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Developing inclusive schools: three perspectives from England

Abstract

This paper makes available to a German-language readership the findings of three studies undertaken by the author in the field of inclusive schools. The first is a systematic review of the English language research literature on inclusive schools. The second is a series of case studies of schools educating high proportions of students with ‘special educational needs’. The third is a study of teacher research teams working to make their schools more inclusive. Synthesising these studies, I conclude that there are two models of inclusive school development. One assumes that they arise out of exceptional circumstances and commitments. The other assumes that they are much like other schools and arise out of undramatic processes of teacher reflection and policy support. I argue that this latter model is particularly appropriate where policy makers are trying to encourage inclusive approaches across a school system as a whole.

Keywords: school system in England, development of inclusive schools

Perspectives on inclusion

This paper is concerned with the development of inclusive schools. Specifically, it seeks to make available to a German-speaking readership the findings of a series of research studies conducted in England, and to explore the implications they might have for the development of inclusion in their countries. In some ways, this is a straightforward task. It has long been recognised that the development of inclusion is a ‘global agenda’ (Pijl et al., 1997), embodied in international declarations (most notably, the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), and taking much the same form wherever it
appears. The implication is that the findings of research in England can be transferred unproblematically to the education systems of Germany, Austria, Switzerland or other countries.

However, it is also the case that inclusion is a notoriously ‘slippery’ concept, with its roots in many different streams of thought (Clough, 2000; Dyson, 1999), and deeply embedded in the structures, histories and cultures of different education systems (Artiles & Dyson, 2005). In England, for instance, both scholars and policy makers have argued that inclusion is not simply about the placement of disabled children in mainstream schools, but is a more fundamental approach to education which has implications for all children (see, for instance, Booth, 2004; Ofsted, 2000; QCA, 1999). This may be something to do with the nature of the English education system, which is largely non-selective, where only a relatively small proportion of children – just over 1% - are educated in segregated special settings, yet where, as many of 20% of school students – most of them not regarded as ‘disabled’ – are identified as having ‘special educational needs’ (DCSF, 2009). In this context, the development of inclusive schools can be seen either as a very challenging task in which schools and their teachers have to be persuaded to change their fundamental approaches to educating children, or as little more than a relatively minor extension existing school capacities. This is a dichotomy to which we shall return in due course.

It is not difficult to see how these conceptual and contextual complexities make the idea of a single, agreed definition of inclusion problematic, let alone allowing that definition to be used across system boundaries. It follows that there is unlikely to be one model of ‘the inclusive school’, or one process for developing such schools. In the remainder of this paper, I wish to consider some of these complexities by reporting on three studies of inclusive schools which colleagues and I have carried out in recent years. These studies were designed and conceptualized differently, with the consequence that they embody different understandings of inclusion and yield different findings about how inclusive schools might be developed. In the final section of the paper, therefore, I wish to explore these differences in order to outline two fundamental perspectives on inclusion, and hence on the development of inclusive schools. I shall then conclude by suggesting how these different perspectives might be used in the context of education systems that are very different from that in England.

**Study 1: culture and exceptionalism**

The first study took the form of a systematic review of the English-language literature on inclusive schools (Dyson et al., 2002; Dyson et al., 2004b). ‘Systematic’ reviews are methodologically-explicit and highly-rigorous reviews of research literature aimed at identifying the most robust evidence on their chosen topic (EPPI-Centre, 2007). They start from the formulation of a precisely-articulated review question, similar to the research questions
which inform empirical research. They then move on to a comprehensive search of databases and other sources to identify research reports likely to be relevant to this question. The reports identified in this way are screened for their relevance in accordance with explicit criteria, and a (usually small) number are then analysed in detail by extracting the research evidence from the reports in a structured way. The robustness of this evidence is weighed – again in accordance with explicit criteria – and is synthesized in order to produce the ‘best’ answer to the review question.

The review question we formulated was:

*What evidence is there that mainstream schools can act in ways which enable them to respond to student diversity so as to facilitate participation by all students in the cultures, curricula and communities of those schools?*

This question, of course, embodies a de facto definition of inclusion which sees it as concerned with a fundamental approach to the education of all children rather than simply with the placement of disabled students. We screened over 14,000 citations, read 325 reports (i.e. publications arising from research studies) and identified 41 of these (from 27 studies) which met inclusion and exclusion criteria derived from this review question. This rate of attrition, though not altogether unusual in systematic reviews, nonetheless raises questions about the robustness of the very large volume of research literature in the inclusion field.

From this process, we identified four themes where the research literature yielded what seemed to be trustworthy findings. These were:

1. **The importance of school culture.** A theme running strongly through all studies was the importance of cultural factors in promoting (or inhibiting) inclusion. By 'culture' in this sense, we meant the norms, values and accepted ways of doing things in schools. The development of more inclusive approaches emerged from these studies as intertwined with the development of a distinctively inclusive school culture, marked by an acceptance and celebration of difference, a commitment to offering educational opportunities to all students, a high level of staff collaboration, a willingness of teachers to learn together, and the promotion of collaboration between students and between school staff and parents. These cultural characteristics appeared much more important than specific forms of organisation and practice.

2. **Leadership and decision-making.** The collaborative nature of school cultures in these studies implied a particular form of leadership and decision-making. Strong school leaders, committed to inclusive values, are crucial to the development of more inclusive schools, but such leaders must recognise the importance of collaborative processes. The leaders of inclusive schools are not autocrats, but, rather, supporters and enablers of their staffs who were engaged in a collaborative process of school development.

3. **Structures and practices.** No single model of how inclusive schools should be organised emerged from these studies. However, schools tended to have engaged in some degree of restructuring to create more
flexible and less segregated forms of provision. Likewise, a diversity and flexibility of pedagogical approaches seemed to be important, rather than any particular set of techniques. The implication seemed to be that the cultural factors set out above will generate a range of teaching approaches which will be flexible and responsive to individual difference.

4. A supportive policy context. Even where schools develop 'inclusive' internal culture, they cannot divorce themselves from the policy and wider social contexts in which they are located. Policies which are broadly pro-inclusive support the development of inclusion at school level, and those which are hostile to inclusion or privilege other educational values make the task of inclusive schools significantly more complex.

The model which emerges from this review of what inclusive schools has much in common with the broader view of inclusion that has developed in England (and elsewhere). If inclusion is seen as being a principled approach to the education of all children, it is not surprising that the key to developing inclusive schools is seen as lying not in the adoption of particular practices and forms of provision, but in the development of distinctive school cultures, and the presence of strong and principled leadership. It is not surprising either that the literature tends to present such schools as exceptional, and to see them and their leaders as battling against a tide of non-inclusive policy which overwhelms most other schools.

However, widespread as this view was in the literature we reviewed, the evidence supporting it was decidedly flimsy. For the most part, studies took the form of single school or small-\(n\) case studies where the schools were identified as inclusive on the basis of nomination or self-identification, rather than through some independent assessment of their inclusivity. Fieldwork tended to be limited and to draw heavily on interviews with teachers and school leaders rather than on observations of practice or impacts on children. There were very few comparative studies between more and less inclusive schools to identify the distinguishing features of either.

All of this leaves a nagging doubt about much of the research literature on inclusive schools. That literature undoubtedly demonstrates that there are schools that are marked by an exceptional commitment amongst their teachers and leaders to principles of inclusion. However, it does not demonstrate unequivocally that such exceptional commitment is essential to the development of inclusive schools, nor even that it necessarily translates itself into different experiences and outcomes for children. There may, in short be other – perhaps, even, better – ways of being and becoming inclusive, and these might be revealed by other kinds of study. It is to this possibility that I now wish to turn.
Study 2: what do inclusive schools look like?

Some six years ago, colleagues and myself undertook a study of the relationship between the inclusiveness of a school and the achievements of its students for the ministry of education in England (Dyson et al., 2004a; Dyson et al., 2007; Farrell et al., 2007; Kalambouka et al., 2007). For the purposes of this study, we operated with a (by English standards) rather restricted definition of inclusion, as being simply the presence in the school of students identified as having special educational needs. An inclusive school is thus one which educates a higher proportion of such children than might be expected from other features of the school’s demographic.

The study had two main aims. One was to determine whether inclusion in this sense had any impact on children’s achievements across the school as a whole. The analyses of achievement and population data we undertook suggested that it did not. However, the second aim of our study was more relevant to our concerns in this paper. Given that inclusion seemed to be unrelated to achievement, how were highly inclusive schools managing themselves so as to avoid the ‘dragging’ effect of having a disproportionately high number of students with difficulties in their populations. To explore this, we undertook small-scale case studies of 16 schools primary and secondary schools. Our data collection methods were similar to those of many of the studies we accessed in the systematic literature review. We relied on interview data with school staff, supplemented by direct observation of classrooms to understand how the forms of provision they told us about were implemented in practice. Crucially, however, the case study schools were selected not because we or their head teachers believed them to be inclusive, but because we had statistical evidence that they were inclusive, at least in terms of the make-up of their student populations.

What we learned about these schools raised some important questions about the ‘orthodox’ view of what makes schools inclusive as it emerged from our systematic review. In brief:

1. Different ‘inclusive’ schools were, in fact, very different in terms of their student populations. Some, for instance, educated concentrations of children with particular disabilities in the context of school populations that otherwise experienced few difficulties. Others educated a high proportion of children who were achieving at very low levels, in the context of populations that were themselves low-achieving and facing multiple difficulties. Other schools again showed some mixture of these population characteristics.

2. Different schools organised their provision in very different ways. Some placed children with special educational needs in ‘units’ or ‘resource bases’ so that they spent significant periods of time away from their peers. Others placed them in mainstream classrooms, perhaps with additional adult support. Most commonly, schools established flexible provision, so that children identified as having special educational needs
spent their time in different learning environments, sometimes alongside their mainstream peers, and sometimes in semi-segregated settings.

3. Classroom practices in highly inclusive schools tended to show considerable flexibility in terms of individual planning, individual support, a variety of activities, and a mixture of individual, group, and whole-class work. However, these were features that could probably be found in well-organised classrooms everywhere. There was no indication that there was a distinctive pedagogy that was peculiar to highly-inclusive schools.

4. The heads and teachers of inclusive schools were typically values-driven, in the way that our systematic review had led us to expect. However, their commitment was not so much to inclusion per se as to the principle of ‘doing the best they could’ for all of their students. ‘Doing the best’ in this sense did not necessarily carry with it any commitment to educating students in particular settings, and was entirely compatible with the kind of mixed, flexible provision we have just described. Moreover, this commitment did not prevent them reporting significant practical difficulties in educating a wide range of students in the same school and (where this occurred) in the same classroom. Students with ‘behaviour difficulties’ in particular were seen as being difficult to include in mainstream schools and classrooms, and even the most committed teachers found these challenges hard to meet.

5. Highly-inclusive schools were certainly welcoming and supportive institutions for children with difficulties. However, this did not prevent them also being committed to driving up the achievements of all of their students. They tended to have a range of strategies for raising achievement that were typical of those employed by all schools, and the presence of students identified as having special educational needs did not appear to inhibit these strategies.

Our findings from this study are, of course, not directly comparable with those from our systematic review. We were less interested in underlying school processes – the ‘culture’ of the school and the extent of teacher collaboration, for instance – than were many of the studies included in the literature review, and we were using a narrower definition of inclusion. Nonetheless, the two pieces of work do suggest that there might be a significant difference between schools where teachers and leaders consciously set out to act on inclusive values, and those which in practice include a high proportion of children with difficulties. This latter group of schools appear little different from what we know of all other schools. Their practices and forms of organisation are flexible and thoughtful, but do not seem to be much different from those of other well-organised schools. In particular, the way they organise their provision for students identified as having special educational needs is pragmatic rather than ideologically-driven, and tolerates greater or lesser degrees of segregation.

Whereas the studies in our systematic review emphasised the exceptional character of inclusive schools and their teachers and leaders, the schools we
worked with in this study appeared as rather unexceptional. Indeed, what was striking was that, for the most part, these schools had become highly inclusive, not through choice, but through circumstance. The educated high proportions of children with special educational needs not because they had chosen to do so, but because these children lived locally, or because the local authority (responsible for organising education in the area) had decided to locate provision for children with a particular type of need in the school. Moreover, although some of the schools in the sample had become known for their positive attitude towards children with difficulties, and were therefore being actively selected by the families of such children, the schools themselves were not always happy with this situation. Far from seeking to become yet more inclusive, they were concerned about the possible negative impacts of acquiring a reputation as the local ‘special educational needs school.

This presents a rather different view of inclusive schools from that in much of the inclusion literature – a view which emphasises the similarities between highly-inclusive schools and others rather than their differences. This in turn has implications for how we might understand the development of inclusive schools. If such schools arise out of strong ideological commitments, assertive head teacher leadership, and distinctively ‘inclusive’ cultures, then their development is likely to depend on the coming together of an exceptional head with an exceptional staff, in policy contexts which support the inclusive values of both. If, however, inclusive schools are much like other schools, then the process of development might be much less exceptional – and much more accessible to a wide range of schools. It is with such a development process that our third study was concerned.

Study 3: developing inclusive schools

Between 1999 and 2003, I was involved with teams of researchers from three UK universities in a project called Understanding and Developing Inclusive Practices in Schools (Ainscow et al., 2004; Ainscow et al., 2006; Ainscow et al., 2009; Dyson & Gallannaugh, 2007; Dyson et al., 2003)⁠. The project involved university teams working with networks of eight or nine schools in each of three local authority areas. The aim was to support these schools in becoming more inclusive by working alongside them to examine the inclusivity (or otherwise) of current practices and develop new, more inclusive, ones. A particular emphasis was placed on the use of evidence, and therefore each school was encouraged to designate a small teacher research team, representing a cross-section of the staff, whose task it was to collect evidence about current practices and consider its implications.

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The kinds of evidence gathered by these teams included classroom observations, examinations of students’ work, and interviews with students. The teacher research teams met with their counterparts from other schools in their local authorities on a number of occasions each year, and there was an annual conference at which the teams from the three local authority areas came together to exchange findings.

Given the tendency of the inclusion literature to emphasise the exceptional nature of inclusive schools, it is important to note that the schools in our sample were a fairly typical cross-section of schools in England. Certainly a few explicitly presented themselves as ‘inclusive schools’ and displayed many of the characteristics we had been led to expect by our systematic review. Most, however, had no particular history of commitment to inclusion, and had populations that were very similar to those of other schools in their areas. Indeed, at the start of the project some of them were a little anxious in case becoming involved might require them to accept more students with difficulties than they already had. It is also important to note that they were working in a policy context where the national government was engaged in what the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, called “an unprecedented crusade to raise standards” (Blair, 1999). In other words, they were being required – on pain of public humiliation and external intervention – to focus not on the values of inclusive education, but on raising children’s attainments in English and Maths particularly, by following centrally-prescribed forms of organisation and teaching.

In this context, we did not offer the schools a tight definition of what inclusion might mean, or of what kinds of practices and forms of provision were inclusive. Instead, we suggested that inclusion was something to do with accepting and responding to diversity in school populations in positive ways, but left each school to determine what this might mean in its own circumstances. Not surprisingly, perhaps, many schools began this process by identifying issues that were closely related to the national ‘standards agenda’, focusing on how to improve boy’s writing (which was a particular concern nationally at the time), or on how to manage students whose behaviour was difficult, or on some other aspect of students’ attainment.

From this point, schools followed somewhat different trajectories. Some, which already saw themselves as inclusive, appeared to see the project as an opportunity to invite researchers to celebrate their existing practices. Others began to identify significant ways in which some of their students were marginalised by current arrangements, only for the process to be cut short by the head teacher’s reluctance to explore problematic issues, or by the teacher research team’s fear of how the rest of the staff might react. The commonest response, however, was for the initially quite narrowly-conceived inquiries to broaden out over time to encompass more substantial issues and more significant aspects of school practice. For instance, one school began to explore how it could bring children with learning difficulties from its segregated ‘unit’ into in mainstream classrooms.
Another abandoned its traditional approach to teaching literacy in favour of what, in the context of national prescriptions, was a high-risk language- and experience-based approach. Another again took the equally risky step of opening up videos of lessons for scrutiny by its research team, and so began to develop more collaborative forms of developing its practices.

In themselves, none of these changes was dramatic. There was no evidence of schools transforming themselves over the lifetime of the project from self-evidently non-inclusive to self-evidently inclusive institutions. Their populations remained unchanged, their forms of provision remained largely stable, and there was no trumpeting of inclusive values. On the other hand, the kinds of less dramatic shifts in thinking and practice outlined above suggested to us that most of the schools were on a journey. It was a slow and sometimes hesitant journey, but, if pursued over time, would make them more inclusive institutions than those which began the project in 1999.

Our analysis was that two aspects of this journey were particularly significant. First, the engine driving the development of these schools was not the advent of a charismatic head teacher, or a sudden conversion to inclusive values. Rather, it was being asked to engage with evidence about the actual nature of the school’s practices and the impacts of those practices on actual students. Teachers certainly brought values to bear on this engagement, but they were the values of ‘doing the best for all students’ that we also encountered in the highly-inclusive schools in Study2. However, what changed thinking and practice was not a commitment to new sets of values, but a collaborative engagement with evidence about real children in real classrooms, in a way which disturbed the assumptions teachers held about themselves and their students.

Second, as I indicated above, this process of development occurred in the context of the national ‘crusade for standards’. In our systematic review, national policy contexts frequently appeared as hostile to inclusion, and as negative forces against which inclusive schools had to battle. The stance of the schools in this project, however, was more ambiguous. Whilst there were aspects of the standards agenda they wished to resist, there were also aspects of that agenda which informed and supported their efforts to become more inclusive. Specifically, the focus on standards directed their attention to students who were doing badly in the schools’ current arrangements, and whose difficulties stimulated teachers to develop new practices. At the same time, by studying these children’s difficulties closely, teachers typically became convinced that the practices prescribed by the standards agenda were inadequate, and that more creative and ambitious approaches needed to be developed. In this way, working in the context of the standards agenda also enabled schools to escape the limitations of that agenda.
Putting it all together:
how can inclusive schools be developed?

What emerges from these studies, I suggest, are two very different models of what inclusive schools are and how they can be developed. The first model, emerging from the bulk of the literature reviewed in study 1, offers what might be called the ‘exceptional’ view of inclusion. It sees the inclusivity or otherwise of a school as stemming from a deep and principled commitment to inclusive values on the part of the teachers and, especially, of the head teacher. It implies that, since education systems are tend not to be based explicitly and wholly on such values, inclusive schools will necessarily find themselves working against the prevailing direction of education policy in those systems, and will therefore only emerge in exceptional circumstances – notably, when exceptional school leaders are able to impose inclusive values on the school as a whole, and maintain those values in the face of the non-inclusive tendencies of the system as a whole.

The second model offers what we might call the ‘unexceptional’ view of inclusion. As our engagement with schools in studies 2 and 3 suggests, schools that are, or are becoming, inclusive may not actually be very different from most other schools. They may indeed act on the basis of values and principles, but these are likely to be similar to the values that many educators hold, and need not involve an explicit commitment to distinctively inclusive principles. Likewise, they may be well-organised, and have flexible and individually-responsive provision and practices, but not in a way that seems very different from many other schools. Finally, the process of becoming inclusive for such schools seems to depend less on exceptional leaders battling the policy context than on more mundane processes of reflective development or even of chance, in which the policy context is accepted and may even be supportive.

These models, it seems to me, pose two interesting questions for policy makers and for others who wish to see the extension of inclusion in their national systems. First, what kind of inclusive schools do they wish to develop? Is the criterion of inclusivity to be the level of principled commitment to inclusive values on the part of teachers and leaders? Or is it to be the presence of a diverse range of students and the emergence of practices capable of responding to those students? The two are not, of course, mutually exclusive, and ideally inclusive populations and practices emerge out of principled commitments. However, it is important to remember that inclusive practices can also emerge without an explicit commitment to inclusion, and that the research evidence is not strong in demonstrating that the schools which articulate the most explicit commitment to inclusive values also have the most positive impacts on their students.

Second, what kind of inclusive schools is it practicable to develop? The ‘exceptional’ model, by definition, demands the coming together of
exceptional leaders and teachers in exceptional circumstances. It also seems to demand either that national policy becomes wholly supportive of inclusion, or that schools are able to stand out against policy. On the face of it, this seems like a recipe for the development of a small number of ‘showpiece’ inclusive schools, but an unlikely way to make whole school systems more inclusive. By contrast, the ‘unexceptional’ model rests on the kinds of commitments, practices and forms of provision that are common in very many schools. The process of development is not one that depends on the presence of exceptional individuals, but one in which ordinary teachers engage with the realities of their own students and classrooms and seek to extend the responsiveness of their work. Moreover, that process is not one which conflicts hopelessly with the other aims of national policy, but which interacts with, and may even be supported by, those aims. Whatever the limitations of this model may be in developing showpiece inclusive schools, it seems like a more promising way of bringing some form of inclusion to the school system as a whole.

This brings us finally to the question of what these three perspectives on inclusion from England might have to say to countries elsewhere, and, specifically, to the countries where the readership of this journal work. It is probably true to say that the history of inclusion in England has been more about the spread of the ‘unexceptional’ model of inclusive schools than of the ‘exceptional’ model, driven by a process of incremental reform over very many years. In this context, it is realistic to suppose that the next stage in the development of inclusion in England might best take the form of a further incremental development, supported by relatively minor modifications to education policy (Ainscow et al., 2006). Whether this is an option elsewhere may well depend on whether the school systems in those countries have developed over time an adequate foundation of inclusive provision and practice. Some inclusion advocates in England would no doubt argue that radical reform led by ‘exceptional’ schools is the only way forward, and this may well be true elsewhere. What these three studies show, however, is that the outcomes of such a course are not as certain as might be supposed, and that the development of inclusive schools does not necessarily have to happen in this way.

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