

Creating Conversations: The evolution of the Enabling Education Network

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INTRODUCTION

The Enabling Education Network (EENET) was set up to establish an information-sharing network to support and promote the inclusion of marginalised groups in education worldwide. EENET aims to provide a networking opportunity for those involved in educational programmes which enable individuals to participate in, and contribute towards, an inclusive society - where gender, poverty, ethnicity, class, behaviour, HIV and TB status, and disability do not mean exclusion; and where education is not confined to schools.

In this chapter the concept of inclusive education and current international trends towards promoting inclusive education policies are discussed. The rationale for establishing EENET, the key players and the underlying values and principles are then outlined. This is followed by an account of EENET's activities in its first year of existence and a discussion of the type of network EENET aspires to be. Two examples of the kind of networking which has already taken place are provided; these also illustrate the way in which responsibility for information dissemination can be devolved to key partner organisations. Finally, some of the main challenges facing EENET are discussed.

TRANSITIONS FROM SEGREGATION TOWARDS INCLUSION

In countries of the industrialised North, the dominant approach to children and adults with impairments has been the provision of expensive, segregated and institutionalised provision for separate categories (with categorisation based primarily on impairment). In the last two decades, however, large numbers of children have been integrated into their local schools. Sadly, the successes of integration remain limited in Britain and elsewhere in the North. A large proportion of children continue to be marginalised within and from education systems, or, at best, accepted on a conditional basis...conditional on the extent to which the child adapts to the school. Meanwhile, a significant minority of

disabled children continue to be educated in separate, segregated provision. Attempts to adopt a more inclusive policy have generally been hampered by a long legacy of exclusion, which ties up resources and creates enormous bureaucratic and attitudinal obstacles to the process of inclusion.

The concept of "inclusion", as distinct from "integration", describes a process whereby schools, education structures, systems and methodologies are required (and enabled) to change so that they can cater to the individual needs of all children, including all disabled children. By contrast, the focus of "integrated" education is on disabled children who are brought into mainstream schools. In integrated education, adjustments are made to the individual child so that s/he fits into the particular school. By implication and with a degree of inevitability, the regular school stays the same.

The distinction between these two concepts of inclusive and integrated education is absolutely critical. In essence, the distinction is analogous to that between the medical (individual) model of disability and the social model of disability. The focus on "fixing" the individual is replaced by an attempt to change the environment and (in the case of education) to change the context in which children are expected to learn. The following definition of inclusive education was developed for a seminar held in Agra, India (IDDC 1998).

Inclusive education:

- Acknowledges that all children can learn;
- Acknowledges and respects differences in children: age, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, HIV and TB status, etc.;
- Enables education structures, systems and methodologies to meet the needs of all children;
- Is part of a wider strategy to promote an inclusive society;
- Is a dynamic process which is constantly evolving (IDDC 1998).

It is important to make clear that promoting inclusive education does not deny the diversity of children's needs and abilities in learning. Certainly, including disabled children in mainstream schools and trying to get away from the distinction between so-called "normal" and "disabled" children (so characteristic of segregated educational provision) is important. But a denial of the differences would be naïve and dangerous. Many, including EENET, are aware of the need to maintain a balance between working towards better education for all children

and recognising the very real life challenges which face severely disabled children. Individual differences should be recognised and celebrated as part of the inclusion process. Support and encouragement for self-help groups and the involvement of positive adult role-models, ex-pupils and children themselves in the education process are essential for the promotion of positive identity in disabled children and other marginalised groups. We need to move towards a more holistic view of disability to promote a stronger understanding of inclusion.

In countries of the South, where there has been relatively little investment in segregated educational provision for disabled children, inclusive education programmes tend to be more successful. In fact, wealthier nations have arguably created greater, more insurmountable obstacles to inclusion because of their relatively vast material resources. In the South, by contrast, the rehabilitation and special needs industry is much smaller and less powerful, and human resources can be harnessed to bring about inclusion. Here, implementation of inclusive education may simply involve the positive reinforcement of well-established, community-based and inclusive attitudes and practices.

In some areas, it would never even occur to teachers working in remote rural areas that a child disabled by polio, for example, should be educated anywhere other than the local school. This has been described as "casual integration" by Miles (1989). This form of casual integration is clearly widespread and deserves to be recognised and documented. However, casual integration tends to happen on an ad hoc and individual basis, rarely impacting on the system as a whole. Thus, even where casual integration is evident, it remains likely that many children will continue to be excluded unless efforts are made to include them.

In both North and South, inclusive education is a dynamic process which is still evolving. The concept inevitably means different things to different people. Some of those differences will depend on the context and stage of development in a particular setting. Problems also arise in language and translation: in many countries it may be difficult to find appropriate and different words for integration and inclusion, thus making it harder to differentiate clearly between the two concepts. Meanwhile, many practitioners may not be aware of the theoretical analysis and thinking that underpins the two concepts. This is not to say that these concepts have limited use. They can and have proved useful to many individuals (professionals and non-professionals, western and non-western) who are engaged in re-thinking the "educational task". The key to effective re-thinking in line with an inclusive approach is to ask: "How can we prepare

schools so that they can become places that deliberately reach out to all children?" (EENET 1997).

INTERNATIONAL TRENDS

Most large development organisations employ an adviser or expert on one or more of the many issues which relate to difference (e.g. gender, race, ethnicity, age). But only rarely are the commonalities between marginalised groups explored. Sadly, awareness and equal opportunities training in any one issue does not guarantee awareness in relation to all issues. A person may be race-aware and gender-aware, but completely disability-unaware (Stubbs 1995). Inevitably, this has worked against the promotion and acceptance of inclusive education as a strategy for responding to diversity. Despite this barrier, recent years have seen an increasing focus on, and debate about, the potential for inclusive education.

Inclusive education is gaining impetus globally. Sometimes the impetus comes from a rights perspective: "Disabled children and other marginalised groups have a right to be educated alongside their peers". Sometimes it comes from an economic perspective: "We cannot afford or sustain segregated 'special' education, and so inclusion is the only option". Generally a combination of these two approaches prevails.

The United Nations' world conferences on "Education for All - meeting basic learning needs" (Jomtien, Thailand in 1990) and on "Special Needs Education: access and quality" (Salamanca, Spain in 1994) added to this impetus by emphasising that many children are excluded or are not benefiting from current systems, such as disabled children, street children and children from ethnic minorities. Contributors to these conferences highlighted the importance of taking another look at existing systems, structures and methods within schools, with a view to creating a schooling system that benefits and includes all children in the particular community. Moreover, a clear link was made between inclusive education, and initiatives aimed at school improvement and effectiveness, since these initiatives share the same aim of providing a better educational environment for all.

An outcome of the Salamanca conference was the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO 1994). This has been and is currently used to support policy changes in many countries, North and South. Another invaluable UNESCO product is the Teachers Education Resource Pack (UNESCO 1993),

produced as part of a long-term initiative to help schools develop more inclusive practices. The "Special Needs in the Classroom" project began in 1988 with the aim of producing and disseminating a resource pack of pre-service and in-service teacher training materials. This initiative subsequently developed into a broader analysis of educational transformation and the management of change. The pack, available from UNESCO in fifteen languages, has led to initiatives in over 50 countries.

In the light of this international activity and interest, the establishment of EENET is very timely. EENET is essentially a post-Salamanca initiative which aims to broaden the concept of inclusive education beyond the classroom to include community-based strategies; and to promote the dissemination of useful and relevant information in accessible formats throughout countries which have limited access to basic information and/or financial resources.

WHO IS INVOLVED IN EENET?

The initiative for EENET came from the International Disability and Development Consortium (IDDC): a group of international non-governmental organisations working to promote disability and rehabilitation issues, primarily in the countries of the South. For information, IDDC was set up in 1994 and does not have an organisational infrastructure.

Save the Children Fund (UK), which acts as IDDC's lead agency on inclusive education, identified the need for a network which would both share experience and help produce low-cost training materials relevant to the needs of the South. It was also felt that there was a need for a more independent body that would look at inclusion in its broadest sense and supply simple, useful and relevant information to the field. UNESCO gave full support to the idea, since it recognised the need for such a network but lacked the capacity to develop one. Several IDDC members pledged minimal funding for the establishment of EENET and, in mid-1997, a part-time co-ordinator was appointed.

The day-to-day administration of EENET is carried out by the part-time coordinator with support from staff and students at the Centre for Educational Needs, University of Manchester. So far, students from Ethiopia, Palestine, Brazil, Kenya and Cyprus have taken a great interest in the development of EENET and have given generously of their time in carrying out a variety of tasks, such as designing the database and mailing newsletters. Their comments and suggestions have been very valuable in the process of thinking through

how to create an international network which will benefit people in countries of the South as well as the North. The students have also provided names to add to EENET's mailing list, and will continue to publicise EENET and provide valuable feedback when they return to their home countries.

Although membership is open to individuals and organisations in all countries of the world, EENET gives priority to the needs of countries in the South. There are over 600 individuals and organisations in over 100 countries on the mailing list so far, with an enormous range of professional and personal interests, including: parents and parents' organisations, teachers, teacher trainers, academics, community development workers, policy-makers, disabled people's organisations and ex-pupils of special schools.

EENET is possibly unique in the way it makes connections between academics and a wide range of practitioners on the issue of inclusive education. EENET is based in an academic institution, but has strong links with UNESCO and the major international NGOs working on disability and development issues. Thus, EENET has great potential to reach a large number of relevant individuals and organisations.

RATIONALE FOR EENET

At the grassroots level, practitioners have limited access to relevant information and lack opportunities to network with each other. There is a severe shortage of relevant and appropriate resource materials in local languages. It was primarily in response to these very basic needs for useful information that EENET was established.

Inclusive education programmes in the South are often more successful at being fully inclusive and community-based than those which operate in the North. Even so, seminars and publications are invariably biased towards the North, because when it comes to processing and disseminating information - the crucial resources are mostly held in the North. Yet there is a tremendous need to share the experiences of the South in promoting and practising inclusion ... and to share these experiences with others in both South and North. So, EENET aims to create space for sharing experiences.

The distorted ways in which much information about the South is processed, and the ways in which those in the North set the agenda for what is and is not processed about those in the South, are also cause for concern. International

research, literature and conferences tend to be dominated by a Northern perspective with the result that pioneering examples of good practice in the South go unrecognised or unvalued. The flow of information goes from North to South. These imbalances increase the likelihood of the uncritical and sometimes inappropriate export of Northern (western) debates and practices to and by the South. Therefore, EENET aims to create space for people in the South to set their own agendas and present their own experiences, and for more critical reflection of Northern practices.

Finally, EENET also aims to influence the policy and practice of major donor agencies who continue to invest large amounts of money in projects which are modelled on practice in the North, without any awareness of projects which are innovative, inclusive and underway in the South, and with little thought to issues about transferring practice from North to South. EENET is anxious not to reinforce the negative deficit model of developing countries (Stubbs 1994), but instead to recognise and publicise examples of good practice in inclusive education, often in the absence of material and financial resources.

UNDERLYING VALUES & PRINCIPLES

By creating conversations between members of a participatory information network, EENET aims to be far more than just an information service. It is extremely difficult to process information without bias, and therefore EENET tries to be as explicit as possible about its own underlying values and principles, and its own bias. With this in mind, the underlying values and principles of EENET are set out below.

EENET:

- Believes in the equal rights and dignity of all children;
- Prioritises the needs of countries which have limited access to basic information and/or financial resources;
- Recognises that education is much broader than schooling;
- Acknowledges diversity across cultures and believes that inclusive education should respond to this diversity;
- Seeks to develop partnerships in all parts of the world.

In conducting its work, EENET:

- Adheres to the principles of the Salamanca Statement;
- Believes that access to education is a fundamental human right;
- Recognises the intrinsic value of indigenous forms of education.

EENET is committed to:

- Encouraging the effective participation in IE of key stakeholders, such as disabled people; children of different ages and gender; people from ethnic and other minorities;
- Engaging with the difficulties caused by the global imbalance of power;
- Encouraging a critical and discerning response to all information and materials circulated.

WHAT DOES EENET OFFER?

"Enabling Education", EENET's newsletter, is the major focus in the short-term for the dissemination of stories and articles by practitioners, information about useful publications and video training packages, and the development of international conversations about inclusive education. The first issue of the newsletter was published in December 1997 and a limited number of Braille copies were produced as part of EENET's commitment to disseminate information in a variety of accessible formats. The newsletter was translated into Portuguese at the initiative of a reader. The style of the newsletter is deliberately non-academic and participatory. The newsletter aims to be an accessible vehicle for sharing and disseminating up-to-date information, ideas and experiences of inclusive education.

EENET's web site was established within the first few weeks of the appointment of the co-ordinator. It acts as a bibliographic database for key documents produced by EENET (e.g. the newsletter) or by practitioners (e.g. a manual, produced in Lesotho, to accompany a video training pack for teachers; a Child-to-Child training pack on inclusion produced in Palestine). There are also several documents produced by Save the Children (UK) which analyse their experience of moving from integration towards inclusion. References for relevant UNESCO documents are also listed. Already information available on the web site has been used by intermediaries who in turn have established direct contact with grassroots teachers and community development workers.

All of this frees up the co-ordinator's time to concentrate on the needs of practitioners who do not have access to the world wide web.

EENET also runs seminars. The first EENET seminar was held in July 1997 in Manchester and was attended by 20 participants from 13 countries and organisations. Discussions at the two-day seminar helped to formulate EENET's values and principles and contributed to the development of the strategic plan. The first meeting of EENET's steering group took place at this seminar. The steering group is deliberately small: seven people who represent the major funding agencies, the University of Manchester and countries of the South. This meeting was short and primarily discussed financial issues relevant to the initial establishment of EENET.

In June 1998, a longer meeting of the steering group took place which reviewed EENET's first year and discussed the nature of the network and how it should develop. It was felt that connections between organisations rather than through EENET should be prioritised, in order to avoid setting up parallel structures. The danger of falling into the trap of building a small UK-dominated NGO network was also discussed (see below).

In March 1998, EENET played a major collaborative role in the preparation for, and the facilitation of, a South-focused international seminar on inclusive education. This was held in Agra, India. The ongoing and ever-increasing need for useful, relevant information was highlighted by the 50 participants - all of whom pledged to publicise and participate in EENET. The seminar reinforced three key lessons (IDDC 1998):

- A recognition that the main barrier to inclusion is the prevalence of negative attitudes and not a lack of resources, as is often assumed.
- There is a need for effective school-based support through the empowerment of all involved.
- Inclusive classrooms are unlikely to work in isolation, they require community support and participation.

A PARTICIPATORY INFORMATION NETWORK

EENET aims to be a participatory information network, rather than a dissemination machine.

EENET's main aim is to disseminate useful and relevant documents and training

materials in a variety of formats to practitioners in the field who normally find it difficult to access information. EENET will only produce additional documentation where no other such material exists. In order to do this as cost-effectively as possible and with maximum participation from interested parties, conversations have to take place so that information can be shared as widely, and in as many different formats, as possible. Conversations have been initiated through the newsletter, correspondence and seminars. By providing a platform for practitioners who would not normally share their ideas and experiences with a wider audience, the vision of a participatory information network should become a reality.

National and regional organisations which share similar principles are encouraged to take responsibility for information collection, translation and dissemination. In this way, there should be maximum participation from the beginning, so that EENET can grow slowly and sustainably on a relatively small budget. The word "decentralisation" was initially used to describe a major aspect of EENET's strategy in relation to the establishment of a participatory network. However, "decentralisation" implies that there is a substantial "centre" from which information and ideas emanate, and which exercises some control over the activities of sub-centres. But EENET cannot afford to exercise too much control if it is to succeed in reaching those individuals and organisations who have previously been "hard to reach", and thus excluded. Central (and Northern) control is not what EENET is about.

In the interests of sustainability, the newsletter and other documents will only be translated if there is sufficient interest and commitment by a partner agency to allocate resources for that purpose. Translation issues, after all, should not be seen in isolation. Once documents appear in other languages there will inevitably be correspondence in those languages and perhaps a desire to develop regional versions of the newsletter in the appropriate languages. This would overload EENET's minimal infrastructure in the UK, and would be more efficiently dealt with on a regional basis.

Finally, one of EENET's key roles is to develop ways of documenting experiences which otherwise would not be documented because of difficulties with translation or with written language, and to make them as widely accessible as possible. Sharing these experiences through the website would be just one of the methods of dissemination, as the vast majority of people in the South will continue to use other, more traditional methods of communication. Guidelines for running workshops to explore a wide variety of methods of communication,

including writing, will be developed. These will focus on the particular issues of inclusive education with a wide range of stakeholders, including children. It is hoped that the workshops will both build skills in a given community and produce useful documentation of inclusive education experience which can be shared.

SHARING EXPERIENCES

EENET recognises the danger and nonsense of transplanting educational practices across cultures and instead supports the idea of using local practice and thinking as the foundation for development activities (Ainscow 1998). In essence, this is about "making the familiar unfamiliar" by encouraging practitioners to stand back from their own situation, and take a fresh look at their own work in the light of experiences from another part of the world. It is still too early in EENET's development to be able to quote many examples of this process in action, but the following vignettes illustrate the type of networking which has already taken place.

A Vignette from South Africa

Saajidha, a lecturer at a distance education teacher training college in South Africa, is involved in developing a new course on special needs in education. She is nervous about using the term "Inclusive Education" as she is "weary of feeding the students too much too fast and then losing them". The term "Inclusion" has only recently been discussed as part of the government's National Commission on Special Needs Education. Furthermore, the majority of Saajidha's students speak English as their second language and come from peri-urban and disadvantaged rural communities.

Saajidha is in regular correspondence with EENET to share ideas, enquire about opportunities for further study for herself, and to comment on the range and usefulness of the documents on the website. She says: "Introducing something as new and as significant as this [inclusive education] is challenging". She desperately needs teacher education materials. The video training package recently produced in Lesotho, "Preparing Teachers for Inclusive Education", is an example of the locally produced and appropriate materials which EENET is able to provide at low cost. It is likely that Saajidha will act as a dissemination point in South Africa for that training package.

This is an example of the kind of conversations that have been created so far -

conversations which combine sharing experience and ideas, feedback on EENET's information provision, and concrete offers of help to disseminate training materials. As a result of these conversations with Saajidha and others, it is hoped that a partner agency will emerge through which EENET can channel information relevant to southern Africa and South Africa (thereby regionalising EENET).

A Vignette from Portugal

Ana works in the Ministry of Education's Institute of Educational Innovation in Portugal and, through her involvement with UNESCO's "Special Needs in the Classroom" project, networks with large numbers of primary schools in Portugal. She received the first copy of the EENET newsletter, "Enabling Education", in late December and emailed back immediately offering to arrange for its translation into Portuguese. This very spontaneous translation was promptly arranged and in early February a photocopy of "Promovendo a Educacao" arrived in the EENET office. Dissemination in all Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa is now possible; and dissemination in Brazil has begun through a Brazilian student based at the Centre for Educational Needs in Manchester University.

The development of such pro-active partnerships in key regional and sub-regional centres in the world will enable EENET to share information and create conversations with inclusive education practitioners, policy-makers and researchers in large parts of the South, with minimum financial commitment and administrative responsibility. It is essential to forge partnerships with experienced networking agencies already committed to the principles of inclusion.

CURRENT DIFFICULTIES

EENET is already facing up to several difficult challenges. In this paper, mention has been made of some of the difficulties inherent in implementing a participatory information network - especially how to make the network truly participatory, and how to avoid domination by Northern professionals and organisations.

Mention has also been made of issues of translation and regionalisation. These link directly with another key issue: globalisation through technology. EENET was set up amid an information revolution. This brings advantages; but it also

carries risks. The information industry is changing rapidly. Access to information has never been as quick or as easy, and it is set to become even faster and more accessible as telephones, fax machines and televisions all become linked to the World Wide Web. In this context, it is not surprising that the decision to establish a website was one of the first decisions made when EENET was set up.

The dilemma for EENET is how to balance these increasingly rapid, high tech forms of communication which proliferate in the North with the needs of the most excluded and marginalised people in the South, whose communication systems continue to be orally-based. It is likely that a variety of communication methods will be employed in order to reach as many people as possible. Homeless International supports local NGOs in India and South Africa which provide support to organisations of slum and pavement dwellers (Homeless International 1998). Regular exchange visits take place, while "backyard emails" provide regular news updates. Individuals in both countries also enter into email correspondence, with literacy support provided by their local NGOs. This illustrates the possible ways in which high-tech forms of communication can complement face-to-face exchanges of experience. It points the way forward for EENET to explore all possible methods of disseminating information and creating conversations.

Perhaps the greatest and most exciting challenge is to develop partnerships with children, and emerging organisations of children and young people, on the issue of inclusive education. Discussions about how to empower young people with learning difficulties have begun to take place among parents' organisations in Africa; EENET will maintain close contact with this new development through two steering group members who are centrally involved. In addition, writing workshops (referred to above) will seek to involve children in the analysis and documentation of their own experiences, alongside policymakers, teacher trainers and other interest groups. It will be essential to develop appropriate methods and materials to ensure that children fully participate in workshops and feel safe to express their opinions. It will be equally essential to guard against tokenistic involvement.

CONCLUSION

EENET's core function is to provide basic information about inclusive education, primarily for practitioners in the South, and to encourage the sharing of ideas, information and experiences by a wide range of practitioners in the field. The

majority of individuals and organisations on EENET's mailing list so far are concerned with inclusive education as it relates to disabled children. Increasingly, though, as the understanding of inclusion broadens to include all children, EENET will focus on the need for quality and equity in education as a whole. Maintaining a balance between the specific needs of marginalised groups and the need to challenge structures and systems to become more inclusive is one of the many challenges facing EENET. The other major challenges can be summarised in a series of questions as follows:

- How do we reach the "hard to reach"?
- How do we overcome barriers to communication?
- How do we avoid Northern domination?
- How do we encourage South-South conversations?
- How do we involve children and young people?

EENET will continue to grapple with these issues while building a sustainable and participatory network. EENET welcomes suggestions for further development and offers to share ideas and information that could be of use to colleagues around the world who are working to develop education for all.

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