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Teacher Leadership: Agency, Enquiry and Inclusion in School Improvement

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Abstract

Theoretical frameworks and practical strategies for inclusion, e.g. from the 'Index for Inclusion' (Booth and Ainscow, 2002) are already well established in supporting schools in identifying and tackling barriers to learning and participation. These ideas can also offer a fresh perspective in exploring leadership and agency in relation to school improvement. What do principles of inclusion have to offer to our understanding of concepts of shared leadership, leadership density and leadership capacity and their relationships with school improvement?

This paper builds on previous research into teacher-led school improvement and its impact. In particular, the crucial role of teachers and the wider school workforce in developing inclusion through their own leadership, collaboration and enquiry is explored. A cycle is identified whereby inclusive leadership encourages further spread of inclusive cultures and practices in learning, participation and leadership. This is illustrated by contemporary evidence of the impact of teachers' leadership in several education contexts. Internal accountability, individual and collective confidence, creativity and enthusiasm for learning are seen to be strengthened. This offers both inspiration and challenge for schools, reinforcing the notion that

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approaches making explicit links between leadership, agency, enquiry and learning are powerful in building capacity for improvement.

Inclusion as a process of improvement

School improvement arguably involves inclusion, not as a 'state' to be achieved but as a process with which the school needs to engage. Ainscow *et al.* (2006) conceive of inclusion as a process in which inclusive values and principles are articulated and enacted in practice. They suggest that this involves the following activities:

- collaboration
- active engagement
- participation in decision making
- recognising and accepting diversity of identity
- valuing education in maintaining the community.

Inclusion is conceived as developmental, describing a school that is moving towards inclusive policies, practices and cultures (Booth and Ainscow, 2002), rather than one that has reached a certain stage or met a set of criteria. In this developmental process, the aim is that all members of the school community become active participants and contributors, embodying the inclusive approaches listed above, approaches which are familiar in current school improvement literature. This offers no 'comfort zone' within the improvement discourse; Ainscow *et al.* (2006) believe that inclusive approaches inject 'attitude' into school improvement, where teachers, school leaders and other members of the school community are committed to the adoption of a principled and ethical stance in relation to curriculum, pedagogy and relationships which offers continual challenge, subjecting practice to scrutiny in a process within which enquiry has a crucial role.

Challenges for learning and leadership

This paper is intended as a preliminary exploration of the relationships between the discourses of inclusion and teacher leadership and a consideration of the implications of inclusive values and principles for teachers' professional roles and activity and for school leadership structures and approaches. The notion of 'removing barriers' is key, along with responding to diversity and setting suitable learning and leadership challenges. Slee (in Ainscow, 1999:xi) suggests that inclusion is a "profoundly subversive and transformational undertaking". The following quotation from Galton and MacBeath (2008) sets the scene for such an exploration:

Good teachers have always known how to be educationally subversive. They have refused to underestimate their own sense of agency and have been able to perceive the scope for radical change within their own classrooms and within their own schools. They refuse to collude with the victim mentality which relinquishes initiative, self-belief and a sense of agency. They are encouraged, supported and empowered by a senior leadership team which understands that schools learn and change from the bottom up (p.115).

The emphasis on classroom improvement is prominent in the inclusion discourse. Recent research by Galton and MacBeath (2008) has highlighted the pressures experienced by teachers called upon to implement inclusive approaches that work 'against the grain' compared with systemic structures and priorities. In examining the interplay between the three 'worlds' of inclusion policy, aspirational classroom practice and existing practice, they found that teachers widely agreed with the principles of inclusion but identified problematic aspects such as differentiated provision, decision making, expertise and support. The progress towards greater inclusion could not be achieved without appropriate expertise and resources and was highly context-sensitive. Teachers saw real benefits but these were almost invariably qualified; they occurred where certain local conditions were met: a supportive culture, an absence of resistance or resentment in response to special needs, adequate meeting of students' needs in the mainstream setting and appreciation for teachers' efforts.

Inclusion in policy, culture and practice

This gives some indication of the tensions inherent in the process of putting into practice inclusive values and principles. It shows the importance of the 3-strands of focus emphasised in Booth *et al's* 'Index for Inclusion' (2002):



In order for inclusive practice to become embedded, policies at both national and local level need to be coherent and accordant with inclusive values and principles in order that school-based developments can be effective. Also, organisational cultures in schools need to be conducive to inclusive approaches. As Galton and MacBeath (2008) assert, the connections between the macro-methodology of policy and the micro-methodology of the classroom must not be underestimated.

Whatever the context, Galton and MacBeath's (2008) study shows that effective inclusive development depends on the goodwill of teachers, shared belief in "inclusion as a force for good" (p.79) and quality of leadership. Even where such conditions are right, Ainscow *et al.*'s (2006) case studies show that improvement is "halting, partial and ambiguous". Where the ambition is to work towards a full realisation of inclusive principles in practice (i.e. beyond "narrow goals of measured attainment" and other aspects easily quantified such as attendance figures), the research suggests that this calls for more subtle, social processes which cannot be addressed technically by the allocation of responsibilities to individuals in schools, training days, policy documents and adjustments of organisational structure. It is a *social* process in which people need to make meaning, embedding their actions within understandings of shared values and principles. This can be achieved through communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) in which open and flattened leadership styles, enquiry and collegial relationships enable organisations to maintain stability and adapt to new situations. Therefore, while there is much that can be done to provide a coherent policy context for improvement, the extent to which schools can 'move' (Rosenholz, 1989) depends largely on subtle and detailed nuances within schools and amongst individuals. Diversity becomes a resource for challenging and learning from one another's experiences, beliefs and assumptions (Ainscow *et al.*, 2006). Thus the improvement process is a matter of human commitment and action rather than of bureaucratic legislation.

From leadership of inclusion to leadership as inclusion

The complex social process of moving a school along the inclusion continuum requires an inclusive approach to leadership and teacher professionalism as well as to students' learning. Dyson *et al.*, in their review of effectiveness of school actions in promoting inclusion, find that

Schools with inclusive cultures are likely to be characterised by the presence of leaders who are committed to inclusive values and to a leadership style which encourages a range of individuals to participate in leadership functions (in Ainscow *et al.*, 2006:39).

It is suggested that the appointment of leaders should take into account their commitment to inclusion and participatory styles of leadership. Explicit links are made between the participation and learning of students and the involvement of teachers and other staff in decision making about teaching and learning activities. This is echoed by Corbett (2001) who explains the importance of creating an inclusive staff team who can share common vision and purpose without stifling diversity. She goes on to suggest that the process of inclusion involves learning to look 'through an inclusive lens'. , while Hart (2003) notes the potential of connecting teachers' power and learners' power in 'co-agency'. This relies on learners taking up the invitation to develop competence, control, enjoyment and safety in their learning, which in turn relies on teachers developing sophisticated understanding of diversity of learning needs, processes and preferences and taking action to adjust their practice accordingly. Again this is not merely conceived as a technical process but is driven by their "passions and sense of social justice" (p.231).

Ainscow *et al.* (2006) similarly suggest that the participation and learning of students is linked to the participation of staff in decision making about teaching and learning. If this is the case then the inclusion discourse must be linked with the leadership discourse. This is relevant in terms of how headteachers and those with particular responsibility (e.g. Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (Sencos)) implement inclusion in their own schools. It also relates to the development of "communal responsibility" (Ainscow *et al.*, 2006: 186) *between* schools, a difficult notion where many schools are working in competition, succeeding or failing on their individual organisational merits. Perhaps most importantly, it concerns how all staff (teachers and others) engage with the values and principles of inclusion and put them into practice not only in their classrooms but in their professional approaches. For Galton and MacBeath (2008), teachers are increasingly responsible for setting the agenda as leaders of both children's and colleagues' learning, with "distributed leadership as a mantra" (p.115). Here we see how a real commitment to inclusion is about much more than what happens in the classroom; it must involve changing the leadership structure and culture of the organisation in response to the challenges of inclusion.

Leadership for all

The international school leadership discourse embraces shared leadership and the building of leadership capacity across the whole organisation. There is increasing emphasis on inclusive leadership models that take into account teachers' leadership and individual agency. As has been argued previously (Durrant, 2005; Frost and Harris, 2003), this is not simply a matter of sharing (distributing) leadership to particular individuals by delegating tasks or appointing teachers to specific roles. It requires a new, inclusive concept of teacher professionalism that embraces each person's leadership capacity as a right as well as a responsibility of teaching professionals (Meredith, 2000, following Forster, 1997). Leadership here is a fundamental aspect of humanity that should be fostered in everyone (Frost, 2003). Of course this has to be supported by the headteacher (principal) in order to achieve significant influence and coherence (Frost and Durrant, 2004; Crowther *et al.*, 2002). Headteachers have the greatest influence on the ways in which leadership is interpreted and exercised by individual members of the school community whose perspectives, agendas and activities combine in 'conjoint agency' (Gronn, 2003), to determine the direction, nature and momentum of school change. Sergiovanni (2000) concludes that there is more potential for organisational improvement where leaders surrender authority in favour of more inclusive leadership (the concept of 'leadership density'). Spillane (2003) agrees that leadership is more powerful when 'stretched' over the individuals in an organisation to include both formal and informal leadership roles (Spillane, 2003). Crowther *et al.* (2002) consider that this can be achieved through teachers' collaborative learning and culture building, echoing the inclusive approaches introduced at the start of this paper.

Within this field of distributed leadership and in particular teacher leadership, it can therefore be seen that the same emphasis is placed on social processes and personal engagement as within the discourse of inclusion. This is reflected in the complexity of the processes involved, the importance of sensitivity to context, the significance of individuals' commitment to values, the development of understanding and 'meaning making'. In the next section of the paper I explore some evidence for inclusive approaches in three scenarios where effective school improvement has been demonstrated and/or advocated inclusive leadership and learning approaches, based upon evaluations in which I have been directly involved.

Evidence for inclusive approaches to school improvement through teacher leadership

Example 1: A Masters Programme in School Development

The MA in School Development at Canterbury Christ Church University has been well documented in its development, structure and influence and has spawned a series of publications explaining its unique structure of support for teacher led school development (Frost *et al.*, 2000; Frost and Durrant, 2003, 2004; Durrant and Holden, 2006). Essentially, teachers are involved in a process of clarifying their values and concerns and deciding upon a focus for development, then drawing up detailed action plans for enquiry and professional action to support a form of action research. The resulting leadership of development in their schools involves teachers directly in collaboration to lead and manage change, the gathering and using of evidence in enquiry, and challenging and testing of ideas in practice. The outcomes include changed organisational structures and cultures, the development of individual and organisational capacity and improved student learning; sometimes there are also influences beyond the school, for example on local communities and educational policy. The structure of the programme is supported by partnerships between the University and schools or local agencies including as Local Authority 'clusters' (collaborative groups of schools within the District). Teachers generally meet in schools or at convenient local venues with occasional visits to the university campus for conferences (CANTARNET, 2008), use of the library and study weekends.

A small-scale research project investigated the impact of this MA along with other programmes supporting teacher leadership, as a result of which a conceptual framework was produced for the planning, tracking and evaluation of the impact of teacher-led development work (Frost and Durrant, 2002; Durrant, 2007). This has been used as the basis for developing a tool for analysis of the impact of all Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programmes within the Faculty of Education (CCCU, 2006). This enables programme directors to gather evidence to meet government accountability requirements but more importantly to gather evidence from participants, mostly teachers, in order to evaluate the programmes in terms of their impact on pupil, professional and organisational learning.

For the purposes of this paper, the evidence gathered from teacher participants in the MA in School Development in 4 education settings for the academic year 2007-8

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was analysed in relation to the inclusive approaches listed by Ainscow *et al.* (2006) and at the start of this paper: collaboration; active engagement; participation in decision making; recognising and accepting diversity of identity; valuing education in maintaining the community. The education settings were three urban secondary schools in contrasting contexts and one group comprising participants from seven different schools (primary, secondary and special) within an Excellence Cluster (providing funding and intervention in an area of socio-economic deprivation), providing a range of participant perspectives.

This analysis shows that this programme, which explicitly encourages all teacher participants to exercise leadership in their professional situations, whatever their role and career stage, demonstrates outcomes that are consistently aligned with inclusion both in leadership and in supporting students' learning.

Teachers report that their proactive development of practice and participation in decision making along with active leadership of change has increased, typically commenting

“[I have] increased confidence and awareness in selecting effective solutions to teaching and learning issues.”

“Greater contribution, awareness and knowledge allow me to hold former opinions and contribute more.”

Most have ideas about how to progress this further in the future, for example by making contact with other schools or setting up working parties or project groups in their own schools. Individual and collective capacity has increased through collaborative working, clarifying values and purpose and building professional confidence:

“I share my feelings and ideas with my immediate work colleagues. They have been encouraged to think about why they do things much more deeply.”

“It has affected self-awareness and commitment of colleagues by way of reflection, engagement.... collaboration and the importance of support.”

Collaborative enquiry has fuelled this process, engaging colleagues with evidence and evaluating and legitimating change (see Durrant and Holden, 2006):

“Team spirit has been improved, confidence improved and greater reflection, valuing students’ opinions.”

“I started really listening to learners and explore issues which have affected learning and opportunities”

Clearly, through their investigations teachers are more aware of students’ learning processes and have challenged their own and colleagues’ practice, deepened their understanding and broadened their pedagogic repertoires. The improvements reported range from classroom to whole school change. Professionally, many participants report a significant change of motivation and mindset, seeing themselves as leaders of learning and school improvement, with some discovering renewed commitment and energy in their professional lives:

“[I have taken] greater interest in whole school issues and my opinions and ideas seem to be more in demand within the school.”

Overall the evidence suggests a movement towards more participative, responsive approaches tailored to local circumstances and individual learning needs, according closely with inclusive values and principles.

Example 2: ‘Teachers as Readers: Building Communities of Readers’

This project built on a previous study entitled ‘Teachers as Readers’ (see Cremin *et al.*, 2008). Its national survey of 1200 primary teachers disclosed that while most are committed readers, their knowledge of children’s literature was relatively narrow. This raised concerns as to whether teachers were knowledgeable enough to guide and recommend reading, to plan literacy work for diverse student needs and to extend beyond a limited canon of the most popular authors whose work children are already selecting for themselves. It was recognised that children’s literature is not formally acknowledged as part of a primary teacher’s professional repertoire.

In the second, developmental phase of the project, ‘Teachers as Readers: Building Communities of Readers’ 2007-8 (TaRs), sponsored by the United Kingdom Literacy Association and the Esmeé Fairbairn Foundation, the aims were to

1. widen primary teachers' knowledge of children's literature in order to support independent reading for pleasure.
2. develop teachers' confidence and skilful use of such literature in the classroom in order to foster reading for pleasure.
3. develop teachers' relationships with parents, carers, librarians and families in order to support independent reading for pleasure.
4. develop 'Reading Teachers' - teachers who read and readers who teach - in order to support independent reading for pleasure.

The project was led by a core team of researchers supporting action research by 50 teachers in 5 Local Authorities led by Local Authority Co-ordinators (Cremin *et al.*, 2008).

While the inclusion agenda was familiar within all the Local Authorities as part of national policy, this project did not emphasise inclusion explicitly, but focused on teachers' professional development, action research and leadership of change in their schools. However, the outcomes demonstrate inclusive approaches very clearly, giving plentiful evidence for a reciprocal relationship between inclusive approaches to leadership and inclusive learning (Durrant, 2008).

In terms of professional learning, collaborative enquiry and professional development amongst teachers as they have read a wider range of literature has helped them to recognise one another's diverse preferences and has challenged assumptions and preconceptions. They have become far more aware of the range of learning and reading preferences amongst children and have adapted their practice using a wide repertoire of approaches. This has led to much greater engagement of children, including some case study children who were previously disaffected, would not have thought of themselves as readers and are now eager to engage in regular 'book talk'. Wider participation and involvement has extended into other classrooms through collaborative work led by the teachers directly involved, and is beginning to spread to families and communities. Children have more choice in their reading and are more active participants in their learning. There is widespread evidence of barriers to participation and learning being broken down, and also of teachers developing the confidence, creativity and capacity to become actively involved in leading change as a direct result of the inclusive support and structuring of the project.

There has been intense interest in the outcomes of this project and it has already been widely disseminated throughout the country as part of the government's Primary National Strategy including detailed guidance materials for Local Authorities and teachers (Cremin *et al.*, 2008). Teachers, schools and Local Authorities adopting this approach find that supporting teachers' professional development, enquiry and agency using the models that have been developed, encourages inclusive developments in schools. This includes not only more inclusive learning in classrooms but also the shifting of organisational culture towards more inclusive leadership approaches in a reciprocal relationship - each is supportive of the other.

Example 3. Creative Partnerships Hastings and East Sussex: evidence from Creative Commentaries

Creative Partnerships is a government initiative, managed by Arts Council England "...to develop the skills of young people across England, raising their aspirations and achievements, and opening up more opportunities for their futures" by transforming teaching and learning. Creative professionals such as storytellers, artists and poets work with teachers, pupils and other members of the school community to design and implement projects that bring creativity into the school curriculum. A strong theme is the participation of children and young people in planning implementing and dissemination. Nationally, the programme has involved over 2,400 primary, secondary and special schools, targeting 36 deprived areas of England (Creative Partnerships, 2008).

Creative Partnerships was established in the Hastings area of South East England in 2005 and has operated for the past three years in 23 educational settings including primary, secondary and special schools. In autumn 2007, Hastings and East Sussex Creative Partnerships commissioned five commentaries to reflect the work it had done in the 23 core educational settings over the three years 2005 – 2008 (Creative Partnerships Hastings and East Sussex, 2008). The five 'lenses' through which the work was reviewed were decided in conjunction with East Sussex School Improvement Service (the District / Local Authority) as areas of particular interest to education professionals and policymakers. Five independent researchers were employed to carry out the reviews under the following headings:

- Every Child Matters⁽¹⁾
- Learning Environments
- Partnerships
- Language Development
- Pupil Voice

The researchers were appointed to investigate the ways in which these themes were emerging in the work both directly and indirectly, to examine the issues arising and to write a 'critical commentary'. Evidence from the evaluation at the end of the first year (Durrant, 2006) together with the Creative Commentaries' research reveals a commitment to inclusive learning and leadership which, while perhaps often implicit rather than explicit in the documentation and discourse, has contributed to powerful improvement.

Examining the evidence in relation to the inclusive approaches listed at the start of this paper, the programme has fostered the following:

- collaborative learning amongst professionals, children and young people and between the school workforce and the 'creative partners' who came into schools to lead school-based projects, also powerful collaborative learning between schools supporting one another;
- active engagement of all students, sometimes spreading to the whole school community;
- emphasis on student participation and voice including at the planning stage of projects;
- recognition, celebration, articulation and development of diverse perspectives, skills and preferences amongst students and the school and wider education workforce, challenging existing ideas and practice through working creatively across traditional curriculum boundaries, across professions, in new spaces and with new opportunities for learning;
- strengthening links with local communities (e.g. through working with local planners) and with local organisations and agencies (such as galleries and libraries), which has improved schools' image and morale in a deprived area and taken learning beyond classroom walls and school boundaries.

Examination of the process of the programme shows that action research and collaborative learning amongst teachers and other participants has enabled them to engage with and enact inclusive values and principles. This has been achieved by challenging practice, developing shared understandings and making meaning of new

¹ 'Every Child Matters: Change for Children' sets out the government's aim that every child should have support for the following outcomes: enjoy and achieve; achieve economic wellbeing; stay safe; be healthy; make a positive contribution.

learning experiences for themselves in the process of creating new learning opportunities for children and young people.

Enquiry, agency, action

Examining these three examples, it is clear that there are parallels across improvement programmes with very different approaches and contexts. It is significant that in all three examples, leadership was encouraged, supported and structured amongst teachers and other participants. Reports of developing confidence, skills and sense of agency were typical in all three examples, along with expressed intentions to pursue the work further, spread the message and increase the impact through further collaborative work. Where improved student learning and school change were paramount, professional development emerged more as an outcome than an input (Durrant, 2007) as participants decided their own agendas, learnt from one another and offered mutual support, which challenges traditional 'training and delivery models', offering the opportunity for maximum participation and involvement amongst teachers as well as their students. Also significant is the engagement of teachers and other participants, including students, in enquiry, as researchers and learners within the improvement process (see Durrant and Holden, 2006). Owning and working with evidence has clearly given all these improvement processes more direction and power. The examples show school communities with flattened hierarchies and blurring of roles, where people are getting involved together in improvement of their organisations, not as recipients of training or beneficiaries of policy but as agents of change and leaders of learning. The result is often exciting and creative, often unpredictable, meeting students' learning needs in local contexts and challenging teachers as leaders and learners to move to new places in their thinking and action.

Inclusive approaches to school improvement: leadership and learning

This initial exploration suggests that, whether inclusion is implicit within school improvement projects and programmes or whether it has explicit emphasis, it is valuable to examine both learning and leadership in relation to inclusive values, principles and approaches. The discourse of inclusion has much to offer in the planning and implementation of activity to improve learning for all, not just for those with particular needs, and provides helpful ideas and frameworks for evaluation.

Furthermore, the evidence from these examples demonstrates inclusive approaches to professional learning and powerfully inclusive leadership models. Here, the participation and involvement of teachers and the wider workforce as agents of school change and leaders of learning demonstrates that radical change can indeed be achieved within their own classrooms and schools, as suggested by Galton and MacBeath (2008). With the right conditions, structures and support, including from senior school leaders and external agents, schools can learn and change through teachers' creativity, leadership, mutual learning and support. It would be valuable to progress this thinking further to test the extent to which the theoretical frameworks for inclusion can be embedded more explicitly within school improvement endeavours. Given the strong relationships between inclusive leadership approaches and the removal of barriers to participation and learning amongst students, a starting point might be to move from developing leadership *of* inclusion to approaching school leadership *as* inclusion. This offers the opportunity to create the kind of challenge and 'disturbance' (Ainscow et al, 2006) that leads to real change and increase the integrity and coherence of developmental processes throughout organisations, changing their culture so that improvement is more sustainable through the learning and leadership of all.

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