

Developing inclusive education systems: how can we move policies forward?

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Education systems throughout the world are faced with the challenge of providing an effective education for all children and young people. In economically poorer countries this is mainly about the estimated 72 million children who are not in school. Meanwhile, in wealthier countries many young people leave school with no worthwhile qualifications, others are placed in various forms of special provision away from mainstream educational experiences, and some simply choose to drop out since the lessons seem irrelevant to their lives.

Faced with these challenges, there is an increased interest in the idea of *inclusive education*. However, the field remains confused as to what this means. In some countries, inclusion is still thought of as an approach to serving children with disabilities within general education settings. Internationally, however, it is increasingly seen more broadly as a reform that supports and welcomes diversity amongst all learners (UNESCO, 2001). It presumes that the aim of inclusive education is to eliminate social exclusion that is a consequence of attitudes and responses to diversity in race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender and ability. As such, it starts from the belief that education is a basic human right and the foundation for a more just society.

In this chapter we consider what needs to be done to move education systems in an inclusive direction. In so doing, we draw on international research evidence to develop a framework for moving policy and practice forward.

Defining inclusion

The confusion that exists within the field internationally arises, in part at least, from the fact that the idea of inclusive education can be defined in a variety of ways (Ainscow, Farrell & Tweddle, 2000). It is not surprising, therefore, that progress remains disappointing in many countries. For example, in her analysis of national education plans from the Asia region, Ahuja (2005) notes that the idea of inclusive education was not even mentioned. In fact, special schools and residential hostels were often put forward as a strategy for meeting the needs of a wide range of disadvantaged students, and non-formal education was seen as a solution to the educational needs of marginalised groups. This is a worrying trend, especially given the negative effects of institutionalisation on vulnerable groups of children in under-resourced contexts (United Nations, 2005).

It is also important to note that, even in the developed world, not all educationalists have embraced the inclusive philosophy and some are resistant to the idea (Brantlinger, 1997; Freire & César, 2002; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994). Indeed, some disability-focused organisations still argue for separate, 'specialist' services. Most

notably, many organisations of deaf people argue that separate educational provision is the only way of guaranteeing their right to education in the medium of sign language and access to deaf culture (Freire & César, 2003). Meanwhile, the development of small specialist units located within the standard school environment is seen by some in the field as a way of providing specialist knowledge, equipment and support to particular groups of children whose needs are difficult to accommodate in mainstream classrooms.

Consequently, as we consider the way forward, it is important to recognise that the field of inclusive education is riddled with uncertainties, disputes and contradictions. Yet throughout the world attempts are being made to provide more effective educational responses for all children, whatever their characteristics, and, encouraged by the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), the overall trend is towards making these responses within the context of general educational provision (see the special edition of the European Journal of Psychology of Education, December 2006 for accounts of international developments). As a consequence, this is leading to a reconsideration of the future roles and purposes of practitioners throughout the education system, including those who work in special education. And, of course, this has major implications for the direction of national policies and the development of practice in the field.

Developing inclusive education systems

Through our collaborative action research in school systems in countries as diverse as Australia, Brazil, England, Romania, Portugal, Spain and Zambia, we have tried to map factors that have the potential to either facilitate or inhibit the promotion of inclusive practices in schools (Ainscow, 1999; Ainscow et al, 2006). These are all variables which national and, to varying degrees, local district administrations, either control directly, or over which they can at least exert considerable influence. Some of these factors seem to be potentially more potent; in other words, they are ‘levers for change’ (Ainscow, 2005). However, our research suggests that two factors, particularly when they are closely linked, seem to be superordinate to all others. These are: *clarity of definition* in relation to the idea of inclusion, and the *forms of evidence* that are used to measure educational performance.

This being the case, we have supported a number of education systems as they have attempted to develop a definition of inclusion that can be used to guide policy moves. Predictably, the exact detail of each system’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 a stimulus 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 is about the presence, participation and achievement of all students.* Here ‘presence’ is concerned with where children are educated, and how reliably and punctually they attend; ‘participation’ relates to the quality of their experiences whilst they are there and, therefore, must incorporate the views of the learners themselves; and ‘achievement’ is about the outcomes of learning across the curriculum, not merely 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 within 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. 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 (Ainscow, 2005). Such a debate must involve all stakeholders within the local community, including families, 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’ (Finkelstein and Grubb, 2000). So, for example, local authorities in England 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 they reveal; invite misinterpretation; and, worse of all, have a perverse effect on the behaviour of professionals.

This is arguably the most troubling aspect of our own research. It has revealed, how, within contexts that value 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, 2006; Ainscow et al, 2006). All of this suggests that great care needs to be exercised in deciding what evidence is collected and, indeed, how it is used.

Our 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 systems 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’.

Such a formulation is consistent with what some scholars have defined as the ‘organisational paradigm’ of inclusive education (Dyson and Millward, 2000). This requires new thinking that challenges assumptions that are deeply established amongst many educators across the world. Specifically, it requires a move away from explanations of educational failure that concentrate on the characteristics of individual children and their families, towards an analysis of the barriers to participation and learning experienced by students within education systems (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). Here, the notion of barriers draws our attention, for example, to ways in which lack of resources or expertise, inappropriate curricula or teaching methods, and attitudes can limit the presence, participation and achievement of some learners. Indeed, it has been argued that those students who experience such barriers can be regarded as ‘hidden voices’ who, under certain conditions, can encourage the improvement of schools in ways that would be of benefit to all of their students (Ainscow, 1999)

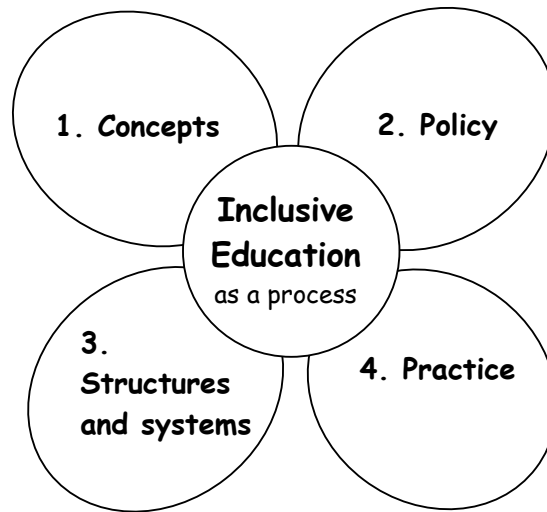
Developing a framework

Such an approach is more likely to be successful in contexts where there is a culture of collaboration that encourages and supports problem-solving (Carrington, 1999; Kugelmass, 2001; Skrtic, 1991). It involves those within a particular context in working together, using evidence to address barriers to education experienced by some learners. What, then, does this mean for policy? What needs to be done so that education systems that can encourage practices that ‘reach out’ effectively to all children and young people, whatever their circumstances and personal characteristics?

In order to offer some direction as to how this agenda might be addressed, we have been developing a framework¹ based on what international research suggests are features of education systems that are successful in moving in an inclusive direction (Ainscow, 2005; Ainscow et al, 2006; Dyson, Howes & Roberts, 2002). The items in the framework should be seen as ideals, i.e. aspirations against which existing arrangements can be compared in order to pinpoint areas for development.

The framework consists of four overlapping *themes*, as follows:

¹ A version of this framework was prepared for the UNESCO International Conference on Education, ‘Inclusive Education: The Way of the Future’, held in Geneva, November 2008



For each of the four themes in the framework we suggest four *performance indicators*, as follows:

Theme 1: Concepts

In an education system that is becoming inclusive:

- 1.1 Inclusion is seen as an overall principle that guides all educational policies and practices.
- 1.2 The curriculum and its associated assessment systems are designed to take account of all learners.
- 1.3 All agencies that work with children, including the health and social services, understand and support the policy aspirations for promoting inclusive education.
- 1.4 Systems are in place to monitor the presence, participation and achievement of all learners.

Theme 2: Policy

In an education system that is becoming inclusive:

- 2.1 The promotion of inclusive education is strongly featured in important policy documents.
- 2.2 Senior staff provide clear leadership on inclusive education.
- 2.3 Leaders at all levels articulate consistent policy aspirations for the development of inclusive practices in schools.
- 2.4 Leaders at all levels challenge non-inclusive practices in schools

Theme 3: Structures and systems

In an education system that is becoming inclusive:

- 3.1 There is high quality support for vulnerable groups of learners.
- 3.2 All services and institutions involved with children work together in coordinating inclusive policies and practices.
- 3.3 Resources, both human and financial, are distributed in ways that benefit vulnerable groups of learners.
- 3.4 There is a clear role for specialist provision, such as special schools and units, in promoting inclusive education.

Theme 4: Practice

In an education system that is becoming inclusive:

- 4.1 Schools have strategies for encouraging the presence, participation and achievement of all learners from their local communities.
- 4.2 Schools provide support for learners who are vulnerable to marginalisation, exclusion and underachievement.
- 4.3 Trainee teachers are prepared for dealing with learner diversity.
- 4.4 Teachers have opportunities to take part in continuing professional development regarding inclusive practices.

The framework can be used to review the stage of development within a national or district education system. This requires an engagement with statistical and qualitative data, not least the views of students and their families. In this way, evidence can be used to formulate plans for moving policy and practice forward.

Concluding remarks

This chapter has addressed what we see as the biggest challenge for education systems around the world, that of responding to learner diversity. The approach we have outlined is not about the introduction of particular techniques or organisational arrangements. Rather it places emphasis on processes of social learning within particular contexts. Collaboration and the use of evidence as a means of stimulating experimentation are seen as key strategies for moving such processes in a more inclusive direction. As Copland (2003) suggests, inquiry can be the 'engine' to enable the distribution of leadership that is needed in order to foster participation, and the 'glue' that can bind communities together around a common purpose.

All of this has major implications for leadership practice at different levels within schools and education systems. In particular, it calls for efforts to encourage coordinated and sustained efforts around the idea that changing outcomes for all students is unlikely to be achieved unless there are changes in the behaviours of adults. Consequently, the starting point must be with professional staff at all levels: in effect, enlarging their capacity to imagine what might be achieved, and increasing their sense of accountability for bringing this about. This may also involve tackling taken for granted assumptions, most often relating to expectations about certain groups of students, their capabilities and behaviours.

Our argument is, then, based on the assumption that *education systems know more than they use* and that the logical starting point for development is with a detailed analysis of existing arrangements. This allows good practices to be identified and shared, whilst, at the same time, drawing attention to ways of working that may be creating barriers to the participation and learning of some students. However, the focus must not only be on practice. It must also address and sometimes challenge the thinking behind existing ways of working.

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