



Inclusive education for people with intellectual disabilities in the higher education sector

Teaching methodologies and practices
of translating rights into practice

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Abstract

Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) forms the cornerstone of the right to «inclusive education», outlining in subsection 1 that, States «shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels» (2006). The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states that inclusion «involves a process of systemic reform embodying changes and modifications in content, teaching methods, approaches, structures and strategies in education» (2016, [11]). However, this right to inclusive education has not been realised in any systematic way for students with Intellectual Disabilities in Higher Education (HE). This article will (1) explore the right to inclusive education for people with disability established under the CRPD (2) review existing research on pedagogies and practices for teaching students with Intellectual Disability in HE in Ireland, Canada, the US and Australia, (3) describe an inclusive, rights-based programme for people with Intellectual Disability developed in an Irish university (UCC), and (4) argue that critical reflection, documentation and sharing of pedagogies and practices from rights-based programmes in HE is key to development and dissemination of practice insights in this emergent field of education.

1. Introduction

Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) forms the cornerstone of the right to «inclusive education», outlining in subsection 1 that, States «shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels» (2006). The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities notes that inclusion «involves a process of systemic reform embodying changes and modifications in content, teaching methods, approaches, structures and strategies in education» (2016, [11]). The Committee is clear that «[p]lacing students with disabilities within mainstream classes without accompanying structural changes to, for example, organization, curriculum and teaching and learning strategies, does not constitute inclusion» (2016, [11]). It acknowledges that «teachers need practical guidance and support in: the provision of individualized instruction; teaching the same content using varied teaching methods to respond to the learning styles and unique abilities of each person; the development and use of individual educational plans to support specific learning requirements; and the introduction of a pedagogy centred on students' educational objectives» (2016, [71]). The Committee also observes that «[q]uality inclusive education requires methods of appraising and monitoring students' progress that considers the barriers faced by students with disabilities» and that «[t]he emphasis should be on individual progress towards broad goals.» (2016, [74]). According to the Committee, «[t]he education system must provide a personalized educational response, rather than expect students to fit the system» (2016, [12] (c)). To achieve this, teachers and other staff will need education and training, as stipulated in Article 24 CRPD (2006).

The comments of the Committee above, articulate general indicators and principles informing inclusive education. However, they do not: identify programme models or teaching methodologies; situate their observations within the scholarship of teaching and learning around inclusive education; acknowledge the challenges in developing inclusive education at Higher Education (HE) level when

inclusive education at primary and secondary level is still very limited. It is thus not surprising that the right to inclusive education for people with Intellectual Disability in HE has not been realised in any systematic way in the international context (O'Donovan, 2021). In Europe, Ireland had emerged as a leader in inclusive education in HE with a number of universities offering programmes consistently since the mid-1990s¹ (O'Donovan, 2021; Aston, 2019; Bonar, 2018). In 2021 the Irish Higher Education Authority recognised the programme for people with Intellectual Disability at University College Cork (UCC), as leading best practice and awarded €1 million to the UCC id+ project to enable continued development and dissemination of inclusive education practice throughout the Irish HE sector. Informed by a thematic review of research on teaching practices for people with Intellectual Disability in HE settings and peer-based reflection on teaching students with Intellectual Disability, this article articulates a model of inclusive education developed on the Certificate in Social Citizenship programme at UCC (Courses | University College Cork (ucc.ie). It describes the teaching and learning practices employed to translate abstract rights into pedagogical practice and argues that provision of meaningful education for people with Intellectual Disability in HE requires pedagogical change at the level of the classroom and cultural change at the wider institutional and sectoral level.

2. Method

The data in this article was generated through thematic literature review and reflective inquiry. A thematic review (Snyder, 2019) of research on

¹ In a landmark initiative the Irish Government in February 2024, funded 10 Higher Education Institutions to develop and deliver inclusive education for students with Intellectual Disability.

inclusive teaching in HE and of experiences of faculty delivering it was undertaken. The following search terms were entered into UCC OneSearch and into Google and Google Scholar: «postsecondary education»/ «further education»/ «higher education», «intellectual disability*»/, «inclusive»/ «facilitator», «inclusion facilitator», «staff», «faculty», «lecturer»/ «teach*»/ «teaching methods»/ «assessment»/ «adapted curriculum»/ «modified curriculum»/ «co-learning»/ «collaborative learning». This synthesis of research on teaching practices on HE programmes for students with Intellectual Disability provided analytical insights which enabled us to contextualise the pedagogical practices developed at UCC. University teaching is largely a private, solitary and unexplored practice and commentators (Shulman, 1993) have challenged faculty to become reflective practitioners (Schon, 1990), undertake the «the hard work of thinking about teaching» (Bender & Gray, 1999, p. 3) and document and share their teaching practices. Our reflections on teaching people with Intellectual Disability were generated in formal and informal dialogical spaces across communities of practice including faculty, inclusion facilitation colleagues and students who have worked as Peer Buddies for students with Intellectual Disability. This dialogue has enabled us to articulate, critique and refine our teaching practices and enhance inclusive teaching and learning opportunities for people with Intellectual Disability in HE. Our learning in this regard is shared below.

3. Results

3.1. Inclusive Education for People with Intellectual Disability in Higher Education: Reviewing the Literature

Models of education for people with Intellectual Disability at HE identified in the literature, include

mixed or hybrid models, substantially separate models and fully inclusive individual support models (Hart et al., 2006). Research on teaching delivered in these models is sparse, was conducted predominantly in the US and Canada and to a lesser extent Australia and Ireland, reflects the perspective of educators rather than students, shows that staff are seeking guidance on inclusive teaching, and offers no definitive answers about which adaptations to curriculum and teaching are most effective (Bacon & Baglieri, 2022, ; Lee & Taylor, 2022; Whirley et al., 2020; Becht et al., 2020; Aston, 2019; O'Connor et al., 2012). Key themes in the literature include supports to facilitate inclusion, teaching modifications and adaptations, and faculty training needs.

3.1.1. Inclusion facilitation

The research indicates that inclusive education in HE, where students with and without Intellectual Disability learn together, requires scaffolding by designated inclusion facilitation staff and/or student peer mentors without Intellectual Disability. In Canada «[i]nclusion facilitators do not attend classes with students with Intellectual Disability but provide support in course adaptation as well as to faculty and to peer mentors» (Aylward & Bruce, 2014, p. 44) who «volunteer their support in class by helping with note taking, sharing information and naturally assisting with explanations of instructions, if needed» (Uditsky & Hughson, 2008, p. 30). Similarly, in the US, Hall et al. found that most HE programmes had staff supporting the participation of students by assisting with development of assignments and behaviour support plans and providing «resources, interventions, and answers» to faculty questions (Hall et al., 2021, p. 16 & p. 21).

3.1.2. Teaching Modifications and Adaptations

Uditsky and Hughson 2008, p. 21) referencing the Alberta Model of fully inclusive HE, assert that students with Intellectual Disability should

follow the regular curriculum as this exposes them to more expansive and culturally relevant learning opportunities and communicates «that students with developmental disabilities have a place within this learning environment». In Alberta «[t]he content of courses, related assignments and exams are modified and adapted by professors, instructors, graduate teaching assistants, peers and/or facilitators according to the needs of each student» (Uditsky & Hughson, 2008, p. 29). This need for strengths-based accommodations aligned with the learning needs of individual students is flagged in the literature. In the US, Taylor et al. emphasise the need to facilitate «students to identify their personal goals related to courses» (Taylor et al., 2021, p. 17) while Jones et al. argue that it is vital that faculty receive information and resources to build on student strengths and learning styles and improve accessibility in classroom instruction (Jones et al., 2016, pp. 103-104).

3.1.3. Training Needs

A need for faculty training on the ideas and practices of inclusive HE is indicated. In the US Taylor et al., (2021, p. 19) note that «better understanding is needed about existing practices for orienting faculty to the structures and expectations of postsecondary programs for students with ID and the concepts and practices of effective instruction». In one US university 54.1 % of faculty and students expressed a desire for training in «disability awareness and universal design for learning» and a «a faculty learning community designed for faculty members who are interested in offering their courses to students with IDD» (Gilson et al., 2020, p. 79). Lee and Taylor's (2022, p. 244) US scoping study also identified «that peer mentors and instructors would welcome additional training and support to assist them in most effectively including students with IDD in the classroom and in campus life». A similar need for training on disability awareness and inclusive practices was found among faculty in Australia (Rillotta et al., 2020, p. 114).

Accommodations and adaptations in assessment was another key theme in the literature. The

need for academics to receive training on 'provision of accommodations' to include people with Intellectual Disability in their classes» is highlighted in the Australian context (Rillotta et al., 2020, p. 113) while US research demonstrates that «[t]raining on accommodations and teaching practices» impacted positively on faculty's attitudes toward students with Intellectual Disability in HE (Taylor et al., 2021, p. 16).

The literature above demonstrates that the scholarship of teaching and learning about HE for people with Intellectual Disability, is very much an emergent field. In what follows, we describe the pedagogical practices and strategies utilised to provide rights-based HE in one Irish university.

3.2. Inclusive Higher Education for People with Intellectual Disability: Pedagogical Practices and Strategies

3.2.1. Designing and Scaffolding a Rights-based Inclusive Higher Education Programme

The principles of autonomy, inclusion, participation and equality, articulated in Article 3 of the CRPD, along with the right to work articulated in Article 27, and the right to education, articulated in Article 24, guided the design of the UCC Certificate in Social Citizenship (CSC) for students over the age of 18 with an Intellectual Disability. 15 students attend the university 3 days a week for a year and complete 30 ECTs² consisting of cohort-based modules (15 ECTs) where they learn as a group, co-learning modules (10 ECTS) where they learn with students taking bachelor and master programmes, and 5 ECTs of Work Integrated Learning in an individualised, paid, twelve week Career Development and Work Placement.

² European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System - Wikipedia

Our development of a hybrid programme model consisting of both cohort-based (students with Intellectual Disability only) and co-learning modules (students with Intellectual Disability and university peers) recognises that in Ireland, primary and second level education for people with Intellectual Disability is predominantly segregated. The CSC model scaffolds students' transition to inclusive co-learning by providing opportunities to develop skills required to learn successfully in a co-learning setting. On the CSC, co-learning occurs in 22 modules, grouped under 6 thematic study areas and provided by 26 faculty from 15 academic units (see Figure 1). Co-learning modules are part of the «regular curriculum» (Uditsky & Hughson, 2008, p. 21) and allow CSC students to make individualised learning choices, albeit from a limited range of options.

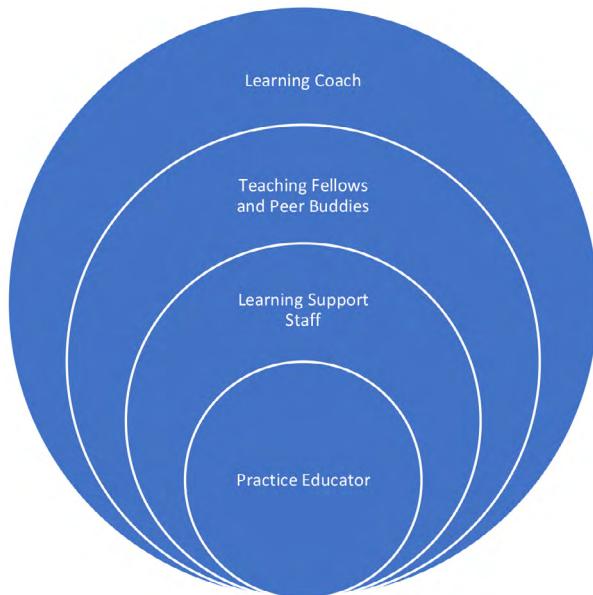
Teaching on the CSC is scaffolded by a student-centred, inclusion facilitation model (see Figure 2). Tier one support is provided by a Practice Educator with experience in inclusive education, who delivers the cohort-based modules and oversees the learning journey of each student in the cohort and co-learning modules and in the Workplace Integrated Learning Placement. The Practice Educator guides the work of 2 Learning Support staff who provide students with individual and small group support to develop relevant learning skills and engage meaningfully with module content. Most of this work occurs in the cohort-based modules, provided on a case-by-case basis in response to learning needs of individual students. Learning support required by CSC students in co-learning modules is provided by student Peer Buddies without Intellectual Disability. However, a Learning Support attends co-learning

Figure 1 Co-Learning Thematic Study Areas and Modules on CSC Programme

Study Area	School/Department	Module
1. Including Children	Music	Let the Music Play
	Occupational Science & Occupational Therapy	Play Provision for Inclusion in Early Childhood
	Education	Disability: Pedagogical Approaches to PE, Sport & Physical Activity
2. People and Diversity	Geography	Cities of Diversity
	Nursing and Midwifery	Valuing People with Intellectual Disability
	International Development	Introduction to Development Studies
3. Performing Arts	Theatre	Performance in Culture
	Music	Choral Studies
	Music	Music Education
4. Health and Wellbeing	Applied Psychology	Cognitive Enhancement
	Nursing and Midwifery	Interpersonal Skills for Nursing practice and Psychology for Healthcare
	Food and Nutritional Sciences	Fundamentals of Nutrition
5. Sustainable Living	Civil Engineering	Introduction to Energy Engineering
	Geography	Sustainable Cities and Communities
	Environmental Science	The Environment and Human Health
6. The World Around us	Environmental Science	Introduction to Environmental Science
	Public Health	Perspectives on Public Health
	Plant Science	Cells, Biomolecules, Genetics and Evolution

modules in a discrete, observation capacity to ensure familiarity with the material covered and ability to provide subsequent learning support and guidance to students or Peer Buddies as required.

Figure 2 UCC Inclusion Facilitation Model



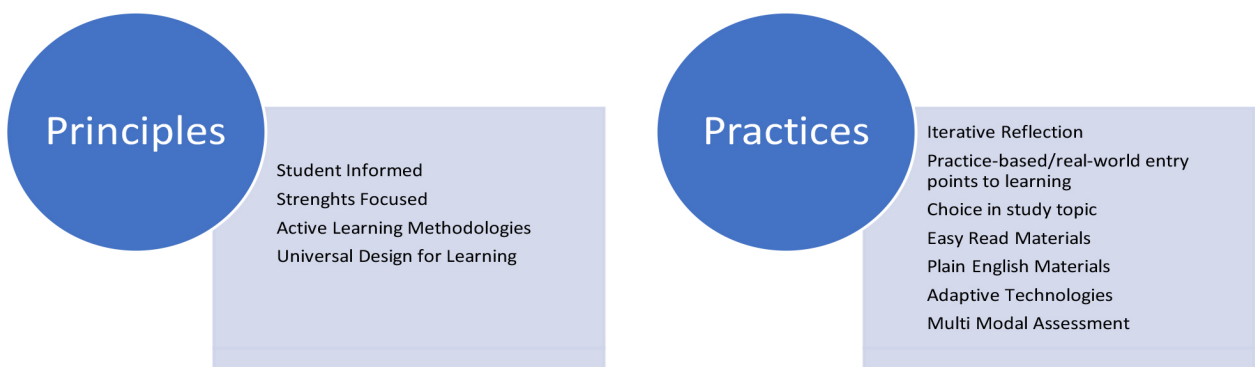
Faculty delivering co-learning modules are designated as Teaching Fellows and receive a small stipend. Student Peer Buddies enter a voluntary, unpaid, peer to peer, learning support arrangement with CSC students. Over a two year period 76 students have acted as Peer Buddies. In general, Teaching Fellows and Peer Buddies have no background in inclusive education and no previous engagement with people with Intellectual Disability. Both groups receive an orientation session detailing

the rights-based approach to inclusive education and outlining learning adaptations and accommodations. Round table meetings organised at least twice per semester facilitate a community of practice where Teaching Fellows and Peer Buddies meet separately to reflect on experiences and devise and modify pedagogical and support strategies. The Practice Educator, Learning Supports, Learning Coach and the id+ Academic Lead also assist Teaching Fellows as required in devising individualised learning support plans for students. The Learning Coach is an Occupational Therapist who works on a sessional basis providing individualised learning plans and group-based coaching as necessary, to support students to develop capacity to engage fully in all aspects of college life.

3.2.2. Principles and Practices of Inclusive Teaching and Learning

The pedagogical principles and practices informing the CSC (see figure 3) are informed by General Comment No. 4 (2016, [11]) and consistent with best practice in inclusive education as outlined in the literature (Uditsky & Hughson, 2008 and Jones et al., 2016). Small-group work facilitated by the Practice Facilitators and Learning Supports, and individual engagement with the Learning Coach, enables each student to identify the supports, adaptations and technologies required to help them learn. Teaching methodologies in cohort-based modules are cooperative and active, have application to real-world

Figure 3 Principles and Practices of Inclusive Learning & Teaching

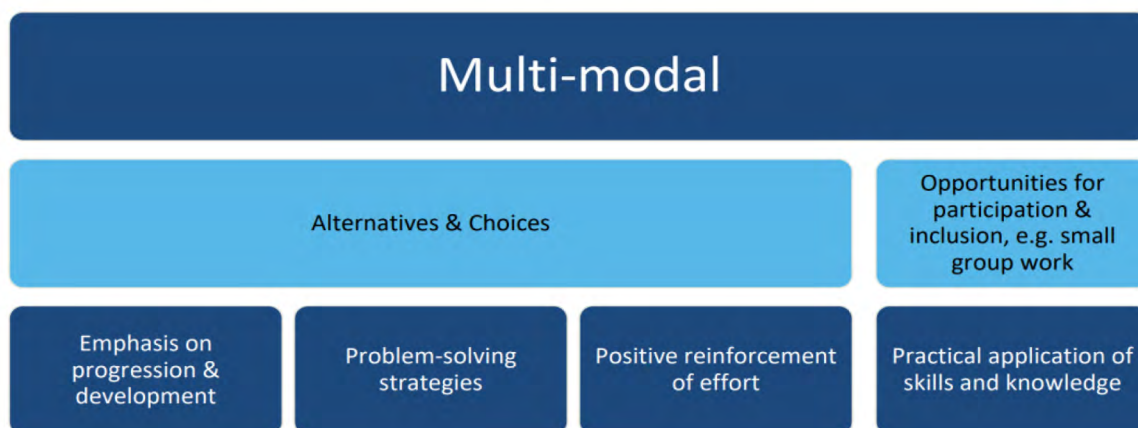


contexts and facilitate students' development of self-reliance and capacity for decision making. Emphasis is placed on personal responsibility for learning, individual progress, positive reinforcement for effort and development of interpersonal, social and problem-solving skills. Teaching Fellows are encouraged and supported to apply these learning approaches as much as is practicable in co-learning modules. Multimodal presentation of course material, learning strategies which build on student experiences as entry points to learning and support active and reflective learning are encouraged (Scheef et al., 2020). Most Teaching Fellows employ principles of Universal Design for Learning and use Easy Read techniques for minimising and simplifying text and matching visuals to it.

to develop. Assessment on co-learning modules is more commonly summative and Teaching Fellows in consultation with CSC students and programme staff have identified types of assessment that match student strengths. Group-based approaches where CSC students participate with classmates without Intellectual Disability in active assessments involving development of podcasts, videos, scrapbooks, wind turbine prototypes etc. are common. Simplified and streamlined multiple choice quizzes or shortened essay style assessments (through writing or audio/video) have also been designed by Teaching Fellows. These modifications are informed by engagement with university training in Universal Design for Learning (Inclusive UCC - Home (sharepoint.com)).

Figure 4 Characteristics of Strengths-Focused Assessment

What is Strengths-Focused Assessment?



Assessment on the CSC is strengths-focused and multi-modal (see figure 4) with students offered alternative formats for demonstrating learning including videos, podcasts, audits, PowerPoint presentations, written reflections, role-plays, creative artwork and performances. Formative assessment through a portfolio of work demonstrating fulfilment of learning outcomes, is used in cohort-based modules. This facilitates reflective learning where students are validated in their learning achievements and guided by feedback, are encouraged to continue

4. Discussion

Rights-based, inclusive, HE for people with Intellectual Disability is an emergent area of pedagogical practice. As Shulman (1993, p. 1) notes, pedagogical practice needs to be made «visible and accessible to the community» so that it can be «shared, discussed, critiqued, exchanged, built upon» (1993, p. 2). Iterative reflective inquiry within and

across our stakeholder communities and continuous mapping of our practice against the rights-based and strengths-focused principles articulated in the CRPD, has shaped our evolving pedagogy in this area. By sharing our learning, we seek to further scholarship in the area while also encouraging higher education institutions to consider how they might respond to the CRPD call for inclusive education at all levels. To build capacity in the HE sector we have also developed an online micro-credential Including people with intellectual disability in higher and further education | University College Cork (ucc.ie) which provides faculty and other staff working in HE with information and skills to facilitate inclusive education for people with intellectual disability.

4.1. Limitations

This work focuses on development and delivery of an inclusive education programme in one university. The results may not be generalisable to the wider HE sector.

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