Using evidence to encourage inclusive school development: possibilities and challenges.

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Since the late 1980s a growing number of international scholars have argued that progress towards more inclusive education systems requires a move away from practices based on the traditional perspectives of special education, towards approaches that focus on developing effective schools for all (Ainscow, 1999; Skrtic, 1991). This shift in thinking has been characterised as the ‘organisational paradigm’ (Dyson and Millward, 2000). In general terms this involves moves 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 school systems (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). In this way, those students who do not respond to existing arrangements come to be regarded as ‘hidden voices’ who, under certain conditions, can encourage the improvement of schools.

In this paper we explore some of the practical implications of adopting such a perspective. Specifically, we describe and reflect on the experience of working with one English secondary school in attempting to use evidence to encourage the development of inclusive thinking and practice. This leads us to examine the possibilities and challenges of using such approaches in the realities of schools.

Rethinking special needs
The field that has been known as special education or, more recently, special needs education, is involved in a period of considerable uncertainty. In particular, the emphasis on inclusive education that is now evident in many countries challenges special needs practitioners to reconsider their own thinking and practice. This context of uncertainty provides the special education field with new opportunities for continuing its historical purpose of addressing the needs of those learners who become marginalised within existing educational arrangements.

A brief look at history reminds us that in the 19th Century special educators in many countries argued for and helped develop provision for children and young people who were excluded from educational plans (Reynolds and Ainscow, 1994). Only much later did this provision become adopted by national governments and local authorities. It is worth noting, for example, that in my own country that it was only as recent as 1971 that
one group of learners, those categorised as ‘having severe learning difficulties’, was deemed to be even worthy of education.

Similarly, provision in mainstream schools grew as a result of a gradual recognition that some students 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 the mainstream in ways that will increase its capacity for responding to all learners (Ainscow, 1999). And, of course, such a project requires the participation of many stakeholders in ways that challenge much of the status quo.

In some countries, inclusive education is thought of as an approach to serving children with disabilities within general education settings (Mittler, 2000). Internationally, however, it is increasingly seen more broadly as a reform that responds to diversity amongst all learners (UNESCO, 2001). The argument developed in this paper adopts this broader formulation. It presumes that the aim of inclusive school development is to eliminate exclusionary processes from education that are a consequence of attitudes and responses to diversity in race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender and ability (Vitello & Mithaug, 1998). As such, it starts from the belief that education is a basic human right and the foundation for a more just society.

Our research suggests that inclusive school development has to be seen as a social process (Ainscow, Howes, Farrell & Frankham, 2003). It requires those within a particular context to engage with different views of a school’s policies, practices and cultures. More specifically, it involves the collection of different forms of evidence in order to analyse barriers to participation and learning (Ainscow, 2005; Booth and Ainscow, 2002).

Our research has shown how engaging with evidence can be helpful in encouraging such dialogue (Ainscow, Howes, Farrell & Frankham, 2003). Specifically, it can help to create space for reappraisal and rethinking by interrupting existing discourses, and by focusing attention on overlooked possibilities for moving practice forward. A particularly powerful technique in this respect involves evidence collected by students about arrangements within their school. Such evidence can, we have found, provide interruptions that can help to 'make the familiar unfamiliar' in ways that stimulate the self-questioning, creativity and action that seem to be necessary for moving a school in an inclusive direction. However, the introduction of such approaches in the context of current national reform agendas, is far from straightforward, as we illustrate in the account that follows.

**Standards and inclusion**
The push to raise educational standards in many countries has led to an emphasis on reform strategies based on competition between schools and parental choice (Thrupp, 2001). Such approaches seem to be unhelpful to the equity and social justice concerns of the inclusion agenda. The argument is that the powerful imperatives of market-led and standards-based policies will inevitably lead schools towards less rather than more inclusive practices (see special edition of the Psychology of Education Review, March, 2001, for an extended discussion of this issue). So, for example, Giroux and Schmidt (2004) explain how market-based reforms in the United States have turned some schools into ‘test-prep centres’. As a result, they tend to be increasingly ruthless in their disregard of those students who pose a threat to success, as determined by measured forms of assessment.

Schools serving economically poor districts tend to be a focus of such reform efforts (Ainscow and West, 2005). Consequently, they face particular challenges in respect to the development of inclusive ways of working. In England, the emphasis on ‘raising standards’ (as measured by aggregate test and examination results) has resulted in the marginalisation or, sometimes, the exclusion of some groups of learners (Ainscow, Howes and Tweddle, 2005). However, there are schools that seem to be successful in increasing and sustaining attainment levels over time, whilst at the same time developing positive strategies for responding to student diversity.

Recently, we worked with one such school in order to learn more about factors that were associated with its success. We intended that our involvement would be a useful contribution to helping the school move forward. With this in mind, we made use of the ‘Timeline of Change’, a research technique that analyses how individuals within a school perceive their experience of a particular change over a period of time (Ainscow, Hargreaves and Hopkins, 1995). Photographs taken by students were also used to promote discussion and reflection amongst leaders in the school.

Hillbank is a state Secondary High School that serves a relatively poor district in the town of Moorside, in the North of England. Currently, it has just over 900 students in the age range 11 to 16 years. It is reported that approximately a quarter of the local population draw some form of welfare assistance. A senior member of the staff commented: ‘It feels like a place that has no sense of direction, or future’.

Moorside itself is a pretty town, set at the head of a valley in the folds of pale green hills. As a result it tends to feel rather isolated, even though it is not far from other urban conurbations. It used to be a textile centre and it was this that drew thousands of immigrant workers from Bangladesh and Pakistan in the 1960s. In recent years, however, manufacturing industry has drained away, to be replaced not so much by unemployment as by low-wage jobs in call centres and retail outlets. There is a crisis of empty private houses, many of them derelict. Nevertheless, the town still looks clean and well cared for.

The Asian community is mainly concentrated near to the centre of the town, in terraces of cramped two-up two-down houses. As a result, young people from these families tend to
go to particular schools near to their homes. This segregation at the school level is a source of considerable concern in a community within which there has been racial tensions, including riots in recent years. These tensions have been exploited locally by the extremist British National Party (BNP).

With this in mind, the local authority has won funding from national government to demolish all eight of the Moorside secondary schools, including Hillbank. These will be replaced by five newly-built schools, located strategically in order to cut across traditional ethnic boundaries. This plan has been opposed by local BNP politicians who argue that the Asians and whites are not polarised enough. One of these politicians was quoted in the Guardian (16.10.03) as saying: ‘I think you’ve got two communities that have got to somehow learn to live separately.’

**School development**

Set against this background of social and economic tensions, Hillbank is worthy of particular attention in that over a period of some 15 years it has gone from being a poorly performing school, very unpopular in the local community, to one that is seen as achieving good examination results and, as a result, is now over-subscribed. At the same time, the school has attempted to become more inclusive.

The headteacher joined the school in 1987, initially as deputy head. He remembers being shocked by what he found in the school. At the time there were about 700 students, about 5% of whom were achieving five A* to C grades in GCSE, the school-leaving examination at 16. About a third of the students left with literally no recognised qualifications. He recalled: ‘It was an unpopular school, living in the shadow of the former grammar school next door’. Apparently cynicism amongst staff was very noticeable, not least in terms of the way that the local community was characterised in deficit terms. Nevertheless, there was a generally good working atmosphere, with high standards in sport, and with a few students picked out for greater academic attention.

The previous headteacher retired in 1994 and the deputy was promoted into the post. He recalls vividly a meeting of parents of prospective parents during that year, at which he explained what the school was good at and how he was introducing new measures to improve examination results. Amazingly, Hillbank went from being under-subscribed to being the most popular secondary school in the town within that year. Reflecting on all of this, the headteacher feels that a number of factors were at work, including the fact that he had become well known locally for his work as deputy, the school’s record in sport, and the fact that he spoke openly and frankly about the changes he was making. He also thinks that there was an element of luck in what happened.

Meanwhile, the new head set about introducing major changes within the school. He paid an external management consultant to review the situation and work with stakeholders to generate a development plan. Emphasis was placed on staff and governor involvement, using the external facilitator to help generate priorities for action. The head recalls that the facilitator kept ‘taking us back to values’. Staff were then formed into working groups to work on key issues. These were not always ‘cozy conversations’
apparently. The head remembers one member of staff asking, ‘how are you going to get us better kids to teach?’

The plans that emerged from the new consultative approach were described as being ‘business-like’, not least the emphasis they placed on target setting. Apparently targets were set for many things, including staff absences and the numbers of times the school was mentioned in the local newspaper. Inevitably there was also a focus on targets for improving examination result. The head recalls: ‘I said to staff, let’s be brave: 22% next year, 25% for the following year, and 30% the year after’. In fact by 1996 the A* to C results had risen to 32% and there was also a reduction in the proportion of students leaving with no qualifications, although this improvement was not so dramatic. Clearly, the approach to school development at that stage was not particularly inclusive. Faced by the need to push the school’s reputation forward, a deliberate decision was made to concentrate attention on those groups of students who seemed likely to make a significant contribution to the improvement of examination results. The head recalls, ‘We threw everything at the borderline kids’.

Almost over night the school came to be seen locally and nationally as a success case. In the political context of a new Labour government that was committed to ‘raising standards’, particularly in economically poor communities, schools like Hillbank that were seen to have made rapid progress, and headteachers who had ‘turned such schools round’, were the flavour of the moment. The head remembered: ‘The great and good were suddenly visiting us to try to find out what had happened’. A national document produced by Ofsted, the national inspection agency, used Hillbank as an example of good practice. As a result, the head found himself invited to speak at various national conferences: ‘I was saying things that related to the new Labour agenda… that target setting was the way to raise standards’.

Looking back, the head recognises how his experiences in the school became simplified and distorted in the telling. The key to what had happened, he argues, was the emphasis on participation and collective decision-making. This was the social process that had made the idea of working to achieve targets a powerful lever for change. In other words, his strategy had, in practice, been an inclusive one.

An inclusive turn
In 1997 the school was inspected and received a good report. The period that followed was characterised by reflection and rethinking. In particular, the head recalls how he and his senior colleagues concluded: ‘Yes, we have improved results, but not really improved teaching and learning’. His account of this period also seems to suggest what might be described as ‘an inclusive turn’ in relation to his strategic thinking about the school. For example, he remembers some questions that troubled him at the time, such as: Why is there still such poor attendance? Why is there still student disaffection? Why do some students leave with no qualifications?

As a result, the improvement strategy was rethought with an emphasis on teaching and learning. With external pressure from Government on the issue of inclusion, greater use
was made of data to pinpoint groups of learners at risk, and areas of policy and practice, that needed attention. One senior member of staff explained, ‘our school uses data a lot and there is still a big emphasis on target setting’.

The story is, then, of a school that learnt to use inquiry-based approaches for fostering developments in teaching and leadership in relation to all students. Copland (2003) suggests that inquiry can be the ‘engine’ to enable the distribution of leadership, and the ‘glue’ that can bind a school community together around a common purpose. However, turning such approaches into processes that make a deeper and more sustainable impact on the culture of schools is much more difficult. This necessitates longer-term, persistent strategies for challenging low aspirations that may exist for certain groups of learners. Certainly, the evidence is that the improvement strategy at Hillbank was successful in bringing about deeper cultural change within the school community, focusing specifically on the need to confront and change residual deficit thinking amongst staff. Perhaps as a result, the improvements in outcomes continued, such that, by 2003, 98% of students left the school with some qualifications and the proportion gaining at least five A* to C grades had risen to 44%.

Reflecting on what had happened, one senior teacher commented on how well the school is now regarded locally ‘for making silk purses out of sow’s ears’. He added that the emphasis is now on ‘improvement for all’. He explained how the range of students in the school had changed as numbers had increased, and that ‘all kids are valued equally’. So, for example, during one school year the priority was to address underachievement amongst boys. In addition, a learning support centre was established that provides a flexible range of responses to students experiencing periods of personal crisis. At the same time, he explained, thinking in the school had changed fundamentally: They’re not problem children anymore, they’re children with problems’.

A new set of challenges
In the summer of 2004 the headteacher was appointed to a similar post in another school, leaving his deputy as acting head for the period up to the closure of the school. She and the heads of the other seven Moorside schools were now closely involved in the planning of the five new schools, which are all due to open in 2007. She commented: ‘They’re talking about establishing the new schools without buildings.’ With this in mind, during 2005 designate headteachers will be appointed. This means that the existing heads face considerable uncertainties, not least in terms of their own futures. Meanwhile, they carry a moral responsibility to ensure that the current students and staff are provided with the best possible environments for doing their work.

At Hillbank the acting headteacher faces additional challenges in this respect. One senior teacher commented: ‘The head leaving has not helped. It has knocked people for six. People are still very keen but they are worried about the future. They don’t know how they will be protected. They just see the school disappearing’. Another senior teacher referred to ‘a sense of bereavement’. All of this raises questions about the issues of sustainability. In other words, how far are deep changes of the sort that have occurred at Hillbank dependent upon the continued presence of one charismatic leader?
The acting head has taken on this challenge by drawing her senior management team together to share responsibility for steering the school through this difficult period. One member of the team commented: ‘We’re not going to tread water’. In this context, the recent history of a school staff that has had enormous success in managing change during very difficult times is surely a reason to remain optimistic.

**Student perspectives**

Our account of developments at Hillbank is rather encouraging, not least in that it suggests that even within a context of extensive external pressure to ‘raise standards’, schools can move towards more inclusive ways of working. As we have seen, such progress requires an engagement with evidence, including statistical data and the view of different stakeholders, and a commitment to work together in order to explore more inclusive forms of teaching. At the same time, the account also illustrates the social complexity of such processes and the way factors external to a school can complicate the agenda.

Bearing this in mind, we collaborated with a small group of sixteen year old students to record their views of five years in the school, using what we call a photovoice approach (Miles and Kaplan, 2005). We hoped that their perspectives would give us deeper insights into what had happened in the school. We also intended that their views could be used to stimulate further developments amongst members of staff.

Working in pairs the students took photographs around the school of areas they saw as welcoming and supportive, and areas that were less so. The pairs then produced posters based on their photographs. As they worked we recorded their conversations and probed them further about their experiences and opinions.

The students made many positive comments about the school and its inclusiveness, confirming the impressions we had gained from staff. They also explained that the school had a good reputation in the local community. However, they highlighted several things they felt made the school a ‘less welcoming’ place. For example, students pointed out some inconsistencies in the school’s application of its rules. There was, they argued, a sense that the best and worst students were exempt from certain rules, leaving those in the middle, sometimes feeling unfairly penalized. One student explained ‘If you’re a good student you get away with a lot more, but if you’re a bad student you can’t get away with nothing.’ Another elaborated ‘But if you’re really bad you can get away with things because the teachers can’t be bothered to keep telling you.’

Students also used their photographic projects to highlight what they saw as some of the worst aspects of decay in the school buildings. The students acknowledged that some of this was because some students vandalise the school. This apparent contradiction, in which students find the results of vandalism to be unwelcoming and unpleasant but are sometimes involved with the perpetration of the very vandalism they decry, generates a sort of ambivalence, which can seem irresolvable and quickly lead to apathy.
One of the few places in the school that students have almost entirely to themselves are the toilets. However, these are some of students’ least favourite spaces, since they are often very dirty and constantly vandalized. Students expressed their despair at what they felt was the futility of trying to prevent vandalism of the toilets. For example: ‘They’re just going to do it anyway, day after day, so there’s no point stopping them. It’s just going to get worse. The toilets are the main part where you just wouldn’t want to go whatsoever.’ The school’s reaction to this has been to lock the toilets during lesson times, but this response, perhaps necessary in the short term, did not seem to students to be a good long-term solution.

The notion of equity and the importance of having their own spaces in the school were important to the students and they illustrated this by contrasting the staff room, which they understood to be a special place, only for teachers, to the student’s toilets which they saw as being one of the equivalent places for students. The students understood this to be a somewhat overdramatic distinction, but used it to highlight the point. They expressed the desire for different sort of space for older students in the school, one student saying: ‘We thought, if there’s a staff room there should be a year 11 room…there is the dining room, but it’s not one of the most relaxing places to sit down.’

Students also felt it was difficult to outlive a poor reputation in the school, even if the individuals changed their behaviour and academic performance. One student gave a personal example of this: ‘Sometimes teachers can pick on you. Say you had a bad reputation in year 9, but you’ve changed when you get to year 11, they’re still going to hold a grudge on you. I know for a couple of teachers I can’t do nothing right really. I can do stuff right now, but not for them. It’s first impressions. If you do something right you know you’re not going to get praised and if you do something wrong you know you’re not going to get praised so really you just stop caring about it.’

Students acknowledged that the difficulty of changing image is a school wide problem and not just an issue between staff and students. For example, one commented: ‘If you’re the class clown everyone finds you the class clown. No matter what you do they try and push you to do it…to do stuff silly. While they do the work, you’re doing stuff, annoying the teacher and they find it funny, but you know you’re going to get done for it.’

Students felt that there had been attempts at consultation in the school, but were a bit wary of instances of what they saw as involving a largely tokenistic process. For example: ‘They had a group of students design the new uniform. They called it ‘keep it real’ and they came up with all these ideas, but no matter what they did or what they wanted, it always had to go through the school and they changed it.’

The perspectives of students (like the perspectives of any other members of a school community) need to be understood beyond literal interpretations, to be engaged with and discussed. One student explained what it meant for him to be consulted as part of this project: ‘It’s been different. It’s been better than lessons. I think personally it’s been a lot different for me. I’ve enjoyed it really. It’s made me feel more involved, being asked what things you prefer about the school and why you prefer it, and what you don’t like
and why you don’t like it…it’s really made me think about how it can be changed and things like that.’ Another student described what it was like working on the ‘photovoice’ project: ‘Normally, when you say something, you get people turning it around in your head…with this you’ve been able to do your own thing instead of someone else’s.’ In summing up the school, another student commented, ‘Even though there are unwelcoming places this is still a popular school. It’s a big school and we’ve got a lot of good grades at this school.’

**Leadership and culture**

Having spent some months collecting views of staff and students about the school’s efforts to become more inclusive, we used our evidence to write an account of what had happened. Our intention was to stimulate ‘self-questioning, creativity and action’. With this in mind, we shared our account with the headteacher and senior management team of the school. This was then discussed at a meeting we had with this team.

Research suggests that using inquiry based approaches for school improvement can lead to periods of ‘turbulence’ as people struggle to make sense of unfamiliar points of view (Hopkins et al, 1994). Certainly our meeting with the senior management team was characterised by a sense of turbulence. Whilst there was a range of reactions, some of which were contradictory, there was a general consensus that the students’ views were simply wrong. So, for example, the comments from students about what they saw as the rather token approach to consultation that had taken place about the new school uniform was described as being untrue. Indeed, the senior team saw student involvement in decision making as a strength in the way they were running the school. Many of the group also dismissed the views of students about bullying and the tendency of some staff to stereotype some students.

It struck us later that we had probably chosen a bad time to share our findings with these teachers. As we have explained, they were at that time facing a particularly challenging set of circumstances. It was, therefore, perhaps understandable that our particular form of interruption was not met with enthusiasm. Nevertheless, the experience suggests that whilst an engagement with evidence can create space for reviewing thinking and practice, it is not in itself a straightforward mechanism 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 analysis and experimentation that is necessary in order to foster the development of more inclusive ways of working.

Such explanations remind us that educational difficulties can easily to be pathologised as difficulties inherent within students. This is true, we suggest, 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 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 approaches 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.

Writing about similar processes, Timperley & Robinson (2001) explain how teachers’ existing understandings influence the way evidence is interpreted, such that they perceive what they expect to perceive. Consequently, new meanings are only likely to emerge when evidence creates ‘surprises’. The role of school principals and other senior staff are crucial in encouraging such rethinking amongst their colleagues. 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 evidence 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).

It seems, then, that inclusive practices are likely to require challenges to the thinking of those within a particular organisation. With this in mind, Reihl (2000) concludes that school leaders need to attend to three broad types of task: fostering new meanings about diversity; promoting inclusive practices within schools; and building connections between schools and communities. She goes on to consider how these tasks can be accomplished, exploring how the concept of practice, especially discursive practice, can contribute to a fuller understanding of the work of school leaders. She concludes: ‘When wedded to a relentless commitment to equity, voice, and social justice, administrators’ efforts in the tasks of sensemaking, promoting inclusive cultures and practices in schools, and building positive relationships outside of the school may indeed foster a new form of practice’ (page71).

All of this points to the importance of cultural factors in promoting (or inhibiting) student participation. By ‘culture’ we mean the norms, values and accepted ways of doing things that are reflected in observed practices. Sustaining inclusive educational practice requires an uncompromising commitment to principles of inclusion among school leaders (Kugelmass and Ainscow, 2004). The development of more inclusive approaches does not emerge as a mechanical process in which any one specific organizational restructuring, or the introduction of a particular practice, generates increased levels of participation. Rather, the evidence is that the development of an inclusive culture requires a shared commitment by staff to processes that produce an overall enhancement in participation among all participants.

Given the problematic nature of the notion of culture, it is important to consider what this involves. One aspect of culture seemed to be the values and attitudes held by school staff.
The extent to which these values include the acceptance and celebration of difference and a commitment to offering educational opportunities to all students, coupled with the extent to which they are shared across a school staff, relate to the extent to which students actually are enabled to participate. Authentic participation is evident when all students learn alongside others, collaborate in shared learning experiences, actively engage with learning and have a say in their education. More deeply, participation means being recognized, accepted and valued for oneself (Booth & Ainscow, 2002).

**Concluding remarks**

Whilst our involvement in Hillbank School has not always been comfortable, we feel that we have learnt a great deal from working in partnership with its staff and students. The school’s history of development is impressive, providing compelling support for the idea that progress towards greater inclusion is possible, even in difficult social contexts. It also suggests that national strategies for raising standards can provide a stimulus for such developments.

In such contexts the use of evidence, particularly the views of students themselves, can be a powerful lever for change. However, as we have seen, the use of such approaches is likely to be very challenging. Their successful use seems to depend on forms of leadership that foster a willingness to address the challenges that emerge as a result of listening to the voices of different people.
References


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