Raising the achievement of all pupils within an inclusive setting: practical strategies for developing best practice

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On the outside

The dramatic green white and black colours in this soft cover book form an effective backdrop for the depiction of the figures in white of an adult and a child holding hands and standing first at the bottom of a mountain, then on the summit and, in the third stage, on the summit of an even higher mountain. These three stages appear to dovetail with the notion in the book title of adult involvement in raising the achievement of children, i.e. first enabling children's ascent of the lower mountain, then the higher one. One could also interpret the illustration as depicting the ascent of the less able to the summit of the lower and the ascent of more able pupils to the higher mountain with the aid of an adult/s.

The authors' and publisher's names and the book title as well as the sub title appear in prominent white letters against a dark background, whilst turquoise is used to emphasise the words "all pupils" in the title. The sub title is a clear indication that the potential reader can expect to gain practical advice on developing best practice in regard to the raising of pupil achievement on reading the book.

The blurb on the back cover is neatly divided into two sections. The first, printed in white letters, briefly describes the book's twelve school case study background, its link to the "Every Child Matters" government policy initiative and the target audience. The second section printed in turquoise offers brief author biographies, which serve as testimonial to the value of the book as a leader in the field of developing best practice in varied inclusive educational settings.

On the inside

The blurb from the back cover is repeated on the very first pages of the book before the title page, but includes only the editor, Belle Wallace's brief biography, but all authors' slightly extended biographies feature again on the first page after the table of contents. The dedication acknowledges the contribution of the teachers who contributed to the fulfilment of pupils' intellectual potential and the development of their individual and joint social and emotional responsibility.

The introduction offers a succinct overview of the six chapters and, besides the conclusion and reflection written by the editor in a separate section at the end, a number of useful appendices regarding the case study schools, referral sheets and planning schedules are included.

In **chapter 1** Belle Wallace places the spotlight on achievement and attainment and classifies the typologies of underachievers to "heighten teacher awareness and, possibly, to extend existing conceptions' (p. 5). Wallace therefore includes a range of strategies used by the case study schools to overcome the "syndrome of underachievement" (p. 16), with an emphasis on the development of a creative curriculum within school environments where pupils feel "safe and happy and can have dreams and visions for their future" (p. 29).

Subsequent chapters expand on Wallace's summary of strategies for overcoming underachievement and allowing pupils to discover gifts and talents to "prepare them for lifelong learning" (p. 29).

The development of a positive self concept is the focus in **chapter 2** (Sue Leyden). The author uses Maslow's hierarchy of needs to illustrate the significance of understanding the social and emotional needs of "able and talented" (p. 64) children and young people at school and at home. In

her detailed examples of best practice strategies observed in the 12 case study schools she empha sises the establishment of an ethos of "care and concern for the individual" (p. 64) to nurture the talents of children and staff alike, taking into account their needs and the ambitions. A number of valuable points for reflection are listed at the end of the chapter for use by school managers and teachers.

Diane Montgomery, in **chapter 3**, investigates the phenomenon of potentially able or specially gifted children with a special educational need, i.e. the dual or double exceptionality syndrome, using the case study schools as a context for the chapter, as well as individual case studies and guidelines from her Learning Difficulties Research Project and postgraduate students. In addition to using data from various sources and detailed descriptions of special needs, the authors includes numerous authentic examples to illustrate various types of needs. The chapter aims to enable tea chers recognise the often hidden gifts in potentially able pupils with special educational needs, to identify underachievement and to apply the values of teaching and learning to "develop cognitive challenge and stretch and communication skills" (p. 97).

In **chapter 4** Carrie Winstanley focuses on main two aspects, *viz*. using challenge to motivate and support children in school and key aspects of best practice distilled from the findings on chal lenge in the case study schools (p. 104). Besides including tables based on, among others, Bloom's Taxonomy (the cognitive domain) (p. 115) and the Anderson and Krathwohl influenced (affective domain) hierarchy (p. 116), the author utilises TASC (Thinking Actively in a Social Framework) and Philosophy for Children (P4C) in the section on best practice.

Michael Pomerantz, in **chapter 5**, writes about the potential of "carefully assembled" gifted and talented pupils in Pupil Research Communities to "solve many complicated and serious prob lems facing individuals and schools" (p. 131). An added advantage to this approach is that it offers "considerable scope" (p. 162) for able underachievers to "redress problems" and take ownership of school problems and to allow those (able underachievers) "with the strongest vested interests to recommend school improvements" (p. 162).

In **chapter 6** Sally Fitton expands the common principles that were generated from the case studies and that underpin "successful leadership and curriculum provision that constitute the sig nificant drivers in tackling the underachievement of all pupils" (p. 165). The author concludes that leadership (teacher support) should be dynamic and committed and that pupil voice is an "important element in this negotiated development …" (p. 173).

Summarised comments

Each chapter in the book fulfils the expectations created by the title, and focuses on raising the achievement of all pupils. The authors make liberal use of the findings from the twelve school case study to support their views and to illustrate best practice. Most chapters feature a section at the end, with "points for reflection", which can be used as a guideline by readers when implementing the strategies described in the specific chapters. In addition to the clear heading and neat structure, each chapter features an extremely useful concept map which serves to summarise chapter contents. The numerous examples of children's writing, text boxes, speech bubbles and other illustrations and figures contribute to the readability of this highly relevant, and even necessary, tome of practical wisdom, which can be used by managers and teachers at all levels to raise the achievement of all pupils.

Critical reflection

As is always the case, there are a number of minor issues that we wish to highlight here, even though these issues do not detract from the overall positive impression. The interchangeable use of the words "pupil" and "learner" could be confusing to some readers. There is intense focus on "able" and "more able" pupils, but the authors regularly reiterate the value of the strategies for all pupils. These aspects do not, however, detract at all from the general value of the publication.

Since the text is geared to UK schools, what is not referred to directly, perhaps, is the crucial aspect of how to best deal with particularly South African issues, for example:

how to facilitate best practice in classrooms that cater for millions of learners from (often seriously) disadvantaged contexts where schools are woefully underresourced;

the challenge of teaching that takes place in learners' second (or even third) mother tongue; lack of resources;

the twin challenges of inadequately trained teachers and insufficient time spent in classrooms; and

dealing with underachievement in the gateway subjects, Mathematics and Physical Sciences. That said, we realise that books are never intended to be everything to everyone but, instead, serve a specific purpose (which is what this volume does).

Facilitating "best practice" in our schools is a matter that deserves the attention of all of us involved in teaching and learning. Taken as a whole, the main issues tackled in this volume do have a relevance for (South) Africa in the year 2010. The contents of the book certainly has currency for (South Africa) in the 21st century. This statement is borne out by, for example, a brief glance at our ever declining Grade 12 results, followed by careful perusal of systemic evaluations that consistently reveal South African learners' backlog in terms of the most basic reading, writing and arithmetic skills, as well as taking note of repeated calls by various stakeholders for something to be done to help learners achieve according to their potential. Every effort at contributing to an increase in the numbers of learners that qualify for university entrance, for sought after fields of study, irrespective of whether studies are completed at a university, university of technology, further education and training (FET) college, or accredited private FET provider or SETA linked (skills education training authorities) learnership, is to be welcomed. The issues highlighted here (*viz.* the challenge of "underachievement", development of a positive self concept, dealing with potentially able or specially gifted children with special educational needs, finding ways to motivate and support all learners, and how best to handle gifted and talented pupils), are justifiably linked to the notion of "best practice" (one would like to add: reflective practice), throughout. Indeed: the professional management of our schools and classrooms are of pivotal importance if we are to have any hope of dealing effectively with the underachievement of all learners.

Carol van der Westhuizen and Kobus Maree
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