needs.

What remains troubling is that the rhetoric of inclusive education for students with disabilities is not matched by enough reality. After a decade or longer, the news is not good enough. Wide geographic differences in the US and Europe, differential schooling and outcomes for students who have some disabilities, or who are non-white and lower income continue. While these trends are not as clear in Europe as in the US (perhaps because comparable data are not available), these same issues may also exist and should be investigated. While access and presence in “mainstream” classrooms and schools is a necessary step toward inclusive education for students with disabilities, it is clearly not enough. What happens in those classrooms is equally critical to achieving genuine inclusive education.

What we do know about achieving inclusive education

Research during the past decade in the United States and Europe, in particular, reveals many common themes. UNESCO research speaks of the importance of shifting approaches to identifying disability away from “diagnoses” toward the careful assessment of the interaction between the student and the school environment. This shift moves the “problem” from within the child to a complex interaction between the educational environment and the child’s ability. Both UNESCO research and that of the European Agency echo the results of the NLTSSs, pointing to the need to segregate students less. All of these collective research efforts also point to the role of families and the cooperation among educators in ensuring positive schooling outcomes, and in various ways, point to the importance of laws, policies and flexible funding and resource allocation systems. Over the past decade, there has been a plethora of research and writing on inclusive education – what it is, how to do it, examples of when it is done well and when it is not. Much of the research (e.g., Fullan 1996) is clear that moving beyond the structural changes involved in relocating students with disabilities to new environments requires fundamental changes in the “core of educational practice” (Elmore 1996, 23). This core of practice includes:

How teachers understand the nature of knowledge and the student’s role in learning, and how these ideas about knowledge and learning are manifested in teaching and classwork. The “core” also includes structural arrangements of schools, such as the physical layout of classrooms, student grouping practices, teachers’ responsibilities for groups of students, and relations among teachers in their work with students, as well as processes for assessing student learning and communicating it to students, teachers, parents, administrators, and other interested parties.

One example designed to assist schools in pursuing this more fundamental agenda is the Systemic Change Framework (SCF) used by the National Institute for Urban School Improvement (Ferguson, Kozleski and Smith 2003). This framework offers school personnel and other stakeholders organised change efforts in a coherent way, while keeping the focus on successful learning results for all students. It also reminds schools that the systems in which they are embedded are products of their communities and the families that live there. Finally, it emphasises how successful change efforts must address all levels of the system – community, district, school, classroom and students. Districts need to ensure that policies are implemented that support individual schools to make the best and most flexible use of resources. Schools need to be organised in ways that create space for teachers to plan, learn and work together. Teachers need to understand and use robust processes for assessing and teaching their students. The SCF assists school personnel and

their partners to focus on the work of schools, and specifically special education, in a new landscape of ongoing change and improvement.

My own synthesis of what systemic efforts to achieve inclusive education actually achieve is fundamental and substantive change in five areas which I frame as “shifts” from a tradition of practice that is grounded in long-standing assumptions to a new practice grounded in new assumptions that challenge and replace the old ones. As schools, whether in the US or elsewhere in the world challenge long-held underlying assumptions and practices, over time, new guiding beliefs and practices emerge that are fundamentally more inclusive of much more human diversity. One lesson we have learned from the past decade of systemic school improvement efforts is that there are clearly some beliefs and practices that support the inclusion of more student diversity and others that do not. What follows is my synthesis of what *changes* when schools pursue those beliefs and practices that *do* embrace and *include* diversity and difference of all kinds.

From teaching to learning

This shift involves moving away from the traditional didactic teaching format where teachers lecture, describe, explain and sometimes question while students are expected to listen, quietly and passively, until instructed to do or say something. This teacher-directed classroom has taken on new extremes of control and regimentation in some of America’s schools for poor and minority students according to a new critique (Kozol 2006). While there have always been periods in our educational history and individual teachers, or even schools, that did not organise classrooms in this way, far too many teachers rely on following the teacher’s manual, instructing the whole class, and setting students to individual tasks that are listed either in the textbook or on accompanying worksheets.

In contrast, in those schools that are pursuing more systemic school improvement efforts, classrooms focused on what the teacher does are changing to emphasise students’ learning. Using a range of strategies, these classrooms and schools are making curriculum more engaging and meaningful, “personalising” learning for each and every student, and creating communities of learners who support and share in each other’s learning.

Strategies like *universal design* of curriculum (Rose, Meyer and Hitchcock 2005) or designing curriculum to emphasise what students will ultimately *understand*, as well as know and be able to do (Wiggins and McTighe 2005), focus on making curriculum accessible to a wide diversity of learners by virtue of the variety that has been designed into what students will learn. Strategies such as project- and problem-based curriculum design and integrating various subjects into study of a broader problem, theme or project (e.g., Lake 2001) are ways to ensure that the resulting curriculum is interesting, engaging and meaningful to students.

When these curriculum design strategies are combined with *differentiated instruction* (Tomlinson 2003; Willis and Mann 2000), individual students’ learning can be “personalised” to their current abilities as well as their interests. Planning for differentiation involves thinking about different ways that any lesson or learning project might be changed to better meet students’ needs. A teacher can differentiate content (what specifically each student learns), processes (how each student learns) and products (what the student produces as evidence of learning). In addition, teachers can take into account and differentiate according to students’ current abilities, their interests and ways they learn best – i.e., learning style or intelligences that are stronger for a student – or even take into account what we are learning about brain function (Gardner 1983; Jensen 2005; Sternberg 1990, 1998). When principles of differentiation are combined with meaningful curriculum design, classrooms become busy (and yes, sometimes noisier), productive work environments where learning is the focus as well as the result (Tomlinson and McTighe 2006).

Finally, inclusive classrooms continue to draw upon the strategies that facilitate cooperative learning among students as a way to create a classroom community of learners (e.g., Jacob 1999).

From offering services to providing supports

Schools have long been organised to offer the service of educating our children and youth. This service has been offered by grade level primarily with supporting services of special education and sometimes counseling, health services and others. Students could effectively take advantage of these services if their particular situation matched what was being offered. If a student wasn't quite ready for the offered grade 4 curriculum, or had already mastered much of it, there was rarely any accommodation. As a student you were expected to move along through the grades as best you could.

In contrast, more systemically inclusive schools are beginning to shift from a "one size fits all" approach not just in the design and delivery of teaching, but also in providing those additional supports and scaffolds that a student might need to learn more easily and effectively. This shift in framing the essential mission of education is not trivial. It means that teachers expect that each student will learn and take responsibility to ensure learning using a variety of strategies. Supports are those conditions that must be present for students to learn well and teachers need to discover them for each student. For some students support is needed only until the content, or skill is learning and the understanding is obtained. For other students some support must always be present and never fade. Some accommodation and assistive technology can be supports, but proper lighting, furniture that fits changing bodies, and options for organising work and breaks from work are also supportive for some students' learning.

From individual to group practice

Historically, teachers were assigned groups of students and expected to teach them for a year (in the US) or multiple years (in many European countries). While there was some oversight over what teachers did in their classrooms, they were largely left to manage the task on their own. Teachers routinely met at faculty meetings to manage administrative tasks and other school operations and logistics, but only rarely did teachers work together to design, teach and assess student learning. As schooling has become more complex and students more diverse, and the need for systemic improvement more pressing, the pressure for teachers to emerge from their classrooms and begin to work together has grown significantly.

Some of the earliest efforts to foster inclusive education required new relationships and changing roles for special educators as they worked alongside general educators (Ferguson, Ralph and Sampson 2002; Maeroff 1993). Special educators are continuing to reinvent their roles in schools as more and more schools make the effort to become more inclusive. In many European countries previously separate schools are seeking to develop new roles and relationships with mainstream schools as resources that can support inclusive education. The challenges have been great for general and special educators seeking to work together as they must overcome a long history of working so separately that the language, routines and timeframes for their work have little similarity. For their part, many special educators have to relearn, or learn anew, the roles, responsibilities and content of general education. For general educators, there is an equal challenge to penetrate the specialist jargon and assumptions of expertise and find enough common ground upon which to build a working relationship. Nevertheless, more and more teachers are becoming "educators without labels" who are able to develop a new cooperative practice with the help of some strategies and guidance (DeBoer and Fister 1995).

As difficult as it has been for general educators and special educators to negotiate a new cooperative practice, the task has become increasingly much more commonplace and comfortable for

general educators. For some time, in many countries, teachers have been working in teams – sometimes grade teams, sometimes cross-grade teams and, usually in secondary schools, discipline-based teams. Over time, these teams have taken on more and more substantive cooperative work, including aligning curriculum among and across grades, developing and teaching integrated curricular units, developing and aligning classroom-based assessment systems and much more. Some teams, both within and across schools, are beginning to study student work together – a strategy that results in learning and changes in practice that combine, according to some sources (e.g., Langer 2003; Ferguson and Santorno 2005) the best of action research, study groups, standards-based learning, student assessment, teacher reflection and portfolio assessment. Group practice among teachers not only results in better learning outcomes for students as teachers with different skills and expertise help each other respond to student learning needs, but also leads to effective and ongoing professional development. Increasingly, school leadership seeks to facilitate *communities of practice* or *professional learning communities* where teachers learn from one another in an ongoing way through working together to teach and improve their practice (Lave and Wenger 1991; Rogoff, Turkianis and Bartlett 2001; DuFour, Eaker and DuFour 2005).

From parent involvement to family–school linkages

The literature is very clear (e.g., Henderson and Mapp 2002) that when families get involved in their children’s education, the students achieve more, stay in school longer and engage in school more completely. At the same time, we also know that many schools struggle to get parents to come to meetings and events and are often dissatisfied with “parent involvement”. For their part, many family members are reluctant to come to school – even intimidated by the school’s expectations of them or feel that school and home work and tasks are quite separate and should remain so. One reason many family members are reluctant is that schools may be unwelcoming and/or intimidating, especially to those whose primary language is other than English, are working hard to raise their income level out of poverty or who may feel shy about developing relationships with teachers for some reason (Gutman and McLoyd 2000; Lewis and Forman 2002; Rao 2000). Yet these reasons may not be very obvious to school personnel.

Definitions of family “involvement” or engagement in their children’s education seem to vary between school personnel and family members. Some groups of family members, such as those who have less (or different types of) cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984), are culturally and linguistically different from the teachers in the school or operate at a quite different economic level (e.g., Lareau and Horvat 1999; Lopez, Scribner and Mahitivanichcha 2001). For example, teachers often focus on ways family members can support teachers’ efforts through such things as helping with homework or doing special learning activities at home, along with attending parent–teacher conferences and other school meetings and events focused on helping families teach their sons and daughters more effectively at home. Family members, on the other hand, might have other notions of what “being involved” in their children’s education might entail that never involve going to school at all, and might not involve doing school activities at home, including homework (Lopez, Scribner and Mahitivanichcha 2001). Of course, these interpretations vary from family to family. Some families do share teachers’ most common interpretations and definitions of involvement. But many more do not. Schools that make their decisions about family linkages based on the perspectives shared with only some families might well leave out large populations of families.

For their part, students sometimes have a perspective on family–school relationships that neither their families nor their teachers know about. Despite the prevailing perspective that students – especially middle and high school students – don’t want their parents or other family members coming to school or talking to their teachers, research suggests that many students *do want* their families and teachers to talk together directly, and work together to support their

learning (Dodd 1996; Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti 2002; Ramirez 2002). Younger students enjoy having their family members in school and older students wish their families were more involved in school committees and other activities.

A growing number of family support specialists and urban educators are moving away from the terminology of “parent involvement” because they feel it symbolises the limitations of unsuccessful past attempts to bolster relationships between home and school (Banks and McGee 2001; Barton et al. 2004; Ferguson and Galindo 2006; Lopez, Scribmer and Mahitivanichcha 2001; Rao 2000). Instead, there must be a mutuality of interaction and collaboration that commits both home and school to each other. Parents must not only be involved with schools, but schools must be involved with families. Especially in our cities, the linkage between families and schools must be strong enough to hold in these most challenging settings. Finally, even this move from involvement to linkage is not enough. The reciprocity required by the notion of linkages must also be played out in a process of cultural awareness and critical reflection (Abrams and Gibbs 2002; Kalyanpur, Harry and Skrtic 2000; Shumrow and Harris 2000).

From school reform to ongoing school improvement and renewal

It is clear from both schooling history and a critical review of results that schools have not changed nearly enough despite repeated waves of reform and even restructuring. Much of what passes for real change or improvement in schools is really just small, quick fixes that, in the end, change little more than what things are called. What rarely changes is the old assumptions and practices that have governed schooling for a century or more – i.e. what Michael Fullan calls “the awful inertia of past decades” (2005, 32).

The current challenge is to reinvent schools with new assumptions and more effective practices rather than simply making additions or corrections to existing practice (Abrams and Gibbs 2000). Real, fundamental change in social institutions (and inclusive education in inclusive systems *is* fundamental change) is complex, difficult work that requires significant time to accomplish and endure (Ferguson, Kozleski and Smith 2003; Kozleski, Ferguson and Smith 2005). The complex contexts of schools require that strategies are differentiated, complementary and coherent in order to leverage continuous change and improvement. The good news is that we already know most of what we need to know to transform schools into inclusive systems (Glickman 2002; Pfferrer and Sutton 2000; Schmoker 2006). What remains is to do the task. The four changes in school work described above illustrate some of what we know and must be supported by ongoing efforts to continuously improve and sustain. Continuous school improvement efforts, well-grounded and validated practices and data-based decision-making are the context within which the other changes described can flourish. But a shift to continuous school improvement is itself a shift that requires focused effort and organisational development.

In sum

Research in the United States and Europe on special education and efforts to include more students with special educational needs in mainstream schools and classrooms confirms that this agenda promises better educational results for students. Yet, our efforts to achieve such results through the development of inclusive educational systems have been uneven at best. Minority students, poor students and students with intellectual impairments fare less well than their peers with higher incomes and other disabilities who are white. These results are unacceptable, and to the extent that they continue in any form, is a further indictment of our apparently weak resolve to educate all our citizens. Yet we have good reason to be optimistic that these trends can and will be challenged by schools’ efforts to engage in the kinds of fundamental, systemic change and improvement that

will, over time, realise inclusive schools and classrooms that are available for *everybody, everywhere and all the time*. I still confess my belief that this improvement is long overdue.

Note

1. While other terms, such as Latino, African American and European American, are preferred, I am using the terms used in the US Department of Education's Annual Report to Congress.

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