

Inclusion as Lived and Felt in the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme

A case study exploring spatial discourses of inclusion

Introduction

Parity of esteem has long been an enduring theme of educational discourses of inclusion. This article examines parity of esteem through the lens of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme by focusing on spatial discourses of inclusion. For this article, parity of esteem relates to issues of value and recognition of difference and the resulting experience of inclusion as something that is lived and felt in school contexts. The article draws on research conducted by the author over a 10-month period with four case-study schools in the north-west of Ireland.

The LCA programme is a distinct, modular, self-contained, two-year Leaving Cert pre-vocational programme. It 'emphasises forms of achievement and excellence which the established Leaving Certificate has not recognised in the past. It offers a specific opportunity to prepare for and progress to further education and training'. (PDST, 2019, p.7).

The programme incorporates work experience and learning that takes place outside the classroom. It is ring-fenced, meaning it is separate from but equal to the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) programme and is not part of the CAO points system. However, recent changes announced as part of Senior Cycle redevelopment mean that since September 2022 LCA students 'have the opportunity to take Leaving Certificate Mathematics and, where possible, a Leaving Certificate Modern Language' (DoE, 2022).



Dr Annmarie Curneen

Lecturer in Education

This article aims to highlight the importance of the affective nature of inclusion as something that is lived and felt. When analysing policy, we must remain cognisant of its embodied experience, and place student voices at the heart of analysis. Examining the Leaving Certificate Applied programme and listening to LCA student voices allows us to interrogate practices that are taken for granted and to rethink inclusion.

The embodied nature of policy

Contexts are multidimensional, and space is just one dimension of context. These spaces are not neutral, and the ways in which students are deployed in space speak to issues central to inclusion, value, and recognition. Matters such as programme aims and objectives do not remain static in policy documents but rather are lived out and embodied in schools' emotional landscapes (Youdell & Armstrong, 2011).

Policies are experiences in practice, and so we should be responsive to the 'material and emotional truths and must approach these pedagogical considerations as a political project' (Hickey-Moody, 2017, p.1086). Spatial discourses are value laden and reflect a hierarchy of values in schools: some students, subjects, and programmes are front and centre, while others are backgrounded. This, one may argue, is an expression in physical or material terms of the hidden curriculum: the unspoken, taken-for-granted practices in schools. Spatial discourses are therefore discourses of power.

In the announcement, it says 6th years come to the hall for assembly, but that's not us; even though we are 6th years, we are LCA, but we are different to them. That's the downfall of it, really. We are separate to them. That's really a downfall. So, if there was something I could change, well, that'd be it. (LCA student, School D)

For LCA students, this is the main issue with the LCA programme – separation from peers. This separation is physical and discursive and involves the construction of an 'us' and 'them' rhetoric. Students following the LCA programme see themselves as different from students completing the 'normal' Leaving Cert and identified this as a reason for separation from their peers.

As stated, the LCA programme is ring-fenced and as such requires a certain amount of separation. The curricular subjects on offer in LCA are designed and taught differently to the LCE. Assessment of LCA is also different, and it is not part of the CAO points system. The focus on work experience and out-of-school learning also necessitates some separation. However, the ways this separation is lived and experienced speaks to our conceptualisation of inclusion and certain practices taken for granted in schools.

The policymakers I spoke to as part of my study had a vision for the LCA programme that was based on a strong commitment to equality and a positive conception of difference. The decision to ring-fence the programme was based on a desire to offer a meaningful alternative to the LCE and the points system. As such, the LCA may be an example of the unintended consequences of policies and the complexity of policy enactment when it comes to be lived out in the spaces of schools. What was conceived of as an inclusive policy has become, at times, a form of exclusion in practice.

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The LCA space

LCA in many ways is a wonderful programme: it has allowed many students to experience success in school and has certainly helped keep students in school who were at risk of dropping out. The goal of access to education and the right to participation is crucial. But we cannot let this overshadow our conceptualisation of inclusion. Students may be in school but experience forms of othering or exclusion. The spatial separation experienced by LCA students gives them a status of outsiders (Youdell, 2006), outsiders on the inside. As one student puts it, 'It's like we are here, we are in the school and all, but we are just kinda looking in on the rest of them' (LCA student, School C).

There are many ambiguities and tensions apparent in the students' lived experiences of the LCA programme. In many ways LCA students like being in their own room and doing their own work, but they feel they are not perceived as being as important or as valued as their LCE counterparts – either by the schools, the Department of Education, the media, or employers.

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For students, LCA was simultaneously a 'safe space' (hooks, 1989) and a place of containment. It represented a place and a way of learning where they felt accepted and accomplished. It was a place of collaboration and collegiality between students and between students and teachers. The LCA programme as such represents an emotional space quite different from students' previous schooling experiences. However, students were very aware of their spatial and discursive alienation and separation, and this had very real effects on their feeling included, valued, and recognised.

Inclusion

Examining the lived experiences of LCA students offers us a different way of thinking about inclusion. Dussel (2010) advises us to think from the other side, opening up a space for the voices, stories, and experiences of those who have been marginalised. Entering into dialogue with quieted voices allows us to think or rethink of inclusion as an emotional endeavour, as something that is lived and felt. The ways that students are recognised, misrecognised, or not recognised affect their emotions and their construction of self.

Inclusion is therefore very much tied up with student well-being, voice, identity, and agency. We don't just learn with our heads but also with our hearts. As one student put it, 'When I'm old, like 40 or 50, I won't remember half of what I learned in class, but I'll remember how I felt' (LCA student, School A). Some curricular changes have been made to the LCA programme as part of Senior Cycle redevelopment. This is to be welcomed, but let us also remain cognisant of the embodied nature of policy when it comes to be lived out in practice.

The LCA programme teaches us that spatial discourses of inclusion and the resulting feelings of recognition and value should be at the forefront of our considerations when redeveloping programmes and curricula. The lessons learned from listening to LCA students are applicable when thinking about inclusion for all students. The ways in which students are visible or invisible, heard or silenced impact on their lived experience of inclusive practices and their subjective construction of self.

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