

Understanding the Development of Inclusive Education System

IJSSP
44, 15/16

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Received 21 June 2024
Accepted 29 April 2024
Published 2 July 2024

Abstract

It is now almost ten years since the Salamanca Conference on Special Needs Education endorsed the idea of inclusive education. 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 costeffectiveness of the entire education system' (UNESCO, 1994). During the subsequent ten 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?

Keywords: special needs, inclusive education, inclusive policies, educational research

MAPPING THE FIELD

As countries have tried to move their education systems in a more inclusive direction, with colleagues I have carried out a programme of research in order to learn from their experiences. This research has focused on: the development of classroom practice (e.g. Ainscow, 1999 and 2000; Ainscow and Brown, 2000; Ainscow, Howes, Farrell and Frankham, 2003);

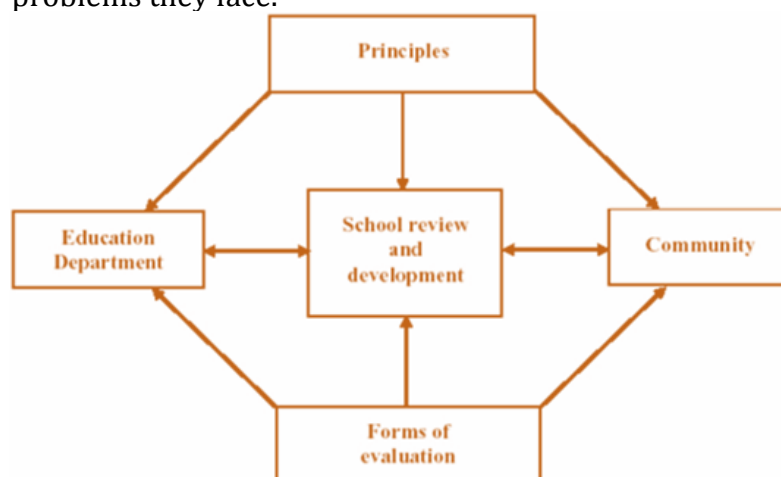


International Journal of
Sociology and Social Policy
Vol. 44 No. 15/16, 2024
pp. 26-32
Emerald Publishing Limited
0144-333X

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school development (e.g. Ainscow, 1995; Ainscow, Barrs and Martin, 1998, Booth and Ainscow, 2002); teacher development (e.g. Ainscow, 1994; 2002); and systemic change (e.g. Ainscow and Haile-Giorgis, 1999; Ainscow, Farrell and Tweddle, 2000), particularly in respect to the role of local education authorities (e.g. Ainscow and Howes, 2001; Ainscow and 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).

Much of our research has involved the use of an approach that we refer to as ‘collaborative inquiry’. This advocates practitioner research, carried out in partnership with academics, as a means of developing better understanding of educational processes (e.g. 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.



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, by and large they do not lead to significant changes in thinking and practice. 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 towards inclusion must 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 sees moves towards inclusion as being 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. At the same time, it also draws our attention to how the same factors can act as barriers to progress.

Developing Inclusive Practices

We have recently completed a three-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; Dyson and Ainscow, 2004). The study 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 about adopting new technologies of the sort described in much of the existing literature (e.g. Stainback and Stainback, 1990; Thousand and Villa, 1991; Wang, 1991; Sebba and Sachdev, 1997; Florian et al, 1998). Rather, it involves social learning processes within a given workplace that influence people's action and, indeed, the thinking that informs their 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 Etienne 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, meaning arises from two complementary processes, 'participation' and 'reification'.

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 and Duguid, 1991](#)).

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.

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 and 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 they 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. 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 pupils;
- 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, the role of the school principal is crucial (Riehl, 2000). So, for example, Lambert and her colleagues seem to be talking about a similar process 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 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 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 et al, 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.

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