Developing Inclusive Schools: implications for leadership

Mel Ainscow

2001

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Mel Ainscow, Faculty of Education, University of Manchester

The field of special education faces deep changes in relation to its thinking and practices. As a result there are new opportunities for continuing its historical purpose of addressing the needs of those learners who remain marginalised by existing educational arrangements. A brief look at history reminds us that in the 19th century special educators argued for and helped develop provision for children and young people who were excluded from educational plans. Only much later did this provision become adopted by national government and local authorities. It is also worth remembering that it was only as recently as 1971 that one group of learners, those categorised as having severe learning difficulties, was deemed to be even worthy of education.

Similarly, provision for children experiencing difficulties within mainstream schools grew as a result of a gradual recognition that some pupils were marginalised within – and in some instances excluded from – existing arrangements for providing education. As this provision developed during the latter part of the 20th century, there was also increased emphasis on notions of integration, as special educators explored ways of supporting previously segregated groups in order that they could find a place in mainstream schools.

It can be argued, therefore, that the current emphasis on inclusive education is but a further step along this historical road. It is, however, a major step, in that the aim is to transform mainstream schools in ways that will increase their capacity for responding to all learners. And, of course, such a project requires the participation of many stakeholders in ways that challenge much of the status quo.

In this paper I reflect on recent research evidence on inclusive education in order to draw out implications for those who take on leadership roles in schools.

Understanding inclusive practice

In recent years, my colleagues and I have been involved in a series of research activities in relation to the development of inclusive practices in schools (eg Ainscow, 1999; Booth and Ainscow, 1999; Clark et al, 1999; Farrell, 2000). In essence this work sets out to address the question: How do we create educational contexts that reach out to all learners? It points towards certain ingredients that seem to be helpful in formulating strategies for moving practice forward. These are:

- **starting with existing practices and knowledge**
  Research suggests that most schools know more than they use. Thus the main thrust of development has to be with making better use of existing expertise and creativity within any given context. Increasingly, therefore, in my own work I have been working alongside teachers as they have developed ways of analysing their practices. Here the particular focus is on the details of classroom interventions and how these can be adjusted in order to foster a more responsive engagement between teachers and learners.

- **seeing differences as opportunities for learning**
Adjusting existing arrangements seems to require a process of improvisation as teachers respond to the various forms of feedback provided by members of the class. For the experienced teacher this involves the application of tacit knowledge gained from years of learning through doing. Pupils who did not fit into existing arrangements can be seen as offering surprises – that is, feedback that invites further improvisation. All of this implies a more positive view of difference, one that is difficult to encourage in contexts where teachers feel unsupported or threatened.

- **scrutinising barriers to participation**
In examining existing ways of working, it is also necessary to consider whether aspects of these practices are in themselves acting as barriers to participation. Once again, here there is a need to engage with the details of classroom interaction. Research illustrates how some pupils receive subtle messages from their teachers that suggest that they are not valued as learners. Consequently, development processes have to incorporate ways of determining the barriers experienced by some learners and addressing these in a supportive way. In this context the views of the pupils themselves are proving to be a promising source of evidence for stimulating discussion.

- **making use of available resources to support learning**
At the heart of the processes described here is an emphasis on making better use of resources, particularly human resources, in order to foster more welcoming and supportive classroom contexts. Here the possibilities are massive, involving ways of working that make more effective use of human energy through greater co-operation between teachers, support staff, parents and, of course, the pupils themselves. There is, for example, strong evidence to support the argument that better use of child-to-child co-operation can help to contribute to the development of a more inclusive classroom in ways that will, in fact, improve learning conditions for all members of a class.

- **developing a language of practice**
Encouraging teachers to experiment in order to develop more inclusive practices is by no means easy, particularly in contexts where there are poor arrangements for mutual support. In this respect the traditional school organisation, within which teachers rarely have opportunities to observe one another's practice, represents a particular barrier to progress. Specifically, it makes it difficult for teachers to develop a common language of practice that would enable them to share ideas and, indeed, reflect upon their own styles of working. It is noticeable that progress in developing more responsive practices seems to be associated with opportunities for teachers to spend time in one another's classrooms. Discussion of video recordings of lessons is also proving to be promising in this respect.

- **creating conditions that encourage risk-taking**
Unlike most other professions, teachers have to carry out their work in front of an audience. In asking colleagues to experiment with their practices we are, therefore, inviting them to take risks. The approaches I am exploring require a working atmosphere that provides support for such risk-taking. This is why the management of change is such a central factor in creating the conditions that can foster the growth of more inclusive practices. In this respect, improved collaboration within a school community seems to be a necessary ingredient.

Implicit in these six ideas is a working definition of what is meant by inclusive practice. It involves the creation of a school culture that encourages a preoccupation with the development of ways of working that attempt to reduce barriers to learner participation. In this sense it can be seen as a significant contribution to overall school improvement. It is worth noting, incidentally, that this is the orientation that underpins the 'Index for Inclusion' (CSIE, 2000), a school development instrument that has recently been issued to all schools in England, with the financial support of the DfES (formerly DfEE).

In summary, then, my reflections suggest ingredients that seem to be relevant to those working to create schools that can become more effective in "reaching out to all learners" (Ainscow, 1999). These ingredients are overlapping and interconnected in a number of ways. Perhaps more than anything they are connected by the idea that attempts to reach out to all learners within a school have to include the adults as well as the pupils. It seems that schools that do make progress in this respect do so by developing conditions within which every member of the school community is encouraged to be a learner. In this way, responding to those who are experiencing barriers to learning can provide a means of raising standards within a school.

Developing inclusive schools

Of course I do not pretend that any of this is easy. As I have argued, deep changes are needed if we are to transform schools that were designed to serve a minority of the population in such a way that they can achieve excellence for all children and young people. Such changes have to be seen in relation to the tensions and dilemmas that have been created by what some people see as the contradictions between the Government's agendas for raising standards and for social inclusion. Inevitably, therefore, effective leadership will be required, particularly at the school level.

There is now considerable evidence that norms of teaching are socially negotiated within the everyday context of schooling (eg Talbert and McLaughlin, 1994; Angelides and Ainscow, 2000). It seems that the culture of the workplace impacts upon how teachers see their work and, indeed, their pupils. However, the concept of culture is rather difficult to define. Schein (1985) suggests that it is about the deeper levels of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organisation, operating unconsciously to define an organisation's view of itself and its environment. It manifests itself in norms that suggest to people what they should do and how. In a similar way, Hargreaves (1995) argues that school cultures can be seen as having a reality-defining function, enabling those within an institution to make sense of themselves, their actions and their environment. A current reality-defining function of culture, he suggests, is often a problem-solving function inherited from the past. In this way, today's cultural form created to solve an emergent problem often becomes tomorrow's taken-for-granted recipe for dealing with matters shorn of their novelty. Hargreaves concludes that by examining the reality-defining aspects of a culture it should be possible to gain an understanding of the routines the organisation has developed in response to the tasks it faces.

When schools are successful in moving their practice forward, this tends to have a more general impact upon how teachers perceive themselves and their work. In this way the school begins to take on some of the features of what Senge (1989) calls a learning organisation, ie "an organisation that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future". Or, to borrow a useful phrase from Rosenholtz (1989), it becomes a "moving school": one that is continually seeking to develop and refine its responses to the challenges it meets.

It seems that, as schools move in such directions, the cultural changes that occur can also impact upon the ways in which teachers perceive pupils in their classes whose progress is a matter of concern. As the overall climate in a school improves, such children are gradually seen

in a more positive light. Rather than simply presenting problems that have to be overcome or, possibly, referred elsewhere for separate attention, such pupils may be perceived as providing feedback on existing classroom arrangements. Indeed they may be seen as sources of understanding as to how these arrangements might be improved in ways that would be of benefit to all pupils.

It is important to recognise, of course, that all of this implies profound changes in many of our schools. Traditional school cultures, supported by rigid organisational arrangements, teacher isolation and high levels of specialisms amongst staff who are geared to predetermined tasks, are often in trouble when faced with unexpected circumstances. On the other hand, the presence of children who are not suited to the existing menu of the school provides some encouragement to explore a more collegiate culture within which teachers are supported in experimenting with new teaching responses. In this way, problem-solving activities may gradually become the reality-defining, taken-for-granted functions that are the culture of the inclusive school.

Leading inclusive schools

Schools that move successfully towards more inclusive ways of working provide evidence of what is currently seen as a shift in thinking about leadership (Ainscow, 1999). This shift involves an emphasis on what have been called transformational approaches, which are intended to distribute and empower, rather than transactional approaches, which sustain traditional concepts of hierarchy and control (eg Sergiovanni, 1992). Typically this requires the headteacher to foster amongst stakeholders an overall vision of the school that encourages a recognition that individuality is something to be respected and, indeed, celebrated. Such a vision is usually created through an emphasis on group processes that are also used to facilitate a problem-solving climate. All of this helps to create a context within which leadership functions can be spread throughout the staff group. This means accepting that leadership is a function to which many staff contribute, rather than a set of responsibilities vested in a small number of individuals. It also seems to involve approaches to working with colleagues that make use of teachers' existing knowledge of how learning can be encouraged derived from their work with pupils (Ainscow and Southworth, 1996).

For this to happen we need educative leaders. Such leaders recognise that school growth hinges on the capacity of colleagues to develop. Moreover they understand that professional development is about both individuals and collegiality; it is to do with each teacher increasing his or her confidence and competence, and with the staff increasing their capacity to work together as a team. Educative leadership has been shown to be a key element in creating more collaborative school cultures because leaders are instrumental in establishing certain beliefs upon which such cultures are founded (Nias et al, 1989). This means that individuals have to be valued and, because they are inseparable from the groups of which they are a part, so too should groups. It also seems that the most effective way of promoting these values is through ways of working that encourage openness and a sense of mutual security. These beliefs, it now seems, are also central to the establishment and sustenance of schools that are seeking to become more inclusive.

As we know, educational change is not easy or straightforward. It involves a complex weave of individual and micropolitical strands that take on idiosyncratic forms within each school context. Consequently it involves much negotiation, arbitration and coalition-building, as well as sensitivity to colleagues' professional views and personal feelings. It is about changing attitudes and actions, beliefs and behaviour.

It follows that providing leadership in schools that are attempting to become more inclusive is not for the faint-hearted. Nor is it comfortable for any other colleagues in these schools. Teachers in such a school have to be able to accept and deal with questions being asked of their beliefs, ideas, plans and teaching practices. In such a context, interprofessional challenge becomes common. Therefore, those who provide leadership must model not only a willingness to participate in discussions and debates, but also a readiness to answer questions and challenges from staff members. Furthermore, they need to enable staff to feel sufficiently confident about their practice to cope with the challenges they meet.

Looking to the future

As we have seen, the issues raised in this paper are fundamental to the training of leaders in the education system, particularly in respect of the work of all headteachers. The issue of inclusion is on the agenda, but there is evidence of considerable confusion as to what it means and what is involved. In this context the needs of special school headteachers require particular attention, since the latter must be seen as having important new roles in respect to developments within the mainstream.

Further research is needed, therefore, in order to bring clarity and direction to the training that is provided. The issues that need particular attention are:

- How can inclusive practices, policies and cultures be developed in schools?

- What leadership skills are needed in order to foster such developments?

- How can these leadership skills be developed?

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