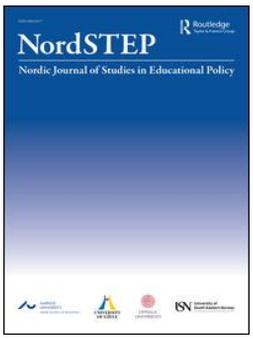

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Promoting inclusion and equity in education: lessons from international experiences

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ABSTRACT
This paper focuses on a major challenge facing education systems around the world, that of finding ways of including all children in schools. In economically poorer countries this is mainly about the millions of children who are not able to attend formal education (UNESCO, 2015). Meanwhile, in wealthier countries many young people leave school with no worthwhile qualifications, whilst others are placed in special provision away from mainstream education and some choose to drop out since the lessons seem irrelevant (OECD, 2012). Faced with these challenges, there is evidence of an increased interest in the idea of making education more inclusive and equitable. However, the field remains confused as to the actions needed in order to move policy and practice forward.

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Inclusive education; equity; system reform; leadership practice

Introduction

This paper focuses on a major challenge facing education systems around the world, that of finding ways of including all children in schools. In economically poorer countries this is mainly about the millions of children who are not able to attend formal education (UNESCO, 2015). Meanwhile, in wealthier countries many young people leave school with no worthwhile qualifications, whilst others are placed in special provision away from mainstream education and some choose to drop out since the lessons seem irrelevant (OECD, 2012). Faced with these challenges, there is evidence of an increased interest in the idea of making education more inclusive and equitable. However, the field remains confused as to the actions needed in order to move policy and practice forward.

In the paper I draw on research carried out with colleagues in various parts of the world that points to some promising possibilities (for more detailed accounts see Ainscow, 2016a). In so doing, I provide frameworks that may be helpful to readers as they consider the other contributions to this journal. I begin, however, by summarizing relevant international developments.

The international policy context

Over the last 30 years there have been major international efforts to encourage inclusive educational developments. In particular, the United Nation's Education for All (EFA) movement has worked to make quality basic education available to all learners. Agreed in 1990, the EFA Declaration sets out an overall vision, which is about being proactive in identifying the barriers some learners encounter in attempting to access educational opportunities. It also involves the identification of resources available at national and community level, and bringing them to bear on overcoming those barriers. This vision was reaffirmed by the World Education Forum meeting in Dakar, 2000, held to review the progress made in the previous decade. The Forum declared that EFA must take particular account of the needs of the poor and the disadvantaged, including working children, remote rural dwellers and nomads, and ethnic and linguistic minorities, children, young people affected by conflict, HIV/AIDS, hunger and poor health, and those with special learning needs.

A major impetus for inclusive education was given by the World Conference on Special Needs Education in 1994. More than 300 participants representing 92 governments and 25 international organizations met in Salamanca, Spain to further the objective of Education for All by considering the fundamental policy shifts required to promote the approach of inclusive education, namely enabling schools to serve all children, particularly those defined as having special educational needs (UNESCO, 1994). Although the immediate focus of the Salamanca conference was on what was termed special needs education, its conclusion was that:

> *Special needs education – an issue of equal concern to countries of the North and of the South – cannot advance in isolation. It has to form part of an overall*

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> *educational strategy and, indeed, of new social and economic policies. It calls for major reform of the ordinary school.*
>
> *(p. iii–iv)*

The aim, then, is to reform education systems. This can only happen, it is argued, if mainstream schools become capable of educating all children in their local communities. The Salamanca Statement concluded that:

> *Regular schools with [an] inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system.*
>
> *(p.ix)*

As this key passage indicates, the move towards inclusive schools can be justified on a number of grounds. There is an *educational justification*: the requirement for inclusive schools to educate all children together means that they have to develop ways of teaching that respond to individual differences and that therefore benefit all children; a *social justification*: inclusive schools are able to change attitudes to difference by educating all children together, and form the basis for a just and non-discriminatory society; and an *economic justification*: it is likely to be less costly to establish and maintain schools which educate all children together than to set up a complex system of different types of school specializing in particular groups of children.

Further impetus to this movement was provided by the 48th session of the IBE-UNESCO International Conference on Education, with its theme *'Inclusive Education: The Way of the Future'*. The long-term objective of this event was to support UNESCO member states in providing the social and political conditions which every person needs in order to exercise their human right to access, take an active part in, and learn from educational opportunities (Opertti, Walker, & Zhang, 2014). During the conference, ministers, government officials and representatives of voluntary organizations discussed the importance of broadening the concept of inclusion to reach all children, under the assumption that every learner matters equally and has the right to receive effective educational opportunities.

Moving forward, the year 2016 was particularly important in relation to the future of the EFA movement and, indeed, the legacy of Salamanca. Building on the Incheon Declaration agreed at the World Forum on Education in May 2015 (UNESCO, 2015), it saw the publication by UNESCO of the Education 2030 Framework for Action. This emphasizes inclusion and equity as laying the foundations for quality education. It also stresses the need to address all forms of exclusion and marginalization, disparities and inequalities in access, participation, and learning processes and outcomes. In this way, it is made clear that the international EFA agenda really has to be about 'all'.

The importance of including disabled children is an essential strand within this new international policy agenda. This was stressed in the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2008), which states: *'The right to inclusive education encompasses a transformation in culture, policy and practice in all educational environments to accommodate the differing requirements and identities of individual students, together with a commitment to remove the barriers that impede that possibility.'*(General Comment No 4) The Convention defines non-inclusion, or segregation, as the education of students with disabilities in separate environments (i.e. in separate special schools, or in special education units located with regular schools). It commits to ending segregation within educational settings by ensuring inclusive classroom teaching in accessible learning environments with appropriate support. This means that education systems must provide a personalized educational response, rather than expecting the student to fit the system.

A new commitment reinforcing inclusion and equity in education was expressed at an International Forum, co-organized by UNESCO and the Ministry of Education of Colombia in September 2019 to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Salamanca Declaration. As underlined by the theme 'Every learner matters', the Forum was an opportunity to revive the broadened notion of inclusion as a general guiding principle to strengthen equal access to quality learning opportunities for all learners.

Like all major policy changes, progress in relation to inclusion and equity requires an effective strategy for implementation. In particular, it requires new thinking which focuses attention on the *barriers* experienced by some children that lead them to become marginalized as a result of contextual factors. The implication is that overcoming such barriers is the most important means of development forms of education that are effective for all children. In this way, inclusion becomes a way of achieving the overall improvement of education systems.

A whole-system approach

International experience has led me to formulate a framework for thinking about how to promote inclusion and equity within education systems (see Figure 1). Amended from an earlier version (Ainscow, 2005), it focuses attention on five interrelated factors, summarized in the diagram below. Together, they can help in determining 'levers for change' (Senge, 1989).

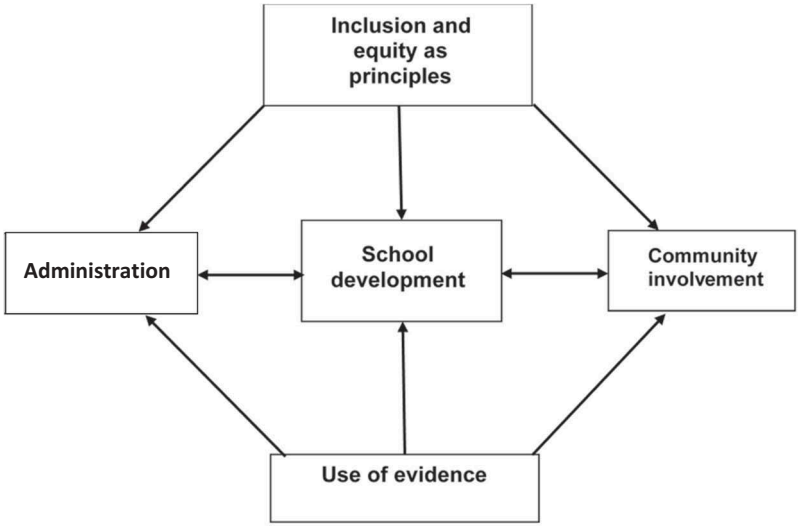

Figure 1. Review framework.

The framework places schools at the centre of the analysis. This reinforces the point that moves towards inclusion must be focussed on increasing the capacity of local neighbourhood mainstream schools to support the participation and learning of an increasingly diverse range of learners. This is the paradigm shift implied by the Salamanca Statement, which I have described as an 'inclusive turn' (Ainscow, 2007). It argues that moves towards inclusion are about the development of schools, rather simply involving attempts to integrate vulnerable groups of students into existing arrangements.

At the same time, the framework draws attention to a range of contextual influences that bear on the way schools carry out their work. As explained below, these influences may provide support and encouragement to those in schools who are wishing to move in an inclusive direction. However, the same factors can act as obstacles to progress. These influences relate to: the principles that guide policy priorities within an education system; the views and actions of others within the local context, including members of the wider community that the schools serve and the staff of the departments that have responsibility for the administration of the school system; and the criteria that are used to evaluate the performance of schools. In what follows each of the five factors are explained, leading to a series of key ideas that need to be considered in developing future policies.

Inclusion and equity as principles

Terms such as 'equity' and 'inclusion' can be confusing since they may mean different things to different people. This is a particular problem when trying to move forward with other people – not least in schools, where everybody is so busy. Put simply, if there is not a shared understanding of the intended direction, progress will be difficult. There is, therefore, a need for agreed definitions of these concepts. Recent international policy documents argue that they should be seen as principles that inform all aspects of educational policy (e.g. UNESCO, 2017).

In some countries, inclusive education is still thought of as an approach to serving children with disabilities within general education settings. Internationally, however, it is increasingly seen more broadly as a principle that supports and welcomes diversity amongst all learners. It presumes that the aim of is to eliminate social exclusion that is a consequence of attitudes and responses to diversity in race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender and ability. As such, it starts from the belief that education is a basic human right and the foundation for a more just society. Hence, the emphasis on equity, which implies a concern with fairness.

Our research suggests that it is helpful to use a definition of inclusive education that involves a process that is concerned with the identification and removal of barriers to the presence, participation and achievement of all students (Ainscow et al., 2006). At the same time, it involves a particular emphasis on those groups of learners who may be at risk of marginalization, exclusion or underachievement.

We have found that a well-orchestrated debate about these elements can lead to a wider understanding of the principle of inclusion. Furthermore, 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. These debates must involve all stakeholders within communities, including families, political and religious leaders, and the media. They should also involve those within national and local district education offices. Recently, in countries such as Colombia,

Ecuador, Mexico, Oman and Uruguay, I have used the indicators provided by *The Guide for Ensuring Inclusion and Equity in Education* (UNESCO, 2017) to facilitate such discussions.

Use of evidence

Previously I have argued that evidence is the lifeblood of inclusive development (Ainscow et al., 2006, 2012). Therefore, deciding what kinds of evidence to collect and how to use it requires care, since, within education systems, '*what gets measured gets done*'. This is widely recognized 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. 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. The challenge is, therefore, to harness the potential of evidence as a lever for change, whilst avoiding these potential problems.

The starting point for making decisions about the evidence to collect at the system level should be with an agreed definition of inclusion. In other words, we must 'measure what we value', rather than is often the case, 'valuing what we can measure'. In line with the suggestions made earlier, then, evidence collected within an education system needs to relate to the *presence, participation and achievement* of all students, with an emphasis placed on those groups of learners regarded to be 'at risk of marginalisation, exclusion or underachievement'.

An engagement with evidence is also crucial at the level of the school, where it can provide the stimulus for professional learning. The starting point for developing inclusive practices is with the sharing of existing approaches through collaboration amongst staff, leading to experimentation with new practices that will reach out to all students (Ainscow, 2016b). This requires the development of a common language with which colleagues can talk to one another and, indeed, to themselves, about detailed aspects of their practice. Without such a language, teachers find it very difficult to experiment with new possibilities (Huberman, 1993). A framework that can help in the promotion of an inclusive dialogue within a school is provided by the Index for Inclusion, a review instrument developed originally for use in England but now available in many countries (Booth & Ainscow, 2002)

The use of evidence to study teaching within a school can help in generating a language of practice (Ainscow et al., 2006). This, in turn, can foster the development of practices that are more effective in reaching hard to reach learners. Specifically, it can create space for rethinking by interrupting existing discourses. Particularly powerful techniques for generating evidence involve the use of mutual lesson observation, sometimes through video recordings, and comments collected from students about teaching and learning arrangements within a school (Ainscow & Messiou, 2017). Under certain conditions, such approaches provide *interruptions* that stimulate self-questioning, creativity and action. In so doing they can lead to a reframing of perceived problems that, in turn, draws the teacher's attention to overlooked possibilities for addressing barriers to participation and learning. In this way, differences amongst students, staff and schools become a catalyst for improvement.

Our current research is exploring teacher/student dialogue as a means of making this happen. This was stimulated by a study carried out between 2011 and 2014 that had a major impact on our thinking (see Messiou et al., 2016, for more details). It involved collaborative action research carried out by teams of teachers in eight secondary schools in three countries (i.e. England, Portugal and Spain), with support from locally based university researchers. The schools were chosen because of the diversity of their student populations. Each team experimented with ways of collecting and engaging with the views of students in order to foster the development of more inclusive classroom practices. Typically, teachers worked in trios following an approach based on lesson study, a systematic procedure for the development of teaching that is well established in Japan and some other Asian countries (Lewis, Perry, & Murata, 2006). Meanwhile, members of the university teams monitored the process and outcomes of these activities.

So, for example, in planning a joint lesson they would each teach, one trio of teachers identified students within each of their classes who they saw as being particularly vulnerable. They felt that by thinking about the lesson with these individuals in mind they might create new and different ways of facilitating the learning of all of their students. One teacher talked about a student who would not speak, even when invited. Another teacher focused on one of his students who had severe dyslexia. This led the teachers to discuss how they might plan their lessons differently; they talked, for example, about getting the students to write on the whiteboard, and getting students to rehearse verbally what they wanted to say, rather than writing arguments down.

The trio decided that they needed to involve some of their students before teaching the lesson to get an

idea of how they preferred to learn. They also wanted to consider how best to plan the lesson to support the many differences amongst the students. They therefore selected seven students, each from a different ethnic background, six of who were born outside the country. The teachers got these students together at lunchtime and asked them to rank their preferences regarding different classroom activities that might be used when studying poetry. One of the teachers explained:

> Initially, they were quite reluctant to perhaps voice an opinion that they thought we wouldn't like … . We stepped back for a bit and just left the recording device on the table and let them talk about what they liked and what they didn't like, because if we're not imposing our views on them, they were more likely to be honest.

The overall aim of the lesson was to develop awareness of and confidence in a variety of dramatic techniques. Each teacher taught the lesson with their two colleagues observing, making changes in the light of the regular discussions that took place as they proceeded. It was noticeable that these conversations became increasingly focused on matters of detail and, as a result, led to a greater emphasis on mutual challenge and personal reflection. By the end of the process the three teachers all commented that they had been challenged to rethink their lesson planning and facilitation. Through this, they realized that new approaches gave members of the class the opportunities to learn out of their 'comfort zones' and, in so doing, this moved the teachers' expectations about the capabilities of their students.

Drawing on the lessons from this research in secondary schools, a current study is using a new model for developing learning and teaching that we call 'Inclusive Inquiry' (Messiou, 2019; Messiou & Ainscow, 2020). This uses dialogue involving teachers and students in order to explore possibilities for making lessons more inclusive. Central to the model is the idea of engaging with the views of students, a process that permeates all the processes involved.

The Inclusive Inquiry approach is currently being trialled in 30 primary schools in five countries (i.e. Austria, Denmark, England, Spain and Portugal).[1] It involves a series of interconnected processes, as shown in Figure 2. Central to these are discussions amongst teachers and their students about how to make lessons more inclusive. This involves students learning how to use research techniques to gather the views of their classmates.

The dialogues that this encourages are focused on learning and teaching. More specifically, differences amongst students and teachers are used to challenge existing thinking and practices in ways that are intended to encourage experimentation in order to foster more inclusive ways of working. This, in turn, sets out to break down barriers that are limiting the engagement of some learners.

The evidence from this study supports our earlier research which suggested that classroom-based research of this kind can be a powerful way of moving practice forward within a school. What is distinctive, however, is the added value that comes from engaging students themselves in the process. It is also clear that the use of the approach can present various organizational challenges. In particular, it has sometimes proved to be challenging of the status quo within schools. Consequently, greater collaboration is needed amongst teachers in order to support the introduction of new practices. This requires organizational flexibility and the active support of senior staff, prepared to encourage and support processes of experimentation. Indeed, it implies the need for cultural change within a school, a theme I return to below.

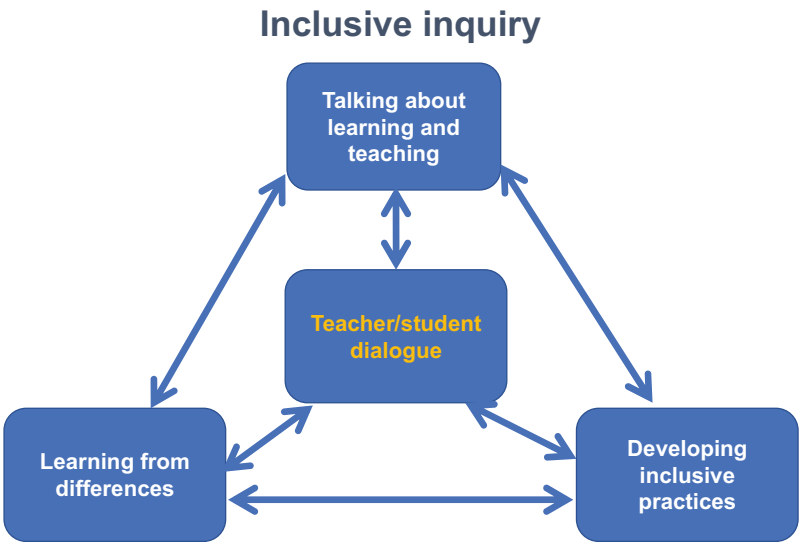

Figure 2. Inclusive Inquiry.

School development

There is not one single model of what an inclusive school looks like. What is common to highly inclusive schools, however, is that they are welcoming and supportive places for all of their students, not least for those with disabilities and others who experience difficulties (Dyson, Howes, & Roberts, 2004). This does not prevent these schools from also being committed to improving the achievements of all of their students. Indeed, they tend to have a range of strategies for strengthening achievement that are typical of those employed by all effective schools, and the emphasis on supporting vulnerable students does not appear to inhibit these strategies. A key factor is the emphasis placed on tracking and supporting the progress of all of the students.

A problem reported from a number of countries, is that despite national policies emphasizing the equal rights of children with disabilities to attend mainstream settings, there has been evidence over many years of significant increases in the proportions of students being categorized in order that their schools can earn additional resources (Fulcher, 1989; Meijer & Watkins, 2019). This has led to dissatisfaction with progress towards integration and brought demands for more radical changes. One of the concerns of those who adopt this view is with the way in which students come to be designated as having special needs (e.g. Slee, 2010). They see this as a social process that needs to be continually challenged. More specifically, they argue that the continued use of what is sometimes referred to as a 'medical model' of assessment – within which educational difficulties are explained solely in terms of a child's deficits – prevents progress in the field, not least because it distracts attention from questions about why schools fail to teach so many children successfully.

The implication is that schools need to be reformed and practices need to be improved in ways that will lead them to respond positively to student diversity – seeing individual differences not as problems to be fixed, but as opportunities for enriching learning. Within such a conceptualization, a consideration of difficulties experienced by students can provide an agenda for change and insights as to how such changes might be brought about. Moreover, this kind of approach is more likely to be successful in contexts where there is a culture of collaboration that encourages and supports problem-solving (Ainscow, 2016a; Skrtic, 1991).

According to this view, the development of inclusive practices is seen as involving those within a particular context in working together to address barriers to education experienced by some learners. These themes are further supported by a review of international research literature that examines the effectiveness of school actions in promoting inclusion (Dyson et al., 2004). In summary, this suggests that some schools are characterized by an *'inclusive culture'*. Within such schools, there is a degree of consensus among adults around values of respect for difference and a commitment to offering all students access to learning opportunities.

The extent to which such inclusive cultures lead directly and unproblematically to enhanced student participation is not clear. Some aspects of these cultures, however, can be seen as participatory by definition. For instance, respect for diversity from teachers may itself be understood as a form of participation by children within a school community. Moreover, schools with such cultures are also likely to be characterized by forms of organization (such as specialist support being made within the ordinary classroom, rather than by withdrawal for separate attention) and practices (such as cooperative group work) which could be regarded as participatory by definition.

All of this means that attempts to develop inclusive schools should pay attention to the building of consensus around inclusive values within school communities. This implies that school leaders should be selected in the light of their commitment to inclusive values and their capacity to lead in a participatory manner (Riehl, 2000). Finally, the external policy environment should be compatible with inclusive developments in order to support rather than undermine the efforts of schools.

Involving the wider community

In order to foster inclusion and equity in education, governments need to mobilize human and financial resources, some of which may not be under their direct control. Forming partnerships among key stakeholders who can support and own the process of change is therefore essential. These stakeholders include: parents/caregivers; teachers and other education professionals; teacher trainers and researchers; national, local and school-level administrators and managers; policy-makers and service providers in other sectors (e.g. health, child protection and social services); civic groups in the community; and members of minority groups that are at risk of exclusion.

Family involvement is particularly crucial. In some countries, parents and education authorities already cooperate closely in developing community-based programmes for certain groups of learners, such as those who are excluded because of their gender, social status or impairments (Miles, 2002). A logical next step is for these parents to become involved in supporting change for developing inclusion in schools.

Where parents lack the confidence and skills to participate in such developments, it might be necessary to engage and build capacity and networks. This

could include the creation of parent support groups, training parents to work with their children, or building the advocacy skills of parents to negotiate with schools and authorities. Here, it is worth adding that there is evidence that the views of families, including children themselves, can be helpful in bringing new thinking to the efforts of schools to develop more inclusive ways of working.

All of this means changing how families and communities work, and enriching what they offer to children. In this respect there are many encouraging examples of what can happen when what schools do is aligned in a coherent strategy with the efforts of other local players – employers, community groups, universities and public services (Kerr, Dyson, & Raffo, 2014). This does not necessarily mean schools doing more, but it does imply partnerships beyond the school, where partners multiply the impacts of each other's efforts.

This has implications for the various key stakeholders within education systems. In particular, teachers, especially those in senior positions, have to see themselves as having a wider responsibility for all children, not just those that attend their own schools. They also have to develop patterns of internal organization that enable them to have the flexibility to cooperate with other schools and with stakeholders beyond the school gate. It means, too, that those who administer school systems have to adjust their priorities and ways of working in response to improvement efforts that are led from within schools.

The role of administrative departments

Policy is made at all levels of an education system, not least at the school and classroom levels (Ball, 2010). As such, the promotion of equity and inclusion is not simply a technical or organizational change – it is a movement in a clear philosophical direction. Moving to more inclusive ways of working therefore requires changes across an education system. These span from shifts in policy-makers' values and ways of thinking, which enable them to provide a vision shaping a culture of inclusion, to significant changes within schools and classrooms.

A culture of inclusion in education requires a shared set of assumptions and beliefs amongst policy-makers and senior staff at the national, district and school level that value differences, believe in collaboration, and are committed to offering educational opportunities to all students (Ainscow, Chapman, & Hadfield, 2020). However, changing the cultural norms that exist within an education system is difficult to achieve, particularly within a context that is faced with so many competing pressures and where practitioners tend to work alone in addressing the problems they face. Leaders at all levels, including those in civil society and other sectors, therefore have to be prepared to analyse their own situations, identify local barriers and facilitators, plan an appropriate development process, and provide leadership for inclusive practices and effective strategies for monitoring equity in education.

National and district administrators have important roles in promoting inclusive ways of managing schools and education processes. In particular, they have to establish the conditions for challenging non-inclusive, discriminatory educational practices. They also need to establish the conditions that build consensus and commitment towards putting the universal values of inclusion and equity into practice. Particular forms of leadership are known to be effective in promoting inclusion in education (Riehl, 2000). These approaches focus attention on teaching and learning; they create strong supportive communities of students, teachers and parents; they nurture the understanding of a culture of education among families; and, they foster multi-agency support.

There is also evidence that school-to-school collaboration can strengthen the capacity of individual organizations to respond to learner diversity (Muijs, Ainscow, Chapman, & West, 2011). Specifically, collaboration between schools can help to reduce the polarization of schools, to the particular benefit of those students who are marginalized at the edges of the system. In addition, there is evidence that when schools seek to develop more collaborative ways of working, this can have an impact on how teachers perceive themselves and their work. Specifically, comparisons of practices in different schools can lead teachers to view underachieving students in a new light. In this way, learners who cannot easily be educated within the school's established routines are not seen as 'having problems', but as challenging teachers to re-examine their practices in order to make them more responsive and flexible.

Local coordination is needed in order to encourage such forms of collaboration (Armstrong & Ainscow, 2018). Indeed, a recent report noted that four of the most successful national education systems – Singapore, Estonia, Finland, and Ontario – each has a coherent 'middle tier', regardless of their differing extents of school autonomy or devolution of decision-making (Bubb, Crossley-Holland, Cordiner, Cousin, & Earley, 2019). In particular, they all had district level structures that offer a consistent view that, to maintain equity as well as excellence, there needs to be an authoritative co-ordinating influence with local accountability.

Having analysed two relatively successful large-scale improvement initiatives, Andy Hargreaves and I have suggested a way of supporting local authorities in responding to these new demands (Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015). We argue that, in taking on new roles,

districts can provide a valuable focus for school improvement, be a means for efficient and effective use of research evidence and data analysis across schools, support schools in responding coherently to multiple external reform demands, and be champions for families and students, making sure everybody gets a fair deal.

The problem is, of course, that not all local school systems are strong. Therefore, a way to reduce variation amongst school districts is to promote collaboration among them so they share resources, ideas, and expertise, and exercise collective responsibility for student success. In adopting this 'leading from the middle' approach, districts can become the collective drivers of change and improvement together.

Thinking about the development of policies for promoting inclusion and equity, it is encouraging to note the progress made in certain countries. For example:

- The Italian government passed a law in 1977 that closed all special schools, units and other non-inclusive provision (Lauchalan & Fadda, 2012). This legislation is still in force and subsequent amendments have further strengthened the inclusive nature of the education system. Not only did this close segregated educational facilities but it removed the possibility of exclusion from school as a corrective sanction. Whilst practice varies from place to place, there is no doubt that the principle of inclusion is widely accepted.
- Finland is a country which regularly outperforms most other countries in terms of educational outcomes. Its success is partly explained by the progress of the lowest performing quintile of students who take the PISA tests outperforming those in other countries, thus raising the mean scores overall (Sabel, Saxenian, Miettinen, Kristenson, & Hautamaki, 2011). This has increasingly involved an emphasis on support for vulnerable students within mainstream schools, as opposed to in segregated provision (Takala, Pirttimaa, & Tormane, 2009).
- Having enacted legislation making disability discrimination in education unlawful, Portugal has gone much further in enacting an explicit legal framework for the inclusion in education of students with and without disabilities (Alves, 2019). Recent legislation requires that the provision of supports for all students be determined, managed and provided at the regular school level, with local multidisciplinary teams responsible for determining what support is necessary to ensure all students (regardless of labels, categorization or a determination of disability) have access to, and the means to participate effectively in education, with a view to their full inclusion in society.

In drawing attention to these examples, I stress that they are not perfect. Rather, they are countries where there are interesting developments from which to learn. They are also varied in respect to the approach being taken and what they have achieved. Consequently, whilst lessons can undoubtedly be learned from these countries, they must be replicated with care.

There are many sources of inequity in education related to political, economic, social, cultural and institutional factors, and these vary across countries. This means that what works in one country may not work elsewhere. This is why an emphasis on system change strategies being contextually sensitive is one of the pervading themes in this paper.

Conclusion

In summary, then, the ideas that have emerged from this review of international experiences, research and policy documents regarding ways of promoting equity and inclusion are as follows:

- Policies should be based on clear and widely understood definitions of what the terms Inclusion and equity mean;
- Strategies should be informed by evidence regarding the impact of current practices on the presence, participation and achievement of all students;
- There should be an emphasis on whole-school approaches in which teachers are supported in developing inclusive practices;
- Education departments must provide leadership in the promotion of inclusion and equity as principles that guide the work of teachers in all schools; and
- Policies should draw on the experience and expertise of everybody who has an involvement in the lives of children, including the children themselves

These ideas indicate that the promotion of inclusion and equity in education is less about the introduction of particular techniques or new organizational arrangements, and much more about processes of social learning within particular contexts. As I have argued, the use of evidence as a means of stimulating experimentation and collaboration is seen as a central strategy. Copland (2003) suggests, inquiry can be the 'engine' to enable the distribution of leadership that is needed in order to foster participation in learning, and the 'glue' that can bind a community together around a common purpose.

Working with schools over many years to introduce this way of thinking, I have become aware of the complexities involved. One way to think about the processes at work is to see them as linked within an

'ecology of equity' (Ainscow et al., 2012). By this I mean that the extent to which students' experiences and outcomes are equitable is not dependent only on the educational practices of their teachers, or even their schools. Instead, it depends on a whole range of interacting processes that reach into the school from outside. These include the demographics of the areas served by schools; the histories and cultures of the populations who send (or fail to send) their children to school; and the economic realities faced by those populations. Beyond this, they involve the underlying socio-economic processes that make some areas poor and others affluent, and that draw migrant groups into some places rather than others. They are also influenced by the wider politics of the teaching profession, of decision-making at the district level and of national policy-making, and the impacts of schools on one another over issues such as exclusion and parental choice. In addition, they reflect new models of school governance, the ways in which local school hierarchies are established and maintained, and the ways in which school actions are constrained and enabled by their positions in those hierarchies.

It is also important to recognize the complexities of interactions between the different elements in this ecology, and their implications for achieving more equitable education systems. As my colleagues and I work on improvement projects with schools, we therefore find it helpful to think of three interlinked areas within which equity issues arise:

- *Within schools*. These are issues that arise from school and teacher practices. They include: the ways in which students are taught and engaged with learning; the ways in which teaching groups are organized and the different kinds of opportunities that result from this organization; the kinds of social relations and personal support that are characteristic of the school; the ways in which the school responds to diversity in terms of attainment, gender, ethnicity and social background; and the kinds of relationships the school builds with families and local communities.
- *Between schools*. These are issues that arise from the characteristics of local school systems. They include: the ways in which different types of school emerge locally; the ways in which these schools acquire different statuses, so that hierarchies emerge in terms of performance and preference; the ways in which schools compete or collaborate; the processes of integration and segregation which concentrate students with similar backgrounds in different schools; the distribution of educational opportunities across schools; and the extent to which students in every school can access similar opportunities.
- *Beyond schools*. This far-reaching arena includes: the wider policy context within which schools operate; the family processes and resources which shape how children learn and develop; the interests and understandings of the professionals working in schools; and the demographics, economics, cultures and histories of the areas served by schools. Beyond this, it includes the underlying social and economic processes at national and – in many respects – at global levels out of which local conditions arise.

Looked at in this way, it is clear that there is much that individual schools can do to tackle issues within their organizations, and that such actions are likely to have a profound impact on student experiences, and perhaps have some influence on inequities arising elsewhere. However, it is equally clear that these strategies do not lead to schools tackling between- and beyond-school issues directly. No school strategy can, for example, make a poor area more affluent, or increase the resources available to students' families, any more than it could create a stable student population, or tackle the global processes underlying migration patterns. But perhaps there are issues of access, or of the allocation of students to schools, that might be tackled if schools work together on a common agenda.

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

Note

1. The materials developed in both of these studies are available in various languages at: https://reachingthehardtoreach.eu/.

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