
ENFORCING INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS: WHAT ARE THE MODIFICATION LEVERS

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ABSTRACT

This study contends that inclusiveness is the most significant challenge confronting educational institutions around the world. It presents a framework for discovering levers that can help to ease systems in a more inclusive direction, based on results from a 10-year study programme. The emphasis is on variables within schools that influence the development of thinking and practise, as well as larger contextual constraints that may limit such growth. Many of the difficulties encountered by learners are said to be the result of pre-existing patterns of thinking. As a result, initiatives for establishing inclusive practises must include disruptions to thought to allow the study of previously ignored opportunities for moving practise ahead.

INTRODUCTION

The topic of inclusion is a major challenge for school systems all across the world. The attention in economically impoverished countries must be with the millions of children who never visit the inside of a school (Bellamy, 1999). Meanwhile, in affluent countries, many young people walk out of school with no meaningful certificates, while others are placed in various forms of special provision apart from conventional educational experiences, and still others just choose to drop out since the lessons seem irrelevant to their lives. In some nations, inclusive education is viewed as a method of serving disabled students in mainstream school settings. However, internationally, it is becoming recognised as a reform that encourages and welcomes variety among all learners (UNESCO, 2001). This broader formulation is used in the argument presented in this study. It is assumed that the goal of inclusive education is to eradicate social exclusion caused by attitudes and responses to diversity in race, socioeconomic class, ethnicity, religion, gender, and ability (Vitello & Mithaug, 1998). As such, it begins with the conviction that education is a fundamental human right and the foundation for a more equitable society.

The Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education supported the concept of inclusive education ten years ago (UNESCO, 1994). The Salamanca Statement, arguably the most important international document in the field of special needs, contends 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 implies that such schools can "deliver an effective education for the majority of children while improving the efficiency and, ultimately, the cost effectiveness of the entire education system." (1994, UNESCO). Over the next decade or so, there has been significant work in many countries to shift educational policy and practise in a more inclusive direction (Mittler, 2000). In this work, I use evidence from studies conducted throughout that time period to explore what needs to be done to build on the progress that has already been made. In particular, I consider the question: What are the "levers" that can shift education systems towards inclusion?

MAPPING EVENT ON THE PROBLEMS

As countries attempted to shift their education systems in a more inclusive direction, my colleagues and I conducted a research programme to learn from their experiences. While much of this research was conducted in the United Kingdom, it also included programmes in 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 made use of what we call "collaborative inquiry." This method promotes practitioner research conducted in collaboration with academics as a means of improving understanding of educational processes (Ainscow, 1999). Perhaps the strongest justification for this approach is Kurt Lewin's statement that you cannot understand an organisation until you try to alter it (Schein, 2001). In practice, we believe that such understanding is best achieved through collaboration between "outsiders," such as ourselves, and practitioners, policymakers, and other stakeholders as they seek practical answers to the problems they encounter. 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 designed to assist us in focusing on elements affecting inclusive development within an educational system. It focuses our attention on potential levers that can assist in moving the system ahead.

Senge (1989) defines "levers" as activities that can be made to modify the behaviour of an organisation and its members. He goes on to say that anyone seeking to influence change within an organisation must be astute in understanding where the greatest leverage exists. "Low leverage" techniques to bringing about large-scale changes in enterprises, he claims, are far too common. That is, they tend to change how things look but not how they work. Possible examples of low leverage activity in the education field include: policy documents, conferences and in-service courses.

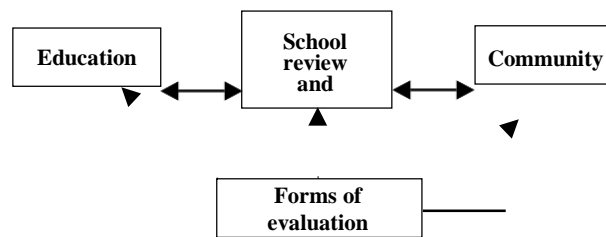


Figure 1. Levers for change

While such programmes may have an impact, they rarely result in significant shifts in thought and behaviour (Fullan, 1991). As a result, our goal must be to identify more subtle, less apparent, and greater leverage techniques of effecting 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 are related 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 larger community that the schools serve and the staff of the departments in charge of school administration; and the criteria used to evaluate school performance.

In what follows, I will look more closely at these broader influences. Before doing so, however, I will summarize 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., inpress). The study, which defined inclusive practises as measures to overcome barriers to student engagement and learning, featured teams from three universities working with groups of schools to advance practise. It led us to the conclusion that the development of inclusive practise is not, in fact, a priority, primarily, about implementing new technologies of the type outlined in most of the existing literature (e.g., Florian Rose and Tilstone, 1998; Sebba and Sachdev, 1997; Stainback and Stainback, 1990; Thousand and 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 phrases "community" and "practise" conjure up similar ideas, Wenger defines these concepts differently, giving the phrase "community of practise" a distinct meaning. A practise, for example, does not have to be defined as the labour and competence of a specific practitioner. Rather, a practise is defined as what individuals in a society do to further a set of common goals by relying on available resources. This extends beyond how practitioners accomplish their responsibilities to encompass how they get through the day, for example, commiserating over the limitations and constraints under which they must function.

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 observes: Practises emerge from shared learning histories. In this sense, history is more than just a personal or collective experience, or a collection of enduring artefacts and institutions, but a combination of participation and reification over time.

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. Therefore, for example, in our research of schools, we saw how hours of meetings, shared experiences, and informal chats over quickly eaten lunches entailed the creation of specific meanings of widely used words. "Raising standards" and "inclusion" are two examples. These shared meanings contribute to the definition of a teacher's experience as a teacher. Similarly, we may presume that groups of colleagues doing similar work in another school have their own shared histories that define what it is to be a teacher in that specific environment.

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.

"Practise communities are not inherently beneficial or destructive. Nonetheless, for better or worse, they are a force to be reckoned with. As a site of action, interpersonal interactions, shared knowledge, and enterprise negotiation, such communities contain the key to true transformation - transformation that has a significant impact on people's lives... Other forces (for example, institutional control or individual power) have an equal impact, but... they are mediated by the communities in which their meanings are negotiated in practise."

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.

• Staff, student, and parent surveys, • Mutual observation of classroom practises, followed by structured discussion
A group discussion on a video recording of one colleague teaching

These approaches involve:

- Discussion of statistical evidence pertaining to test results, attendance registers, or exclusion documents,
- Data from student interviews.
- Discussion of statistical evidence regarding test results, attendance registers, or exclusion records.
- Staff development exercises based on case study material or interview data.

- 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 simple to pathologize educational difficulties as difficulties inherent in kids, even when those same difficulties are employed usefully to investigate specific aspects of school practise. This is true not only for students with impairments and those classified as "having special educational needs," but also those whose socioeconomic position, colour, language, and gender make them difficult for specific teachers in specific structures. As a result, I believe it is critical to build the capacity of people within schools to expose and question deeply ingrained deficit notions of "difference," which define certain categories of kids 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 definition clarity and the kind of evidence used to assess educational success.

In my own nation, there is still much misunderstanding about what "inclusion" entails (Ainscow et al., 2000). This lack of clarity may be traced back to central government policy declarations to some extent. For example, the term "social inclusion" has been related primarily with increasing attendance and decreasing the occurrence of school exclusions. 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 entails all students' presence, engagement, and achievement. "Presence" refers to where children are educated and how consistently and punctually they are educated. "participation" refers to the quality of their experiences while they are there and, as such, must include the learners' own perspectives; and "success" refers to the outcomes of learning across the curriculum, not just 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 behavior 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 criteria does not consider whether or not pupils are allowed to participate in school activities. Rather, it seeks to determine whether pupils, particularly those at risk, for marginalisation or exclusion, participate and benefit as a result. The goals are to promote knowledge of inclusion as a continuous process within schools, to foster the development of inclusive practises, and to use student voice as a stimulant for school and staff growth. The LEA concerned hopes that the standard will become an intrinsic element of the self-review and development processes in schools.

THINKING REGARDING THE YEARS TO COME

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. Practises, in other words, are manifestations of organisational cultures (Angelides & Ainscow, 2000; Schein, 1985). This leads us to believe that many of the hurdles encountered by learners are the result of pre-existing patterns of thinking. As a result, initiatives for developing inclusive practises must include disruptions to thinking.

With the goal to encourage "insiders" to consider previously unconsidered ideas for moving practise forward. So far, our research indicates that a focus on definition issues and the related use of evidence has the potential to cause such interruptions.

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