



The next big challenge: inclusive school improvement

Mel Ainscow

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At a recent conference, the Australian scholar Roger Slee referred to Edward Said's explanation of how when ideas 'travel' to other times and situations, they can lose some of their 'original power and rebelliousness' (Slee, 2004). In this sense, the movement for school effectiveness and school improvement shows all the signs of jetlag. At its point of origin, it was based on a rebellion against conventional explanations about educational failure, particularly in urban contexts (Edmonds, 1979). More recently it seems to have become domesticated into a political discourse that stifles discussion and struggle. As a result, in national contexts such as my own, where reform policies have been based on a narrow view of school effectiveness, strategies for school improvement can, in practice, act as a barrier to the development of a more inclusive education system. In this paper, I reflect on my own school improvement experience in order to explore ways of developing more powerful strategies for moving schools and school systems in an inclusive direction.

Improving the Quality of Education for All

I believe that *the* major challenge facing educational systems throughout the world is that of how to foster inclusion. This means that in economically poorer countries, the priority has to be with the 113 million children who never see the inside of a classroom (Bellamy, 1999). Meanwhile, in wealthier countries the concern must be with the many young people who leave school with no worthwhile qualifications, others who are segregated into various forms of special provision away from mainstream educational experiences, and those who simply choose to drop out since the lessons seem irrelevant to their lives.

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 improvement 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.

Since the late 1980s I have been part of a school improvement initiative known as *Improving the Quality of Education for All* (IQEA). It involves university academics working in partnership with networks of schools, in the UK and other countries, in order to find ways in which the learning of all members of these communities can be enhanced (see Ainscow, 1999; Hopkins, Ainscow & West, 1994; and Hopkins 2001, for more detailed accounts).

The IQEA approach to school improvement emphasises the following features:

- Developments in teaching and learning, through the creation of conditions within schools for managing change successfully;
- School improvement led from within schools, focusing on areas that are seen to be matters of priority;

- Collecting and engaging with evidence in order to move thinking and practice forward, and to evaluate progress; and
- Collaboration amongst colleagues in partner schools, and with IQEA consultants, so that a wider range of expertise and resources is available to support improvements in all of the participating schools

The overall framework used to guide these activities is as follows:



Groups of staff are encouraged to examine the realities of their schools in relation to the four areas outlined within this framework. As can be seen, this emphasises the centrality of the quality of experience provided for students. Engaging with evidence about this, school groups go on to develop areas of focus that will guide their improvement efforts. They then look more specifically at ways in which teaching and leadership practices can be developed within their schools in order to bring about improvements.

The analysis of the experience of IQEA over fifteen years provides strong evidence of how inclusive school improvement can be achieved. More than anything this points to the importance of developing a school culture that fosters positive attitudes towards the study and development of practice.

Developing teaching

Much of the early work of IQEA involved attempts to introduce particular policies and, in so doing, to strengthen the schools' capacity to handle change. Gradually we recognised that even where such initiatives were successful they did not necessarily lead to changes in classroom practice. Our experience is that developments of

practice are unlikely to occur without some exposure to what teaching actually looks like when it is being done differently, and exposure to someone who can help teachers understand the difference between what they are doing and what they aspire to do. It also seems that this sort of problem has to be solved at the individual level before it can be solved at the organisational level (e.g. Elmore et al, 1996). Indeed, there is evidence that increasing collaboration without some more specific attention to change at the individual level can simply result in teachers coming together to reinforce existing practices rather than confronting the difficulties they face in new ways (Lipman, 1997).

At the heart of the processes in schools where changes in practice do occur is the development of a common language with which colleagues can talk to one another and, indeed, to themselves about detailed aspects of their practice (Huberman, 1993). Without such a language teachers find it very difficult to experiment with new possibilities. Frequently when observers report to teachers what they have seen during their lessons they express surprise (Ainscow, 1999). It seems that much of what teachers do during the intensive encounters that occur is carried out at an automatic, intuitive level. Furthermore there is little time to stop and think. This is why having the opportunity to see colleagues at work is so crucial to the success of attempts to develop practice. It is through shared experiences that colleagues can help one another to articulate what they currently do and define what they might like to do (Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2002). It is also the means whereby taken-for-granted assumptions about particular groups of students can be subjected to mutual critique.

Our research has shown how engaging with evidence can be helpful in encouraging such dialogue (Ainscow, 1999 and 2000; Ainscow & Brown, 2000; 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. Particularly powerful techniques in this respect involve the use of mutual observation and evidence collected from students about teaching and learning arrangements within a school. Under certain conditions such approaches provide *interruptions* that help to 'make the familiar unfamiliar' in ways that stimulate self-questioning, creativity and action.

The role of the school principal is crucial in encouraging such activities amongst staff. 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 information 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).

- We have found, however, 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 experimentation that is necessary in order to foster the development of more inclusive ways of working. So, for example, at the end of a

lesson in a secondary school during which there was a very low level of participation amongst the class, the teacher explained what had happened with reference to the fact that most of the class were listed on the school's special educational needs register.

Such explanations make us acutely aware that the relationship between the recognition of anomalies in school practices and the presence of students presenting difficulties as the occasions for such recognition is deeply ambiguous. It is very easy for educational difficulties to be pathologised as difficulties inherent *within* students. This is true 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 teaching approaches and strategies 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'. Usually it is helpful to have an external perspective that can use moments of surprise to challenge accepted meanings and take teachers beyond their existing understandings.

The work of many IQEA schools has demonstrated how a close scrutiny of the processes involved in teaching can challenge teachers to review their thinking and, as a result, to experiment with new practices. This has caused us to reflect carefully on how best to introduce such approaches. Clearly, there are many possibilities and each school has to decide on an approach that fits with its circumstances and traditions. In general, we favour the use of 'lesson study', a systematic procedure for the development of teaching that is well established in Japan and some other Asian countries (Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2002; Lo, 2004; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). Recently some IQEA schools in Hong Kong and the United Kingdom have used the approach to great effect.

The goal of lesson study is to improve the effectiveness of the experiences that the teachers provide for all of their students. The core activity is collaboration on a shared area of focus that is generated through discussion. The content of this focus is the planned lesson, which is then used as the basis of gathering data on the quality of experience that students receive. These lessons are called 'study lessons' and are used to examine the teachers' practices and the responsiveness of the students to the planned activities. Members of the group work together to design the lesson plan,

which is then implemented by each teacher. Observations and post-lesson conferences are arranged to facilitate the improvement of the research lesson between each trial.

Lesson study can be conducted in many ways. It may, for example, involve a small sub-group of volunteer staff, or be carried out through departmental or special interest groupings. It can also happen 'across schools', and is then part of a wider, managed network of teachers working together. Within IQEA the local school network offers the scope for such dissemination and sharing events to occur. The collection of evidence is a key factor in the lesson study approach. This usually involves the use of video recording. Emphasis is also placed on listening to the views of students in a way that tends to introduce a critical edge to the discussions that take place.

Developing leadership

Research in IQEA schools suggests that using strategies such as lesson study to move practice forward often leads to various forms of 'turbulence' (Hopkins et al, 1994). This may take a number of different forms, involving organisational, psychological, technical or micro-political dimensions. At its heart, however, it is usually about the dissonance that occurs as people struggle to make sense of new ideas. It reminds us, of course, that change often requires 'old dogs to learn new tricks'.

There is evidence to suggest that without a period of turbulence, successful, long-lasting change is unlikely to occur (Hopkins et al, 1994). In this sense, turbulence can be seen as a useful indication that the school is on the move. So, how can teachers be supported in coping with such periods of difficulty? What organisational arrangements are helpful in encouraging the development of practice?

From our experience of many schools that have made tangible progress we note the existence of certain arrangements that seem to be helpful. These provide structures for supporting teachers in exploring their ideas and ways of working, whilst, at the same time, ensuring that maintenance arrangements are not sacrificed. More specifically, they seek to support the creation of a climate of risk-taking within which these explorations can take place.

In attempting to make sense of such arrangements we have formulated a typology of six inter-connected leadership 'conditions' that seem to be a feature of successful school development (Ainscow et al, 2000). These are: attention to the potential benefits of *enquiry and reflection*; a commitment to *collaborative planning*; the *involvement* of staff, students and community in school policies and decisions; *staff development* activities that focuses on classroom practice; *co-ordination* strategies, particularly in relation to the use of time; and effective *leadership roles*, not only by senior staff but spread throughout the school. In working with schools on their improvement initiatives we ask them to carry out a review of these organisational conditions to see whether it might be helpful to make adjustments in ways that will provide greater support to staff as they face the inevitable periods of turbulence. However, our search for improvement strategies that will foster more inclusive schools has led us to explore forms of leadership that will challenge existing beliefs and assumptions within a school.

Helpful theoretical and empirical leads in respect to this challenge are provided by Riel (2000). As a result of a detailed review of relevant literature, she concludes that school leaders need to attend to three broad tasks: fostering new meanings about diversity; promoting inclusive practices within schools; and building connections between schools and communities. This analysis leads the author to offer a positive view of the potential for school leaders to engage in inclusive, transformative developments. She concludes: 'When wedded to a relentless commitment to equity, voice, and social justice, administrators' efforts in the tasks of sensemaking, promoting inclusive cultural practices in schools, and building positive relationships outside of the school may indeed foster a new form of practice' (page71).

Bearing these ideas in mind, we have recently been working with a 'think-tank' of school principals in England to address the question: '*What forms of leadership practice encourage behaviour that facilitates the learning of all students within a school?*' Like Spillane, Halverson & Diamond (2001), the practitioners and researchers involved assumed that school leadership has to be understood as a distributed practice, stretched over a school's social and situational contexts. We saw this as a transformational perspective on leadership that sets out to empower others to bring about change, particularly in relation to the ways in which social relationships influence teaching and learning. Consequently, we took *leadership practice* as our unit of analysis, rather than focusing on the work of individual leaders.

It was also assumed that the development of leadership practice starts from personal experience and involves forms of social learning, as those within a given workplace explore ways of solving the practical problems they face as they carry out their duties (Copland, 2003). Much of this professional learning goes on at a largely intuitive level and the knowledge that it creates is mainly unarticulated. In other words, those who develop leadership skills find it difficult to describe the ways in which they do what they do. It can be argued, therefore, that the most effective form of leadership development is likely to be based within the workplace, using social learning processes that influence thinking and action in a particular context.

The experience of working with the think-tank principals revealed some important ideas about the nature of leadership practice and how it can be developed. In particular, it showed how, under certain conditions, written accounts of leadership practice in different schools can be used to stimulate a form of reflection that makes use of the experience and knowledge that exists within a group of educational leaders. It also showed how joint visits to schools in order to produce such accounts can have similar effects.

The approach used within the think-tank emphasised the value of group processes and the use of varied methods of recording information. In this way, the action learning process experienced by this group of principals became the process by which their own leadership practices were challenged. The written accounts were seen as a tool for stimulating a process that brought about changes in the behaviour of staff and, as a result, students.

As a result of this project, a set of leadership development materials was produced in order to guide other groups of leaders who wish to use the accounts as the basis for

leadership development (Ainscow & Fox, 2003). These materials focus on ten 'accounts of practice'. They also include selected readings that are used to: *further stimulate reflection*, by enabling readers to compare what they do with accounts of leadership practice elsewhere; *challenge and reframe existing thinking*, by reading evidence about leadership practices that have proved to be successful in other contexts, and *conceptualize learning*, through engagement with texts that provide deeper theoretical explanations of what is involved in leadership practice. These three approaches throw light on how ideas from the literature can be helpful in generating different types of knowledge that are relevant to the development of leadership practice in schools (West, Ainscow & Notman, 2003).

The project materials are intended to be used by groups of leaders within schools, or from a group of schools, in order to foster yet further action learning activities of the sort that took place within the think-tank. The central aim is to encourage groups of colleagues to work together in order to move thinking and practice forward within their organizations. The starting point for the work of such an action learning group is the existing experience and knowledge of its members. Those taking part must, therefore, be helped to take responsibility for their own learning. Their colleagues in the group are seen as sources of challenge and support, bringing their experiences and perspectives to the discussions that take place. Within such contexts, written accounts of practice, plus the additional readings, are used to stimulate reflection and creativity.

Four other networks (26 schools in total) have subsequently used the materials and processes in order to review and develop their leadership practices. Principals from these schools formed local action learning groups and each was facilitated and supported by a school principal from the original group. At the same time, the participants used the materials to facilitate a similar review and development process with leadership teams in their own schools. There was also a program of school-to-school visits within the groups, leading to the writing of further accounts of practice. These experiences indicate that the process can lead to significant changes in thinking and practice within schools, and that these have a positive influence on the behaviour of students and staff.

Sustainable development

So far I have explained how inquiry-based approaches can foster developments in teaching and leadership. Our experience is that schools using such approaches are likely to have considerable success in bringing about changes in thinking and practice. As Copland (2003) suggests, 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. Turning these successes into processes that make a deeper and more sustainable impact on the culture of schools is, however, much more difficult. This necessitates longer-term, persistent strategies for capacity building at the school level. It also requires new thinking and, indeed, new relationships at the systems level. In other words, efforts to foster inclusive school improvement are more likely to be effective when they are part of a wider strategy.

England is particularly instructive in this respect. Recent years have seen fundamental changes in structures and relationships within its education service. These changes have been reflected most significantly in the evolving relationships

between schools and their local education authorities (LEAs). This movement, from 'dependency' towards greater 'independence', has been consistently orchestrated through legislation and associated guidance. At the same time, the relationship between schools has also changed. In particular, competition between schools has come to be seen as one of the keys to driving up standards. This is encouraged by open enrolment, supported by the publication of league tables of school examination results. All of this is intended to 'liberate' schools from the bureaucracy of local government and establish what has been described as 'school quasi-markets' (Thrupp, 2001), in which effective schools will have an 'arms-length' relationship with the LEA and, indeed, with each other.

This is arguably the most troubling aspect of our own research. It has revealed how a competitive context that values narrowly conceived criteria for determining success creates barriers to the development of a more inclusive education system (Ainscow, Howes & Tweddle, 2005; Ainscow et al, in press). Giroux and Schmidt (2004) explain how similar 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.

Bearing this in mind, I suggest that progress towards a more equitable system will require negotiations about values and principles, and a much greater emphasis on the sharing of expertise and resources between schools. Such an approach is consistent with what Stoker (2003) calls 'public value management', with its emphasis on network governance. Stoker argues that the origins of this approach can be traced to criticisms of the current emphasis on strategies drawn from private sector experience. He goes on to suggest that 'the formulation of what constitutes public value can only be achieved through deliberation involving the key stakeholders and actions that depend on mixing in a reflexive manner a range of intervention options'. Consequently, 'networks of deliberation and delivery' are seen as key strategies. In the education service, this would imply the negotiation of new, inter-dependent relationships between schools, LEAs and their wider communities (Hargreaves, 2003).

Our recent research suggests that Wenger's (1998) notion of a community of practice, defined as a social group engaged in the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise, is helpful in explaining the networking processes that can occur within networks of schools (Ainscow et al, 1995). Wenger himself notes the particular value of interconnected communities of practice. He uses the term 'constellation' to describe a grouping of discrete communities of practice that are related by some form of common meaning. At the same time, common meanings between those in different schools are, in our experience, more partial, more temporary and not as fully shared as those within a more discrete community. Indeed, we have found that this very partiality and lack of commonality can be provocative, providing opportunities to learn from difference through processes of school-to-school collaboration.

We argue, then, that strategies have to be developed that will encourage inter-dependence between schools, whilst, at the same time, easing those involved in a more inclusive direction. We have, for example, reported how three relatively successful schools partnered a school in difficulty in order to foster improvements

(Ainscow, West & Nicolaidou, 2005). Through experiences such as this, we have tried to ‘map’ factors at the district level that have the potential to either facilitate or inhibit such movements (Ainscow & Tweddle, 2003). This research suggests that two factors, particularly when they are closely linked, seem to be potentially very powerful. These are: *clarity of purpose*, and *the forms of evidence* that are used to measure educational performance.

Our experience has been that a well-orchestrated debate about the values that inform policy development can lead to a wider understanding of the principle of inclusion within a network of schools and the local communities it serve. 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. At the same time, 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’. So, for example, English LEAs 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, not least in terms of their attitude to students who are seen to be challenging. This has led the current ‘audit culture’ to be described as a ‘tyranny of transparency’ (Strathern, 2000). This suggests that great care needs to be exercised in deciding what evidence is collected and, indeed, how it is used. The challenge is, therefore, to harness the potential of evidence as a lever for change. In other words, we must learn to ‘measure what we value’, rather than is often the case, ‘valuing what we can measure’.

In one English LEA, for example, we are currently collaborating with officers and school principals on the development and dissemination of its ‘Inclusion Standard’, an instrument for evaluating the progress of schools on ‘their journey to becoming more inclusive’ (Moore, Jackson, Fox & Ainscow, 2004). The Standard focuses directly on student outcomes, rather than on organisational processes, and uses the views of students as a main source of evidence. So, for example, it does not require a review of the quality of leadership in a school. Rather, it focuses on the presence, participation and achievements of students, on the assumption that this is what good leadership sets out to secure. Similarly, the Standard does not examine whether or not students are given the opportunity to take part in school activities. Rather, it sets out to assess whether students, particularly those at risk of marginalisation or exclusion, actually take part and benefit as a result. In these ways, the aims are: to increase understanding within schools of inclusion as an ongoing process; to foster inclusion (in terms of presence, participation and achievement); and to use the student voice as a stimulus for school and staff development. The intention of the LEA involved is that the Standard will become an integral part of schools’ self-review and development processes.

Conclusion

The approaches to school improvement described in this paper involve an emphasis on collaboration and inquiry. As we have seen, leadership practices are central to these ways of working. In particular, there is a need to encourage coordinated and sustained efforts by whole staff groups 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 for school improvement must be with staff members: 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, behaviour and patterns of attendance.

Such approaches require groups of stakeholders within a particular context to engage in a search for a common agenda to guide their efforts and, at much the same time, a series of struggles to establish ways of working that enable them to collect and find meaning in different forms of evidence. In so doing the members of the group are exposed to manifestations of one another's perspectives and assumptions. At its best, this provides endless opportunities for developing new understandings as to how schools can become more inclusive.

All of this is based on the idea that *schools know more than they use* and that the logical starting point for development is, therefore, with a detailed analysis of existing practices (Ainscow, 1999). 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, as I have stressed, the focus of these approaches is not just on practice. It is also on the thinking behind these ways of working. Collecting and engaging with evidence within a school provides a means of surfacing taken for granted assumptions that may be the source of the barriers that some learners experience.

All of this reminds us that school improvement is essentially a social process. In this sense, inclusive school improvement is about learning how to live with difference and, indeed, learning how to learn from difference.

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Correspondence:

Mel Ainscow, School of Education, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, United Kingdom. Email: Mel.Ainscow@man.ac.uk