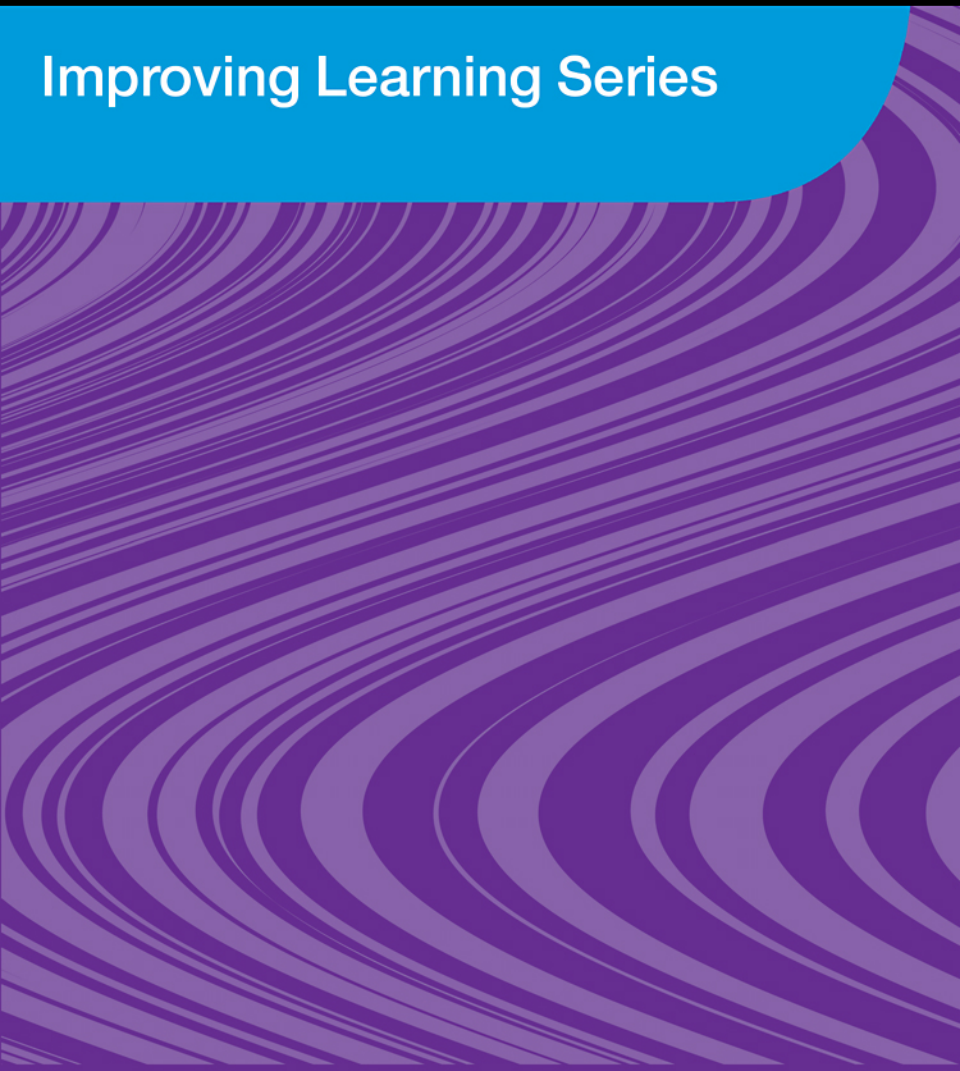
Improving Learning Series



Improving the Context for Inclusion

Personalising teacher development through collaborative action research

Andy Howes, S.M.B. Davies and Sam Fox

ROUTLEDGE

Improving the Context for Inclusion

This timely book addresses the need for increasing multi-agency capacity in schools, as the success of initiatives such as Every Child Matters or 'personalised learning' depends on teachers understanding the challenges faced by young people in learning effectively and happily in their school.

The authors of this thought-provoking book present and analyse case studies of collaborative action research, illustrating what is needed in practice for teachers to engage with inclusion for the benefit of their pupils and themselves. The essential elements of success with inclusion are revealed, including:

- the importance of identifying issues that teachers see as relevant;
- how teachers can achieve meaningful collaboration in addressing the issues;
- the necessity of paying careful attention to the consequences of the changes that they make;
- incorporating practical considerations such as critical support from outsiders;
- the role of facilitators such as educational psychologists in working with groups of teachers to support their development through action research;
- how to facilitate change through making use of resources that are already available in the education system.

Improving the Context for Inclusion is fascinating reading for all students of education, especially those with an interest in inclusion. Teachers, school leaders and those working in education services will gain an invaluable insight into how to create an inclusive school environment by personalising the development of teachers.

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Personalising teacher development through collaborative action research

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Contents

Series editor's preface ix
Acknowledgements x

PART I
What are the issues? **1**

1 Inclusion is a challenge **3**
Discourses of inclusion 6
Education and communities – exploring systems 12
The challenge for teachers 15
The particular challenge in secondary schools 18

PART II
What does the research tell us? **23**

2 Teachers are the solution **25**
Professional development for inclusion 26
Evaluating approaches to teacher professional development in relation to inclusion 35
Why action research? 44

3 Action research for inclusion **52**
An outline of our research 52
Case studies 56
Action-focused projects 57
Issue-focused projects 65
Drawing out themes 79
The actions that teachers took 84

4 What helped teachers **87**
Similarities and differences in teachers' contexts 88
Creating and structuring a space for teachers' engagement 91
Connecting the space to the institution 103
Processes for sustainability at the school level 105
Summarising teacher action research to develop inclusion 106

5 The impact for young people **109**
Teachers' own evaluation of the impact on pupils 109
Pupil views on classrooms and inclusion 111
Measuring pupils' changing perceptions of inclusion and participation 119

6 What makes effective facilitation? **124**
The context of educational psychology 126
The facilitator at Cwrt 131
The EP at Main Road 133
The EP at Hightown 141
The EP at Parc 146
The EP at Bont and Pentre 148

PART III
What are the implications? **153**

7 Improving the context for inclusion **155**
A view of teachers as 'local professionals' 158
The alignment of policy, structures and practices with this approach to teacher development 164
Facilitating facilitation: the role of local authorities and children's services 170
Conclusion: Improving the context for inclusion by personalising teacher learning 174

Appendix: How was the research carried out? **181**

References 186
Index 194

Series editor's preface

The *Improving Learning* series showcases findings from projects within ESRC's Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) – the UK's largest ever coordinated educational research initiative.

Books in the *Improving Learning* series are explicitly designed to support 'evidence-informed' decisions in educational practice and policy-making. In particular, they combine rigorous social and educational science with high awareness of the significance of the issues being researched.

Working closely with practitioners, organisations and agencies covering all educational sectors, the Programme has supported many of the UK's best researchers to work on the direct improvement of policy and practice to support learning. Over sixty projects have been supported, covering many issues across the life course. We are proud to present the results of this work through books in the *Improving Learning* series.

Each book provides a concise, accessible and definitive *overview* of innovative findings from a TLRP investment. If more advanced information is required, the books may be used as a gateway to academic journals, monographs, websites, etc. On the other hand, shorter summaries and *Research Briefings* on key findings are also available via the Programme's website at www.tlrp.org.

We hope that you will find the analysis and findings presented in this book are helpful to you in your work on improving outcomes for learners.

Andrew Pollard
Director, TLRP
Institute of Education, University of London

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This is a book about making sense of practice, and about learning through the attempt to develop more inclusive practice. Many people have contributed to this learning process and not all of them can be mentioned by name here.

Teacher action research is dependent on the engagement of teachers, and research on this process depends on the willingness of those teachers to go further in facilitating and assisting with the generation of data, and the presence of research staff in classrooms and staffrooms. We are grateful to all the teachers and headteachers who agreed to take part in Prosiect Dysgu Cydradd.

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Part I

What are the issues?

Chapter 1

Inclusion is a challenge

This chapter explains inclusion in schools as an inherently educational aspiration. A range of discourses and approaches to educational inclusion are introduced and referenced, along with a group of interventions which focus on actions outside schools which aim (among other things) to support access and participation in education. Then the focus shifts to teachers. The challenge that inclusion presents for teachers is explored, with an argument for focusing on the particular context of secondary schools. The chapter ends by arguing that teachers are so influential in schools that inclusion can only be addressed with their active engagement.

The starting point of this book is in an understanding of inclusion as a particular challenge in secondary schools, and as an issue on which schools can move forward only with the engagement of teaching staff. In this chapter we consider the complex discourse around inclusion, and relate it to some significant contemporary policy developments, including Every Child Matters and personalised learning, and also to educational agendas like pupil voice.

This is a hopeful book, in that it presents an approach to developing a more inclusive education system which depends on the professional engagement of teachers, but it is not a naively hopeful book (Grace 1994, pp. 19–20; Thrupp and Tomlinson 2005). We recognise all too clearly that meaningful inclusion represents a particularly challenging aim in secondary schools. There are many secondary school pupils who see much of their schooling as irrelevant, and feel themselves to be inadequate at school; and many secondary school teachers who

recognise and are dissatisfied with this situation but find it difficult to alter. What is missing in many schools is a process by which teachers can begin to alter the status quo. This book aims to identify and explore one such process.

The concept of inclusion as used in this book involves those who work in education posing questions about the way schools (and subjects, and lessons) are organised in relation to the engagement of young people in the educational process, and then taking action to address this issue. This includes:

- asking questions about how schools adapt to and work effectively with the diversity of their student populations;
- finding out about and working with what pupils bring with them to school rather than viewing differences in terms of deficits;
- taking greater account of the understandings that young people have of school and education, rather than seeking only to engage more young people in existing school practice.

Educational inclusion, then, involves treating each person as a human being, whether pupils, teachers, support staff or managers. Many young people in school come to be perceived and treated as if they occupied a single dimension, for example, as failed students, having ADHD, as trouble-makers, or as compliant and interested learners. Teachers can lose the sensitivity they need to see and interact with children and young people in their contemporary and social location, and with their expectations, constraints, hopes and fears. For us, educational inclusion incorporates a **view of the human self** that finds meaning in relationship to others, rather than being about the development of isolated individuals, and a **view of education** as an open-ended process of becoming for each person, rather than the achievement of pre-specified ends; it has a moral purpose, concerned with preparing each person to live a good life; and it is located in a particular historical and social context. This perspective draws on Fielding's (2006) presentation of the philosopher John MacMurray in his consideration of the institutional life of schools in terms of human rather than functional purpose. Conceived of in this way, inclusion can never result from a quick bolt-on solution to a pressing problem. Instead, the knowledge and understanding on which inclusion is necessarily based can only be gained through ongoing dialogue involving teachers and learners in the institution that they inhabit together. Inclusion, in other words, can be sustained and developed only when there are processes in place through

which solutions to problems and issues can emerge, and where these solutions primarily involve change and adaptation in the cultures, rules and practices of the school and classroom, and change only secondarily in the individuals and groups who appear not to fit in.

Inclusion in this sense is a challenge for teachers and for those who lead and manage schools. Of course many teachers consistently develop and organise effective and inclusive lessons, for example, through the use of images, games, and assessment for learning techniques to facilitate response to the difficulties, or surprising capabilities that they identify among their pupils. But this is not the whole story. Over recent years in England and Wales, many teachers have become used to receiving directives, and tend to express frustration when invited instead to spend time using their own experience and understanding to explore ways forward. Indeed, one of the stimuli behind the project on which this book is based was a seminar on inclusion and action research at Trinity College Carmarthen in 2004, in which the teachers attending expressed disappointment at not being given directions for how to develop their practice. Many teachers feel constantly short of time, and cannot necessarily see the value of engaging in questions of practice with each other as peers. Yet educational inclusion as we understand it requires a community of practitioners engaged primarily in learning with and from each other, with an open-ended agenda for development rather than a predetermined list of competencies to tick off, or the latest educational fad to accomplish. We see the need to counter those dominant discourses around schooling which reduce teachers to individual technicians in a system designed and run elsewhere. We need to know how to create a context in schools in which dialogue and understanding between teachers and learners is valued, in which teachers see themselves as professional learners, and where they recognise the primacy of their own expertise in responding to the young people they are teaching, rather than the promise of the latest initiative.

In this book, we aim to justify our belief in a process which can help to construct such a context, in which developments towards inclusion can be explored, supported and understood within and beyond the school community. Such a process requires a degree of clarity in respect of inclusion in practice (this chapter); the valuing of particular features of teacher professional development (Chapter 2), and a critical, reflective approach towards change within the school and its communities (Chapters 3–6). The book concludes by considering what we learn from all this about improving the context for inclusion in schools.

In the following sections of this chapter, we first consider the various discourses of inclusion and explain our particular focus on the engagement of young people in learning. We then look at broader interventions around school and community, and explore the limitations of their impact on teachers' practice. The implications for teachers of our approach to inclusion are then explored, with particular reference to the challenges faced by teachers in secondary schools.

Discourses of inclusion

Inclusion, like 'reflection' (Morrison 1996, p. 317), has become a portmanteau term, used for such a variety of purposes that it has passed beyond ambiguity and is becoming a source of confusion. As a further complication, different definitions of inclusion dominate in different countries. It may be that the use of the word 'inclusion' in the title of this book is misleading to some readers, although we hope to show that similar issues underlie many different approaches to inclusion, and that therefore there is value in our approach to people working in many different contexts. In any case, the widespread application of the term 'inclusion' demands that it still be addressed, and so it is helpful to briefly review some of the main uses to which it is put. To do this, we begin with a 'typology of six ways of ways of thinking about inclusion' (Ainscow *et al*. 2006, p. 15). In an analysis that builds on one by Clough (2000, p. 8), these authors show how inclusion has been considered in many, sometimes contradictory ways over the past few decades, and how those approaches continue to influence practice, with complex and sometimes perverse consequences. They discuss:

- Inclusion as a concern with disabled students and others categorised as 'having special educational needs'.
- Inclusion as a response to disciplinary exclusion.
- Inclusion in relation to all groups seen as being vulnerable to exclusion.
- Inclusion as 'Education for All'.
- Inclusion as developing the school for all.
- Inclusion as a principled approach to education and society.

(Ainscow *et al*. 2006, p. 15)

Defining inclusion in any of these ways has consequences for the types of activities and the ways of knowing that will be seen to promote inclusion. Each of these definitions of inclusion has merit, but they also

create obstacles in the way they are deployed in practice. The first three definitions spring from the best of intentions in a need to address a perceived injustice, and to overcome the barriers to education for particular pupils. Thus, for example, the inclusion of disabled students and those seen as having special educational needs into mainstream schools is a (qualified) legal requirement in the United States, and to a lesser extent in many other countries including England and Wales, and 'inclusion' is widely taken to signify this focus. Inclusion is also widely understood as the converse of exclusion from school (as a result of challenging behaviour, for example); and school inspection in England and Wales has extended this notion to be a concern for all groups vulnerable to exclusion. Each of these can be justified in terms of practical necessity for all young people concerned.

However, the practice that follows these definitions also creates new problems, because they so easily lead back to a limiting of educational opportunity, based more or less on the identification and indeed extension of differences between people, and on their 'constitutional' characteristics (Thomas and Loxley 2007, p. 141). There is a critical sense in the listing of vulnerable groups 'that there may be some common processes which link the different forms of exclusion experienced by, say, children with disabilities, children who are excluded from their schools for disciplinary reasons and people living in poor communities' (Ainscow *et al*. 2006, pp. 19–20). In practice however, the invitation to analyse and interrogate the origins of such processes goes unnoticed, and the listing of groups becomes yet another way to categorise and label pupils.

In countries of the Global South, inclusion often has yet another meaning – it is widely linked to the aim of Education for All, and concerns mainly the issue of increasing enrolments in schools in the context of poverty and lack of access. Somewhat similar to this is the aim of developing the school for all, to establish a properly comprehensive system in which school development is about reducing barriers to learning and participation for all pupils. This is the basis, for example, of the widely referenced Index for Inclusion (Booth *et al*. 2000). Both of these approaches avoid any categorisation of groups, but in practice have been easily subverted or subordinated to other agendas because they lack any specific focus or sense of challenge – they are hard to argue against in general, but they provide relatively little direction with which to pursue particular issues.

As a consequence, Ainscow *et al*. (2006) argue for an approach based on values and principles as the most robust, perhaps incorruptible way

of moving towards such a state of inclusion. They link this to the UNESCO (2001) formulation of inclusion as a 'reform that supports and welcomes diversity amongst all learners' (Ainscow *et al*. 2006, p. 2), and characterise the approach as '*school improvement with attitude*' (p. 1). An explicit approach to values helps to avoid the dangers that 'deflect attention away from the deeply unjust nature of the world' (Fielding 2006, p. 363), dangers which are certainly present in the discourses of inclusion as school development, where much talk about inclusion can appear to be cosy, based on a romanticised view of the human person who floats, as it were, detached from economic context, with no biography and subject to no social expectations or constraints.

The values approach is one that assumes relatively little about educational settings in general, and approaches inclusion as a process of developing practice in a specific context according to a set of inclusive and educational values and principles. Certainly it embraces some general features of inclusive practice: some practices are

> so integral to our conception of inclusion that they define themselves: for example the reduction of bullying among children and adults in education or the building of relationships of collaboration and respect, or the involvement in schools of parents/carers and their surrounding communities.
>
> (Ainscow *et al*. 2006, p. 26)

In other words, some aspects of schools are too obviously excluding to ignore. In general however, inclusion means believing in and working out the consequences of a commitment to equality of opportunity, for example. 'Given our focus on values, rather than on practices and forms of provision, inclusion, we thought, could only be defined as the embodiment of those values *in particular contexts*' (Ainscow *et al*. 2006, p. 26).

In this approach, then, there is little certainty as to the practices which might best embody inclusive principles and values. As a consequence, a gap often opens up between the values rhetoric and the development of practice, with practitioners bearing nearly all the responsibility to work out the implications in their own contexts, and only partially engaging in this process. As a practical strategy for discerning and developing a manageable focus for change in those contexts, this is problematic. The discourse of values is not well linked to discourses of teaching and learning, and so it is hard to work out the implications of inclusive values for the teacher's role. Which, for example, is the value

that foregrounds the quality of teachers' relationships with children and young people? What values justify and promote an educational dialogue between teachers and relatively marginalised pupils, or coordination and practical understanding with other local policies such as housing and social services? How in practice should teachers investigate the underpinnings of their pedagogy, looking for processes which encourage comparison between pupils and widen the differences between them?

We have found it helpful to bear in mind a more particular view of what the inclusive school would be like. Going beyond our original definition of inclusion as incorporating a specific view of the human person, and a corresponding view of education, Fielding (2006) has proposed the following characteristics of what he describes as an intentional, emergent person-centred school:

> [T]he person-centred learning community is guided by its commitment to the functional arrangements and interactions of the school being firmly committed to wider human purposes. . . . The organizational architecture of the school is heavily influenced by the acknowledged values and aspirations that express its distinctive character. Wide-ranging formal and informal arrangements amongst staff and between students and staff ensure many voices are heard and engaged. Pastoral and academic arrangements relate to each other synergistically with the needs of young people as persons providing the touchstone of aspiration and the arbiter of difficulty or conflict of interest. CPD [continuing professional development] is wide ranging in both its processes and its substance. Often collegial, occasionally communal, it is enquiry driven and learning oriented, e.g. encouraging hermeneutic or critical approaches to action research.
>
> (Fielding 2006, p. 360)

This is not a development programme, although it does contain some indications of developmental structures and processes, and we see it as a dynamic and challenging pen-portrait of features of a school that is taking inclusion seriously as a fundamental value. In a similar way, we see much of the discourse of inclusion as speaking of an intention to influence schools in a radical direction, but often lacking a programme for action. Other attempts to offer an approach to changing the system are much more direct. Hopkins (2007), for example, argues for 'system leadership' in education as the most effective way of

contributing to the development of a more equal and just society. The central systems idea is that there are many aspects which must be addressed at the same time to improve schools, and Hopkins provides an outline of the implications for leadership to bring that about. He articulates his values in passing, promoting an approach to personalised learning that reflects the 'moral purpose of education', urging a consistent focus by teachers on *matching* 'what is taught and how it is taught to the individual learner as a person' (p. 52). He argues too for a particular approach to professionalised teaching, involving coaching and mentoring, along with a framework of accountability and energetic networking, as interrelated and necessary drivers in bringing about a system comprising more uniformly good schools. From a national policy perspective, all this may well add up to a beguiling and integrating picture. However, what Hopkins consistently underplays are the learning processes through which teachers make sense of their practice. In Hopkins' system, professionalisation corresponds to a precise positioning of teachers in relation to policy; teachers are required to define themselves and their practice according to a particular framework. This is disempowering for teachers, and empowering for those who construct the framework. It does little to accommodate the diversity of teachers and their classroom practices, or teachers' diverse experiences of learning and development. It disregards teachers' diverse ways of knowing and being. This is a theme that will be developed in Chapter 2.

These three approaches (school improvement with attitude, the person-centred learning community and systems leadership) are based on very different assumptions about the knowing and learning of teachers, about which more will be said in the next chapter. We propose another approach, related to that of Ainscow *et al*. and Fielding, but constructed in a way that we hope will lead teachers more effectively towards implications for practice. In our understanding, although educational inclusion is best seen embodying a particular moral view of the human person and of education, and therefore a particular set of connected values and principles, it does not necessarily follow that the best way to develop inclusion is to start by thinking and reflecting on those values and trying to come up with useful responses or adjustments to practice. As we have seen, such an approach is extremely demanding for practitioners, because it suggests so many potential areas for action; besides which, the interaction of different values in a particular context means that determining the right course of action is problematic. In any case, if inclusion does comprise a connected set