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DEVELOPING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SYSTEMS: WHAT ARE THE LEVERS FOR CHANGE?

ABSTRACT. This paper argues that inclusion is the major challenge facing educational systems around the world. Reflecting on evidence from a programme of research carried out over the last 10 years, it provides a framework for determining levers that can help to ease systems in a more inclusive direction. The focus is on factors within schools that influence the development of thinking and practice, as well as wider contextual factors that may constrain such developments. It is argued that many of the barriers experienced by learners arise from existing ways of thinking. Consequently, strategies for developing inclusive practices have to involve interruptions to thinking in order to encourage an exploration of overlooked possibilities for moving practice forward.

The issue of inclusion is the big challenge facing school systems throughout the world. In the economically poorer countries the priority has to be with the millions of children who never see the inside of a classroom (Bellamy, 1999). Meanwhile, in wealthier countries many young people leave school with no worthwhile qualifications, whilst others are placed in various forms of special provision away from mainstream educational experiences, and some simply choose to drop out since the lessons seem irrelevant to their lives.

In some countries, inclusive education is thought of as an approach to serving children with disabilities within general education settings. Internationally, however, it is increasingly seen more broadly as a reform that supports and welcomes diversity amongst all learners (UNESCO, 2001). The argument developed in this paper adopts this broader formulation. It presumes that the aim of inclusive education is to eliminate social exclusion that is a consequence of attitudes and responses to diversity in race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender and ability (Vitello & Mithaug, 1998). As such, it starts from the belief that education is a basic human right and the foundation for a more just society.

Ten years ago the Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education endorsed the idea of inclusive education (UNESCO, 1994). Arguably the most significant international document that has

ever appeared in the special needs field, the Salamanca Statement argues that regular schools with an inclusive orientation are "the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all." Furthermore, it suggests that such schools can "provide an effective education for the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system" (UNESCO, 1994).

During the subsequent 10 years or so, there has been considerable activity in many countries to move educational policy and practice in a more inclusive direction (Mittler, 2000). In this paper I use evidence from research carried out during that period in order to consider what needs to be done to build on the progress that has been made so far. In particular, I consider the question: *What are the "levers" that can move education systems in an inclusive direction?*

MAPPING THE ISSUES

As countries have tried to move their education systems in a more inclusive direction, my colleagues and I have carried out a programme of research in order to learn from their experiences. Whilst much of this research has been carried out in the United Kingdom, it has also involved projects in countries as diverse as Brazil, China, India, Romania, Spain and Zambia (Ainscow, 2000a). These have focused on: the development of classroom practice (e.g. Ainscow, 1999, 2000b; Ainscow & Brown, 2000; Ainscow, Howes, Farrell & Frankham, 2003); school development (e.g. Ainscow, 1995; Ainscow, Barrs & Martin, 1998; Booth & Ainscow, 2002); teacher development (e.g. Ainscow, 1994, 2002); leadership practices (Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2003); and systemic change (e.g. Ainscow & Haile-Giorgis, 1999; Ainscow, Farrell & Tweddle, 2000), particularly in respect to the role of school districts (e.g. Ainscow & Howes, 2001; Ainscow & Tweddle, 2003). At the same time, through the work of the *Enabling Education Network* (EENET), we have encouraged links between groups around the world that are trying to encourage the development of inclusive education (Further details can be obtained from *www.eenet.org.uk*). Together the findings of these studies provide the foundations for the argument I present in this paper.

Much of our research has involved the use of an approach that we refer to as "collaborative inquiry". This approach advocates practitioner research, carried out in partnership with academics, as a means

of developing better understanding of educational processes (Ainscow, 1999). Kurt Lewin's dictum that you cannot understand an organisation until you try to change it is, perhaps, the clearest justification for this approach (Schein, 2001). In practical terms, we believe that such understanding is best developed as a result of "outsiders", such as ourselves, working alongside practitioners, policy makers and other stakeholders as they seek practical solutions to the problems they face.

Such research leads to detailed examples of how those within particular contexts have attempted to develop inclusive policies and practices. It also provides frameworks and propositions that can be used by those within other contexts to analyse their own working situations. One such framework provides a useful map for the argument I develop in this paper (see Figure 1). It is intended to help us focus on factors that bear on inclusive developments within an education system. More specifically, it focuses our attention on possible levers that can help to move the system forward.

Senge (1989) sees "levers" as actions that can be taken in order to change the behaviour of an organisation and those individuals within it. He goes on to argue that those who wish to encourage change within an organisation must be smart in determining where the high leverage lies. Too often, he suggests, approaches used to bring about large-scale changes in organisations are "low leverage". That is to say, they tend to change the way things look but not the way they work. Possible examples of low leverage activity in the education field include: policy documents, conferences and in-service courses. Whilst such initiatives may make a contribution, they tend not to lead to
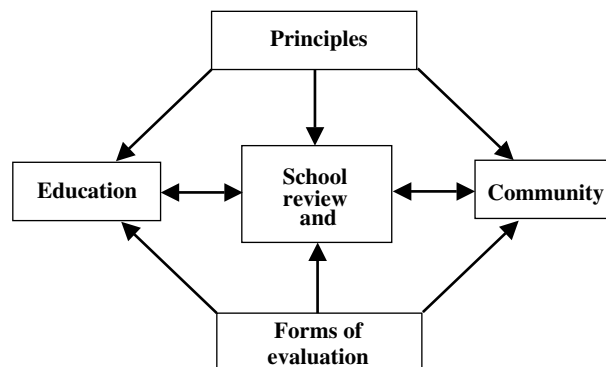

Figure 1. Levers for change.

significant changes in thinking and practice (Fullan, 1991). Our aim, therefore, must be to identify what may turn out to be more subtle, less obvious and higher leverage efforts to bring about change in schools.

The framework places schools at the centre of the analysis. This reinforces the point that moves toward inclusion should focus on increasing the capacity of local neighbourhood mainstream schools to support the participation and learning of an increasingly diverse range of learners. This is the paradigm shift implied by the Salamanca Statement. It argues that moves towards inclusion are about the development of schools, rather simply involving attempts to integrate vulnerable groups of students into existing arrangements. It is, therefore, essentially about those within schools developing practices that can "reach out to all learners" (Ainscow, 1999).

At the same time, the framework draws attention to a range of contextual influences that bear on the way schools carry out their work. As I will explain, these influences may provide support and encouragement to those in schools who are wishing to move in an inclusive direction. However, it also draws our attention to how the same factors can act as barriers to progress.

These influences relate to: the principles that guide policy priorities within an education system; the views and actions of others within the local context, including members of the wider community that the schools serve and the staff of the departments that have responsibility for the administration of the school system; and the criteria that are used to evaluate the performance of schools.

In what follows I examine these wider influences in more detail. Before doing so, however, I will summarise what our research suggests about the way inclusive developments can be encouraged at the school level.

DEVELOPING INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

We have recently completed a 3-year study that has attempted to throw further light on what needs to happen in order to develop inclusive practices in schools (Ainscow et al., 2003; Ainscow et al., in press). The study, which defined inclusive practices as involving attempts to overcome barriers to the participation and learning of students, involved teams from three universities working with groups of schools as they attempted to move practice forward. It led us to conclude that the development of inclusive practice is not, in the

main, about adopting new technologies of the sort described in much of the existing literature (e.g. Florian Rose & Tilstone, 1998; Sebba & Sachdev, 1997; Stainback & Stainback, 1990; Thousand & Villa, 1991; Wang, 1991). Rather, it involves social learning processes within a given workplace that influence people's actions and, indeed, the thinking that informs these actions. This led us to interrogate our evidence in order to seek a deeper understanding of what these processes involve. To assist in this analysis we used as our guide the idea of "communities of practice", as developed by Wenger (1998), focusing specifically on the way he sees learning as "a characteristic of practice".

Although the words "community" and "practice" evoke common images, Wenger has particular definitions of these terms, giving the phrase "community of practice" a distinctive meaning. A practice, for example, need not be framed as the work and skill of a particular practitioner. Rather, a practice consists of those things that individuals in a community do, drawing on available resources, to further a set of shared goals. This goes beyond how practitioners complete their tasks, to include, for example, how they make it through the day, commiserating about the pressures and constraints within which they have to operate.

Wenger provides a framework that can be used to analyse learning in social contexts. At the centre of this framework is the concept of a "community of practice", a social group engaged in the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise. Practices are ways of negotiating meaning through social action. In Wenger's view, meanings arise from two complementary processes, "participation" and "reification". He notes:

Practices evolve as shared histories of learning. History in this sense is neither merely a personal or collective experience, nor just a set of enduring artefacts and institutions, but a combination of participation and reification over time (p. 87).

In this formulation, *participation* is seen as the shared experiences and negotiations that result from social interaction within a purposive community. Participation is thus inherently local, since shared experiences and negotiation processes will differ from one setting to the next, regardless of their interconnections. So, for example, within schools in our study we saw how hours of meetings, shared experiences and informal discussions over hurriedly taken lunches, also involved the development of particular meanings of frequently used

phrases such as "raising standards" and "inclusion". These shared meanings help to define a teacher's experience of being a teacher. In the same way, we can assume that groups of colleagues doing similar work in another school have their own shared histories that give meaning to being a teacher in that particular context.

According to Wenger, *reification* is the process by which communities of practice produce concrete representations of their practices, such as tools, symbols, rules and documents (and even concepts and theories). So, for example, documents such as the school development plan or behaviour policy are reifications of the practice of teachers. They include representations of the activities in which teachers engage, and some illustrations of the conditions and problems that a teacher might encounter in practice. At the same time, it is important to remember that such documents often provide overly rationalized portrayals of ideal practice in which the challenges and uncertainties of unfolding action are smoothed over in the telling (Brown & Duguid, 1991)

Wenger argues that learning within a given community can often be best explained within the intertwining of reification and participation. He suggests that these are complementary processes, in that each has the capacity to repair the ambiguity of meaning the other can engender. So, for example, a particular strategy may be developed as part of a school's planning activities and summarised in a set of guidance for action, providing a codified reification of intended practice. However, the meaning and practical implications of the strategy only becomes clear as it is tried in the field and discussed between colleagues. In this way, participation results in social learning that could not be produced solely by reification alone. At the same time, the reified products, such as policy documents, serve as a kind of memory of practice, cementing in place the new learning. Such an analysis provides a way of describing the means by which practices develop within a school.

At this stage in the argument it is important to stress that I am not suggesting that communities of practice are in themselves a panacea for the development of inclusive practices. Rather, the concept helps us to attend to and make sense of the significance of social process of learning as powerful mediators of meaning. Wenger (1998) notes:

"Communities of practice are not intrinsically beneficial or harmful…. Yet they are a force to be reckoned with, for better or for worse. As a locus of engagement in action, interpersonal relationships, shared knowledge, and negotiation of enterprises,

such communities hold the key to real transformation – the kind that has real effect on people's lives… The influence of other forces (e.g., the control of an institution or the authority of an individual) are no less important, but… they are mediated by the communities in which their meanings are negotiated in practice" (p. 85).

The methodology for developing inclusive practices must, therefore, take account of these social processes of learning that go on within particular contexts. It requires a group of stakeholders within a particular context to look for a common agenda to guide their discussions of practice and, at much the same time, a series of struggles to establish ways of working that enable them to collect and find meaning in different types of information. The notion of the community of practice is a significant reminder of how this meaning is made.

Similarly important is the development of a common language with which colleagues can talk to one another and indeed to themselves about detailed aspects of their practice (Huberman, 1993; Little & McLaughlin, 1993). It seems, moreover, that without such a language teachers find it very difficult to experiment with new possibilities. It has been noted, for example, that when researchers report to teachers what has been observed during their lessons the teachers will often express surprise (Ainscow, 1999). It seems that much of what teachers do during the intensive encounters that occur in a typical lesson is carried out at an automatic, intuitive level, involving the use of tacit knowledge. Furthermore there is little time to stop and think. This is perhaps why having the opportunity to see colleagues at work is so crucial to the success of attempts to develop practice. It is through such shared experiences that colleagues can help one another to articulate what they currently do and define what they might like to do (Hiebert, Gallimore & Stigler, 2002). It is also the means whereby taken-for-granted assumptions about particular groups of students can be subjected to mutual critique.

Our research has drawn attention to certain ways of engaging with evidence that seem to be helpful in encouraging such dialogue. Our observation is that these can help to create space for reappraisal and rethinking by interrupting existing discourses, and by focusing attention on overlooked possibilities for moving practice forward. These approaches involve:

- Surveys of staff, student and parent views,
- Mutual observation of classroom practices, followed by structured discussion of what happened,

- Group discussion of a video recording of one colleague teaching,
- Discussion of statistical evidence regarding test results, attendance registers or exclusion records,
- Data from interviews with students,
- Staff development exercises based on case study material or interview data, and
- School to school cooperation, including mutual visits to help collect evidence.

Under certain conditions all of these approaches can provide *interruptions* that help to "make the familiar unfamiliar" in ways that stimulate self-questioning, creativity and action. Here, as Riehl (2000) suggests, the role of the school principal in providing leadership for such processes is crucial. So, for example, Lambert and her colleagues seem to be talking about a similar approach in their discussion of what they call "the constructivist leader". They stress the importance of leaders gathering, generating and interpreting information within a school in order to create an "inquiring stance". They argue that such information causes "disequilibrium" in thinking and, as a result, provides a challenge to existing assumptions about teaching and learning (Lambert et al., 1995).

We have found that these kinds of actions, involving an engagement with various forms of evidence, may create space and encourage discussion. However, they are not in themselves straightforward mechanisms for the development of more inclusive practices. The space that is created may be filled according to conflicting agendas. In this way, deeply held beliefs within a school may prevent the experimentation that is necessary in order to foster the development of more inclusive ways of working. So, for example, at the end of a lesson in a secondary school during which there was a very low level of participation amongst the class, the teacher explained what had happened with reference to the fact that most of the students in the class were listed on the school's special educational needs register.

Such explanations make us acutely aware that the relationship between the recognition of anomalies in school practices and the presence of students presenting difficulties as the occasions for such recognition is deeply ambiguous. It is very easy for educational difficulties to be pathologised as difficulties inherent *within* students, even when those same difficulties are used productively to interrogate some aspects of school practice. This is true not only of students with

disabilities and those defined as "having special educational needs", but also of those whose socioeconomic status, race, language and gender renders them problematic to particular teachers in particular schools. Consequently, it is necessary, I suggest, to develop the capacity of those within schools to reveal and challenge deeply entrenched deficit views of "difference", which define certain types of students as "lacking something" (Trent, Artiles & Englert, 1998).

Specifically, it is necessary to be vigilant in scrutinising how deficit assumptions may be influencing perceptions of certain students. As Bartolome (1994) explains, teaching methods are neither devised nor implemented in a vacuum. Design, selection and use of particular teaching approaches and strategies arise from perceptions about learning and learners. In this respect even the most pedagogically advanced methods are likely to be ineffective in the hands of those who implicitly or explicitly subscribe to a belief system that regards some students, at best, as disadvantaged and in need of fixing, or, worse, as deficient and, therefore, beyond fixing.

THE WIDER CONTEXT

So far I have focused on factors within schools that can act as "levers for change". However, our experience suggests that developments within individual schools are more likely to lead to sustainable development if they are part of a process of systemic change. In other words, inclusive school development has to be seen in relation to wider factors that may help or hinder progress.

Through our collaborative action research with local education authorities (LEAs) in England and school systems in other countries, we have tried to map factors at the district level that have the potential to either facilitate or inhibit the promotion of inclusive practices in schools. These are all variables which education departments either control directly, or over which they can at least exert considerable influence. We intend that this work will eventually lead to the development of a framework instrument that will provide a basis for self-review processes (Ainscow and Tweddle, 2003). Some of these factors seem to be potentially more potent. However, our research suggests that two factors, particularly when they are closely linked, seem to be superordinate to all others. These are: *clarity of definition*, and *the forms of evidence* that are used to measure educational performance.

In my own country there is still considerable confusion about what "inclusion" means (Ainscow et al., 2000). To some extent, this lack of clarity might be tracked back to central Government policy statements. For example, the use of the term "social inclusion" has been associated mainly with improving attendance and reducing the incidence of exclusions from schools. At the same time, the idea of "inclusive education" has appeared in most national guidance in connection with the rights of individual children and young people categorised as having special educational needs to be educated in mainstream schools, whenever possible. Most recently, Ofsted, the inspection agency, has introduced the term "educational inclusion", noting that "effective schools are inclusive schools." The subtle differences between these concepts adds to the sense of uncertainty as to what is intended and, of course, it is now well established that educational reform is particularly difficult in contexts where there is a lack of common understanding amongst stakeholders (e.g. Fullan, 1991).

This being the case, in our own work we have supported a number of English LEAs as they have attempted to develop a definition of inclusion that can be used to guide policy development. Predictably, the exact detail of each LEA's definition is unique, because of the need to take account of local circumstances, cultures and history. Nevertheless, four key elements have tended to feature strongly, and these are commended to those in any education system who are intending to review their own working definition. The four elements are as follows:

- Inclusion is a process. That is to say, inclusion has to be seen as a never-ending search to find better ways of responding to diversity. It is about learning how to live with difference and learning how to learn from difference. In this way differences come to be seen more positively as stimuli for fostering learning, amongst children and adults.
- Inclusion is concerned with the identification and removal of barriers. Consequently, it involves collecting, collating and evaluating information from a wide variety of sources in order to plan for improvements in policy and practice. It is about using evidence of various kinds to stimulate creativity and problem solving,
- Inclusion is about the presence, participation and achievement of all students. Here "presence" is concerned with where children are educated, and how reliably and punctually they

attend; "participation" relates to the quality of their experiences whilst they are there and, therefore, must incorporate the views of the learners themselves; and "achievement" is about the outcomes of learning across the curriculum, not merely test or examination results.

- Inclusion involves a particular emphasis on those groups of learners who may be at risk of marginalisation, exclusion or underachievement. This indicates the moral responsibility to ensure that those groups that are statistically most at risk are carefully monitored, and that, where necessary, steps are taken to ensure their presence, participation and achievement in the education system.

Our experience has been that a well-orchestrated debate about these elements can lead to a wider understanding of the principle of inclusion within a community. We are also finding that such a debate, though by its nature slow and, possibly, never ending, can have leverage in respect to fostering the conditions within which schools can feel encouraged to move in a more inclusive direction. Such a debate must involve all stakeholders within the local community, including political and religious leaders, and the media. It must also involve those within the local education district office.

Our search for levers has also led us to acknowledge the importance of evidence. In essence, it leads us to conclude that, within education systems, "what gets measured gets done." England is an interesting case in this respect, leading some American researchers to describe it as "a laboratory where the effects of market-like mechanisms are more clearly visible" (Finklestein & Grubb, 2000, p. 602). So, for example, English LEAs are required to collect far more statistical data than ever before. This is widely recognised as a double-edged sword precisely because it is such a potent lever for change. On the one hand, data are required in order to monitor the progress of children, evaluate the impact of interventions, review the effectiveness of policies and processes, plan new initiatives, and so on. In these senses, data can, justifiably, be seen as the life-blood of continuous improvement. On the other hand, if effectiveness is evaluated on the basis of narrow, even inappropriate, performance indicators, then the impact can be deeply damaging. Whilst appearing to promote the causes of accountability and transparency, the use of data can, in practice: conceal more than it reveals; invite misinterpretation; and, worst of all, have a perverse effect on the behaviour of professionals.

This has led the current "audit culture" to be described as a "tyranny of transparency" (Strathern, 2000).

This is arguably the most troubling aspect of our own research. It has revealed, how, within a context that values narrowly conceived criteria for determining success, such moves can act as a barrier to the development of a more inclusive education system (Ainscow, Howes & Tweddle, 2004; Ainscow et al., in press). All of this suggests that great care needs to be exercised in deciding what evidence is collected and, indeed, how it is used.

English LEAs are required by Government to collect particular data. Given national policies, they cannot opt out of collecting such data on the grounds that their publication might be misinterpreted, or that they may influence practice in an unhelpful way. On the other hand, LEAs are free to collect additional evidence that can then be used to evaluate the effectiveness of their own policy and practice in respect to progress towards greater inclusion. The challenge for LEAs is, therefore, to harness the potential of evidence as a lever for change, whilst avoiding the problems described earlier.

Our own work suggests that the starting point for making decisions about the evidence to collect should be with an agreed definition of inclusion. In other words, we must "measure what we value", rather than is often the case, "valuing what we can measure". In line with the suggestions made earlier, then, we argue that the evidence collected at the district level needs to relate to the "presence, participation and achievement" of all students, with an emphasis placed on those groups of learners regarded to be "at risk of marginalisation, exclusion or underachievement".

In one English LEA, for example, we are currently collaborating with officers and school principals on the development and dissemination of its "Inclusion Standard", an instrument for evaluating the progress of schools on "their journey to becoming more inclusive" (Moore, Jackson, Fox & Ainscow, 2004). The standard is different from most existing inclusion awards in that it focuses directly on student outcomes, rather than on organisational processes, and uses the views of students as a major source of evidence. So, for example, it does not require a review of the quality of leadership in a school. Rather, it focuses on the presence, participation and achievements of students, on the assumption that this is what good leadership sets out to secure. Similarly, the standard does not examine whether or not students are given the opportunity to take part in school activities. Rather, it sets out to assess whether students, particularly those at

risk of marginalisation or exclusion, actually take part and benefit as a result. In these ways, the aims are: to increase understanding within schools of inclusion as an ongoing process; to foster the development of inclusive practices; and to use the student voice as a stimulus for school and staff development. The intention of the LEA involved is that the standard will become an integral part of schools' self-review and development processes.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

As we have seen, the development of inclusive policies and practices within rapidly changing education systems is a complex business. This paper is, therefore, an attempt to make a contribution to a better understanding of these complex issues in the field. As such, it is intended that the ideas discussed here will stimulate thinking and debate in ways that will enable further progress to be made in taking forward the inclusion agenda.

As my colleagues and I continue working with the education systems in which we are currently involved, both in the United Kingdom and in other parts of the world, we have two inter-linked aspirations, both of which are inherent in our approach to collaborative research. First, we hope that our partners will derive direct and practical benefits from their involvement, and that, as a result, children, young people and their families will receive more effective educational services. Secondly, we hope to make further progress in understanding and articulating some of the complex issues involved in this work. We also intend that the analysis that has been developed will provide the basis of self-review frameworks, such as the "Index for Inclusion" (Booth & Ainscow, 2002), for the development of inclusive policies, practices and cultures within schools and school systems.

As we take this work forward it is important to keep in mind the arguments presented in this paper. In particular, we have to remember that much of what goes on within organisations, such as LEAs and schools, is largely taken-for-granted and, therefore, rarely discussed. In other words, practices are manifestations of organisational cultures (Angelides & Ainscow, 2000; Schein, 1985). This leads us to assume that many of the barriers experienced by learners arise from existing ways of thinking. Consequently, strategies for developing inclusive practices have to involve interruptions to thinking, in

order to encourage "insiders" to explore overlooked possibilities for moving practice forward. Our research so far indicates that a focus on the issues of definition and the related use of evidence has the potential to create such interruptions.

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