

Teaching and Learning RESEARCH BRIEFING

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The development of inclusive practices in schools: Through what processes can schools become more inclusive?

Inclusion is one of the major challenges facing education systems around the world. The question of how schools can include *all* children from the communities they serve and enable them both to participate to the full and achieve highly is a pressing concern for anyone concerned with issues of equity in contemporary and future society. While there are some outstanding examples of inclusive schools in many countries, the processes by which all schools might grow to be more inclusive are not well understood. This briefing reports on a three-year collaboration between researchers and practitioners that has led to new understandings about how inclusive practice can develop in an English context.

- **Finding 1: ways of thinking**

Many significant barriers to the participation and learning of pupils stem from teachers' misplaced assumptions about what their pupils can do and how best to teach them.



- **Implication 1:**

Overcoming barriers requires more than a different way of working – individuals and groups need to question their accepted ways of thinking, and this takes time.

- **Finding 2: engagement of staff**

Interruptions to established understandings and practices can be fostered when groups of staff engage with evidence about pupils' experience of school, and about their own practice.

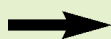


- **Implication 2:**

Establishing a focus for school enquiry on a specific issue of genuine concern to many staff is often more productive than imposing whole school change.

- **Finding 3: underlying factors**

For many pupils, it is not possible to achieve improved outcomes simply by teaching the curriculum harder and longer. Instead, teachers have to strengthen the factors that underpin learning, such as pupils' pleasure in learning and their self esteem.



- **Implication 3:**

Addressing both underachievement and inclusion requires that the national focus on highly measurable outcomes of school be broadened to include these underlying factors.

The research

The Inclusion Network

This research and development project was carried out between 2000 and 2003 by members of an action research network that included teachers and LEA officers from twenty five schools in three urban LEAs, and teams of researchers from three neighbouring higher education institutions. Most schools joining the project expressed a broad desire to do their best by all of their pupils, without necessarily having any clearly-articulated commitment to inclusion or any already outstanding inclusive practice. A key starting point was the Index for Inclusion (Booth et al, 2000*), which was used to introduce the value of thinking in terms of the barriers to participation and learning experienced by pupils. The following research questions guided the process:

- 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?

The focus for development in each school was in line with their current, particular priorities. 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.

Background and rationale

The context of England is particularly interesting in terms of the widespread need to find more effective ways to reduce the marginalisation and exclusion of learners in schools. Since 1988, different Governments have introduced policy changes to foster improvements in state education. Whilst national test and examination results appear to have improved, there is evidence that many pupils still experience marginalisation. At the same time, there has been a worrying increase in the number of young people excluded from schools because of their behaviour, and the proportion of pupils

References

*Booth, T., Ainscow, M., Black-Hawkins, K., Vaughan, M. & Shaw, L. (2000) Index for Inclusion: Developing learning and participation in schools (Bristol, Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education).

placed in segregated special education provision of various forms has changed little over the last twenty-five years. Following the publication of national examination results in the summer of 2002, it was reported that some 30,000 youngsters had just left school without any qualifications at all. This background informed the creation of a research and development network with the following features:

- we looked at inclusion and exclusion in terms of the multiple barriers to learning and participation that potentially affect many learners in schools, rather than taking a narrow focus on particular groups and issues, such as the placement of disabled learners;
- the focus was on long-term development over three years in twenty-five schools, rather than on short term scrutiny of individual schools;
- the schools involved included some that had recently faced periods of difficulty (i.e. special measures and serious weaknesses); this was not a network of exceptional schools chosen as examples of outstanding practice;
- the development of practice was considered in the context of interactions between different kinds of factors, at the classroom, institutional and system level;
- the network drew on the different theoretical perspectives of a large team of researchers for ongoing analysis, rather than relying on a single viewpoint or conceptual framework.

What we did

At the start of the initiative, workshops were held in each LEA for groups of teachers in the partner schools. The school teams were invited, in discussion with their LEAs and the university teams, to identify barriers to learning and participation in their contexts and the actions which might be taken to address these. Each school made their participation in the Network a part of their development plans, and a core team of practitioners attended regular local meetings and four national seminars.

Members of the university teams visited the schools on a regular basis to support these core teams in collecting and engaging with evidence in relation to taking their development initiatives forward. The school teams were encouraged to investigate their own practices and monitor the impacts of their actions systematically, while the university teams gave them technical assistance and undertook agreed additional research. The evidence generated by practitioners in exploring their practice included observations, examples of children's work, performance and attainment statistics, specimen teaching plans, interview notes, questionnaire returns and video of lessons. The university researchers used similar techniques and in addition kept detailed field notes of all their involvements with the schools and school teams, generating rich data about how practitioners in different

institutional contexts conceptualised barriers and the actions needed to overcome them.

We held four national conferences in which all university, school and LEA participants in the Network had the opportunity to discuss their work and share findings. A key feature of these was school visits, where practitioners from other LEAs visited the host LEA's schools and carried out small-scale research activities (interviewing pupils, observing lessons and so on) and discussed what they had learnt with school staff. Later on, staff arranged similar research visits within each LEA.

Changing ways of thinking

As they engaged in a process of research and development over three years, staff in schools recognised that some of the significant barriers to the participation and learning of pupils stemmed from their misplaced assumptions about what their pupils could do and how best to teach them. It took time for individuals and groups to question some of their deeply and commonly held assumptions about what pupils needed.

Maintaining a sense of continuity and purpose over a sustained period was critical to this kind of change. Meetings between schools focused increasingly on identifying the differences experienced by pupils as the schools tried alternative strategies. Participants gradually developed a language of educational outcomes extending beyond national test results. University and LEA staff played an important role in continuing long-term conversations with teachers and school leaders, from which ideas for further action and enquiry developed.

Schools that began effectively to address issues of inclusion shared some common features. Members of staff and school leaders became more committed to principles of inclusion, and more open to engaging collaboratively with evidence about practice. The role of LEAs became clearer, supporting schools in working through the tensions between the requirements of inclusion and raising standards.

Engagement of staff

At the heart of this process of change were groups of staff involved in generating and engaging with evidence about practice, and about outcomes for pupils. This research process created space in which teachers began to experience **interruptions** to their established understandings and practices. Pupil perspectives were particularly effective in this, causing staff to pause and see things from a different and clearly relevant point of view.

Such 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. Indeed, at its best, the national focus on raising standards for *all* learners creates interruptions – 'what if all means all?'

But the key is what happens next in these schools, for all too easily the space created by such interruptions is filled by the pressing concern to achieve results, or to 'drive up standards'. Creating a supportive culture in which staff are able to engage in considering these interruptions meant that staff had opportunities to reappraise their practices and take action together in the light of their rethinking.

A focus on underlying factors

Enquiry helped teachers to understand that teaching the curriculum harder and longer would never improve the learning outcomes of many pupils. They began to think again about the factors that underpin learning, such as pupils' pleasure in learning and their self esteem. Teachers saw achievement outcomes as mediated by underlying pupil-level factors, including pupils' learning capacities and characteristics, their engagement with learning and their view of themselves as learners, and that as teachers they could directly influence these underlying factors.

Rather than simply modifying their existing 'routines' for teaching writing, some Network schools began to question whether their current emphasis on the direct teaching of writing was appropriate for some of their disadvantaged pupils. Instead, they reduced the time they spent on writing and embarked on a programme of experiential learning, oral work and thinking skills. One head said:

We're going down the route of looking at our teaching strategies, and how children learn, and the skills they need to learn, as learners - not the curriculum bit, but the actual learning techniques and strategies they have. Because that tends to be very limited with our children. And we actually want to broaden their range of learning strategies, their thinking skills. We want to create more opportunities of first hand experience, the discussion, practising these thinking skills.

Major implications

Implications for national policy

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

- supporting teachers in engaging collaboratively with a range of evidence about their practice which goes beyond a relatively narrow range of performance data to include underlying factors concerning pupils' experience of schooling;
- increasing the opportunities for teachers to observe each other in action;
- 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, and
- strengthening the role of LEAs as the guardians of an external, principled perspective on the work of schools

Implications for policy at school and LEA level

Sustainable inclusive development occurs in schools and LEAs where there is a shift from a compliance culture to a commitment to shared inclusive values, and a sustained attempt to resolve the policy tensions inherent in multiple and contradictory education initiatives. These tensions include mitigating the selective organisational requirement of the standards agenda; paying attention to conditions for teaching and learning as well as outcomes; balancing long-term rational planning with short-term and improvised change; ensuring that the pressures to create a successful image are matched by deep changes to cultures, policies and practices, and weighing the significance given to the role of headteachers with the value of shared leadership.

St John's Primary School: an example

The leadership team at St John's Primary had come to the view that language skills were a barrier to learning for many children. To develop a space for considering this further, we worked together on a questionnaire which gave children the chance to write what they felt about writing. These questionnaires were developed from initial discussions with children. We included those who struggled with writing, by interviewing them instead. Support staff were asked to help with that.

Example responses:	boys	girls
What don't you like about writing? I don't like long stories and struggle with spellings; half hour enough	9	4
It takes me a long time to think what I'm going to write; it's hard work sometimes; when you have to do it independently; writing is hard, that's the thing; I don't like writing	1	5
It hurts my hand - it aches and when I go home it's sore	2	6
What do you like about writing? Like writing my stories, imaginary world, make it up, thinking about the plot, getting into the story is better and fun, get to put anyone in it	17	12
Tell us about the best piece of writing you have ever done Two pages of story last year; when I first started school; in infants, I got to wear a red badge; in an old school; a poem about a bumble bee; a newspaper; the day I started this class, to make my book look good; when I was in infants, teacher took it to a meeting. I was 6. It was my own version of Tom Thumb	4	3

Jim:

I found really the questionnaire a great help ... the answers from children. It made me try to analyse things ... a lot more ... because we could look at the children's answers and so started to think, well if they're thinking this way, by the answers that they gave them, how do we have to think to get them to change their minds about what they're doing? ... I dig out the questionnaire every so often, and have another look'.

The headteacher:

'For me the questionnaire has been one of the most fundamental things, tools, we've used in school. For the first time we went back to our client base, the kids, and actually asked them what they thought about things, how they felt, how they reacted, what they were good at, what they weren't good at. And for a lot of staff I think it was an eye-opener, wasn't it. Just such a rich area of information for us that we've never tapped into before'.

Further information

Further information including several articles and conference presentations can be downloaded from the project website (address below). Howes et al (2004) 'The action in action research: mediating and developing inclusive intentions', in *Educational Action Research*, 12(2), reflects on the use of action research in this context.

The way that various forms of data acted as an interruption to current thinking and practice in ways that had the potential to move practice forward is described further in Ainscow et al. (2003) 'Making sense of the development of inclusive practices', in *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 18(2), 227-242.

The way that rather typical schools found 'spaces' in an apparently hostile standards agenda is highlighted in Dyson et al. (2003) 'Making space in the standards agenda: developing inclusive practices in schools', in *European Educational Research Journal*, 2(2), 228-244, which concludes that some opening up of that agenda, together with a strengthening of the supportive factors in schools' development might well have significant positive effects.

The findings of the research are set in a wider research context through an associated systematic review of literature, Dyson et al (2002) 'The effectiveness of school-level actions for promoting participation by all students' (*EPPI Centre Review*) in *Research Evidence in Education Library* Issue 1, which can be found at the website www.eppi.ioe.ac.uk.

Finally, a TLRP 'gateway' book in the *Improving Learning* series will be available shortly, describing and analysing in an accessible way the processes and results of the network in participating schools and LEAs, and the implications for developing inclusion at local and system level. This will be published by RoutledgeFalmer in 2004.

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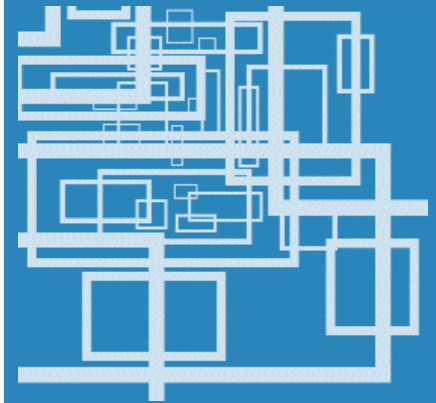
The warrant

The findings of the project are based on understandings gained from engagement with staff in twenty-five schools in three LEAs, who participated in research, conferences, exchange visits and workshops over a period of three years. This design allowed relationships to be built which led to data about the social and personal aspects of change in schools, and the interaction of these aspects with technical and managerial development.

Wherever possible, practitioners carried out evaluations of the processes within and outcomes from their own initiatives, supported by university researchers. User engagement and validation also contributed significantly to the trustworthiness of findings. We invited schools to engage throughout with our accounts of development, and towards the end of the network spent time working with participants on an overview of outcomes. We also worked with a group of participants on a set of materials, the aim of which is to promote the adoption of key elements of the process by staff in other schools.

The theoretical coherence of the findings described in this briefing is the result of a dialogue between the three university teams' emerging interpretations over the period of the project. This process has required articulation of different perspectives and the basis on which these perspectives are held to be valid. Additionally, there is a clear relationship between the conclusions reached in the project and the findings of the linked EPPI-sponsored systematic review of cumulative and comparative evidence.

Teaching and Learning Research Programme



TLRP is the largest education research programme in the UK, and benefits from research teams and funding contributions from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Projects began in 2000 and will continue with dissemination and impact work extending through 2008/9.

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

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

Lifecourse: TLRP supports research 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. The Programme promotes research across disciplines, methodologies and sectors, and supports various forms of national and international co-operation and comparison.

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 collaborates with users to transform this into effective policy and practice in the UK.

TLRP is managed by the Economic and Social Research Council research mission is to advance knowledge and to promote its use to enhance the quality of life, develop policy and practice and strengthen economic competitiveness. ESRC is guided by principles of quality, relevance and independence.

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