

Understanding and Developing Inclusive Practices in Schools

Project grant holders: Mel Ainscow, Tony Booth and Alan Dyson

Aim:

To deepen the understanding of practitioners and policy makers about how schools and LEAs can widen the participation and improve the educational achievement of marginalised children and young people.

The research:

Research was carried out between 2000 and 2003 in twenty five schools by members of an action research network that brought together teachers and LEA officers in three urban LEAs, and teams of researchers from three higher education institutions. Most school joined the project through a broad desire to do their best by all of their pupils, rather than through a clearly-articulated commitment to inclusion or because they already displayed outstanding inclusive practice.

The three partnerships addressed the following research questions:

- What are the barriers to participation and learning experienced by pupils?
- What practices can help to overcome these barriers?
- To what extent do such practices facilitate improved learning outcomes?
- How can such practices be encouraged and sustained within LEAs and schools?

Development processes were facilitated according to schools' own agendas. They began by identifying barriers to participation and learning for pupils in their school, and worked to address these barriers, using research as a tool. These processes generated data about how inclusive practices can develop in current contexts.



Findings:

About barriers to participation and learning
Categorising practice or schools as 'inclusive' or 'non-inclusive' is dangerous. In the schools we studied, barriers to participation and learning arise out of a complex set of interactions between

- the values which teachers seek to enact
- the contexts within which they work
- the understandings they develop of their students and of their educational task.

Practitioners' decisions in the classroom are linked to assumptions that are built up and supported amongst groups of colleagues. They are constantly faced with options to base their practice on assumptions that certain pupils lack what it takes.

About teachers' understanding
Generating and then engaging with evidence about practice, and about outcomes for students, created space for teachers to reappraise and rethink their practice. Student perspectives were particularly effective in this. We conceptualised these as *interruptions* of established understandings and practices.

These interruptions are *not* exceptional events which require the coming together of unusual sets of circumstances. They arise out of recurrent mismatches between practitioners' simplifications and the complexities of the situations in which they must practice. Consequently, development in schools does not need *sustaining* – but it does require *shaping* in ways that result in fundamental questioning of existing assumptions, leading to more inclusive practices. If not, the space of interruption is filled by other dominant and often narrowly-interpreted agendas, such as the pressure to 'drive up standards'.

About what influences further development
Development after interruptions can be shaped through

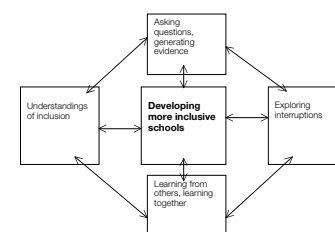
- the principled commitment of members of staff and school leaders
- the emergence of a staff culture in which there is collaborative engagement with evidence and a shared exploration of practice
- critical friendship between schools involving structured research to explore pupils' perspectives.
- LEAs that are able to create a framework within which schools interpret their roles and through which the meaning of national policy is mediated.

About how teachers and schools changed
Teachers began to see achievement outcomes as mediated by underlying student-level factors

- students' learning capacities and characteristics
- their engagement with learning
- their view of themselves as learners.

Teachers became more enthusiastic and confident in the value of asking questions about pupil outcomes, and in thinking critically about school and classroom practice.

Eg. Rather than simply modifying their existing 'routines' for teaching writing, some Network schools questioned whether the direct teaching of writing was appropriate for some of their disadvantaged students. Instead, they reduced the time they spent on writing and embarked on a programme of experiential learning, oral work and thinking skills.



Interlocking processes of inclusive development

The diagram 'Interlocking processes of inclusive development' is being used with staff in other schools to characterise what schools need to engage in if they are to widen the participation and improve the educational achievement of marginalised children and young people.

Ambiguities of the national reform agenda

Downside:

The emphasis on raising standards has unintended negative effects on the development of inclusive practices through the accountability culture and the fragmentation caused by competing priorities. Clear articulated values are needed to sustain commitment to change in this context.

Upside:

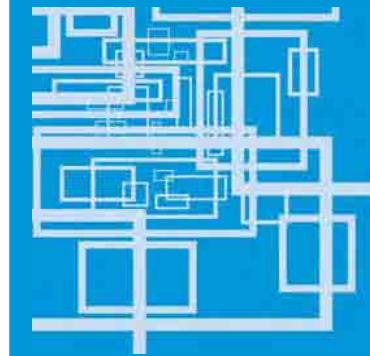
The emphasis on the achievement of *all* learners can potentially provoke more inclusive development in the system, leading to a broader development than the current minority of exceptionally inclusive schools.

Policy developments:

The following policy developments could strengthen the processes that allow schools and teachers to respond productively to the interruptions that they experience:

- supporting teachers in engaging collaboratively with a range of evidence about their practice by extending current imperatives to engage with a relatively narrow range of performance data;
- selecting and developing school leaders not only on the basis of their technical managerial ability, but also on their values orientation and their ability to offer 'constructivist leadership', as defined above;
- strengthening the role of LEAs as the guardians of an external, principled perspective on the work of schools; and increasing the opportunities for teachers to witness each other in action and to engage with other schools in other areas.

Teaching and Learning Research Programme



TLRP involves over 30 research teams with contributions from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Work began in 2000 and will continue to 2008/9.

Learning: TLRP's overarching aim is to improve outcomes for learners of all ages in teaching and learning contexts across the UK.

Outcomes: TLRP studies a broad range of learning outcomes, including the acquisition of skill, understanding, knowledge and qualifications and the development of attitudes, values and identities relevant to a learning society.

Lifecourse: TLRP supports projects and related activities at many ages and stages in education, training and lifelong learning.

Enrichment: TLRP commits to user engagement at all stages of research. It promotes research across disciplines, methodologies and sectors, and supports national and international co-operation.

Expertise: TLRP works to enhance capacity for all forms of research on teaching and learning, and for research-informed policy and practice.

Improvement: TLRP develops the knowledge base on teaching and learning and policy and practice in the UK.

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