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Towards Inclusive Schooling

True integration of children with special needs into the mainstream carries the requirement that schools themselves should change. The special needs task may in effect become the vehicle for whole school improvement. Schools that develop in ways that stimulate and develop the learning of staff members will in turn foster conditions that encourage the learning of all pupils.

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INTRODUCTION: PROJECTS ON SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

I note with interest that Ireland, like many other Western countries, is involved in a major review of its approach to the education of children with special needs. In this article I will reflect upon my experience in different parts of the world of attempts to move towards more inclusive forms of education. In particular I will draw on my experiences of schools involved in two projects with which I am closely involved. The first of these, "Special Needs in the Classroom", is a UNESCO project that has involved the development and dissemination of teacher development materials that can be used to encourage the use of more inclusive practices (Ainscow, 1994); whilst the second, "Improving the Quality of Education for All", is concerned with processes of school improvement (Ainscow et al 1994; Hopkins et al 1994).

My participation in both these initiatives has allowed me to observe the development of mainstream schools (both primary and secondary) that seem able to respond successfully to pupil diversity, including those children who have disabilities. These observations suggest certain patterns that may be of relevance to those involved in the current reform agenda in Ireland.

CREATING CONDITIONS FOR INCLUSION

From my observations I note the existence of certain organisational arrangements that seem to assist teachers as they attempt to move towards more inclusive ways of working. These arrangements provide a structure for development which enables teachers to explore their ideas and ways of working in their own classrooms. More specifically they seem to create a climate of risk taking within which these explorations can take place. In attempting to make sense of such arrangements my colleagues and I have formulated a typology of six organisational conditions (Ainscow et al, 1994). These are:

1. **Effective leadership, not only by the headteacher but spread throughout the school**
2. **Involvement of staff, students and community in school policies and decisions**
3. **A commitment to collaborative planning**
4. **Effective co-ordination strategies**
5. **Attention to the potential benefits of enquiry and reflection**
6. **A policy for staff development**

Using this typology as a guide, it is possible to formulate some important messages about the restructuring that may be necessary within a school if it is to provide the context within which teachers will be prepared to formulate more effective responses to educational difficulties.

Indeed this analysis suggests that the task of what is currently called special needs might be appropriately reconceptualised as a process of school improvement.

LEADERSHIP

In schools that are becoming more inclusive we see evidence of what is currently seen as a shift in thinking about leadership in schools. This move involves an emphasis on "transactional" approaches, which sustain traditional concepts of heirarchy and control (e.g. Sergiovanni, 1992). Usually this leads the Headteacher to seek to establish a clear overall vision of the school that encourages a recognition that individuality is something to be respected and, indeed, celebrated. Such a vision is created through an emphasis on group processes. These are also used to facilitate a problem-solving climate. All of this creates a context within which leadership functions can be spread throughout the

staff group. This means accepting that leadership is a function to which many staff contribute, rather than a set of responsibilities vested in a small number of individuals.

INVOLVEMENT

Apparent also is an emphasis on participation that extends beyond the teaching staff. Interestingly this style of working is similar to the "incorporative approach" noted by Reynolds (1991) to be a characteristic of highly successful schools. Arguably the critical group to which involvement needs to be extended is the pupils themselves. In this respect the crucial issue is that teachers plan their lessons and organise their classrooms in ways that encourage involvement in the tasks and activities that are set. Here an emphasis on group learning activities is important. In effect, group work is a way of setting tasks that encourage participation.

PLANNING

In order to support staff in exploring alternative ways of working, the Headteacher places considerable emphasis on planning. This seems to be guided by an ongoing search for what will work locally rather than what seems to work elsewhere. Here it is the process of planning, rather than plans in themselves, that seems to be crucial. In particular, the active involvement of staff encourages the creation of common purposes, the resolution of differences and the basis for action by individuals. Consequently, the benefits of any planning activity often outlast the currency of the plan itself, offering a level of shared understanding which is a prerequisite for widespread empowerment.

CO-ORDINATION

In the literature on educational management (e.g. Weick, 1985) schools are sometimes referred to as "loosely-coupled systems". This loose-coupling occurs because schools consists of units, processes, actions and individuals that tend to operate in isolation from one another. Loose-coupling is also encouraged by the goal ambiguity that characterises schooling. Despite the rhetoric of curriculum aims and objectives, schools consist of group of people who may have very different perspectives, values and, indeed, beliefs about the purposes of schooling. Consequently, it is helpful to have systems of communication that help to co-ordinate the actions of teachers and others behind agreed policies. These should work in such a way as not to reduce the discretion of individual

teachers to practice according to their own preferences. Teaching is a complex and often un predictable business that requires a degree of improvisation. Indeed it might be argued that a significant hallmark of an inclusive school is the degree to which the teachers in it are prepared to 'tinker' with their usual practices in the light of the feedback they receive from their classes (Huberman, 1993). Consequently, teachers must have sufficient autonomy to make instant decisions that take account of the individuality of their pupils and the uniqueness of every encounter that occurs. What is needed, therefore, seems to be a well co-ordinated, co-operative style of working that gives individual teachers the confidence to improvise in a search for the most appropriate responses to the pupils in their classes; in other words, a more tightly coupled system without losing loose coupling benefits (West and Ainscow, 1991).

ENQUIRY AND REFLECTION

In our school improvement activities my colleagues and I have observed that those schools which recognise that enquiry and reflection are important processes find it easier to sustain their momentum and are better placed to monitor the extent to which policies actually bring about the desired changes. A particularly important aspect of enquiry and reflection relates to classroom practice. We have strong indications that where teachers are encouraged to help one another to explore aspects of their work with children through mutual observation, leading to talk about their practice, this can have a significant impact upon their actions. In particular an emphasis on teacher partnerships within which each person has opportunities to observe the work of their colleague, is a good example of how a commitment to this has to be matched by organisational arrangements that make it happen in practice.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

The above five conditions seem to provide the basis of a climate that supports teacher development and, in so doing, encourage teachers to explore new responses to pupils in their classes. To this end, therefore, schools need to have a well thought out policy for staff development. This needs to go well beyond the traditional patterns by which teachers attend external courses or, more recently, the use of one shot school-based events. More than anything it seems that if staff development is to have a significant impact upon thinking and practice it needs to be linked to school development (Fullan, 1991). As such it should be concerned with the development of the staff as a team, as well as with the learning of individuals.

It is helpful to think of two elements of staff development: the workshop and the workplace (Joyce, 1991). The workshop is where understanding is developed, demonstrations provided and there are opportunities for practice. However, for transfer of ideas and skills that the workshop has introduced back into workplace (i.e. the classroom and school), attending a workshop is insufficient. The ability to transfer into everyday classroom practice requires 'on-the-job' support. This implies changes to the workplace and the way in which we organise staff development in schools. In particular, this means the opportunity for immediate and sustained practice, collaboration and peer coaching, and conditions that support implementation. We cannot achieve these changes in the workplace without, in most cases, drastic alterations in the ways in which we organise our schools. In particular, it requires that time has to be set aside for teachers to support one another within teams and partnerships established in order to explore and develop aspects of their practice.

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT AND SPECIAL NEEDS

This analysis of organisational conditions suggests the possibility of helpful links between attempts to support teachers in responding to educational difficulties and the more general area of school improvement. How might such links be utilised in order to help in the development of schools that are more inclusive?

First of all it seems clear that making a school more inclusive is not an easy move. Whilst the analysis I have provided suggests certain conditions that seem to support such development, these are not readily established in organisations where they are currently absent. What is required, it seems, is a fairly significant redirection of resources and effort in order to shift organisation that are structured to facilitate maintenance of the status quo, towards ways of working that will support development activities. The creation arrangements that encourage development provides opportunities for staff to become clearer about purposes and priorities, leading to a greater sense of confidence and empowerment, and an increased willingness to experiment with alternative responses to problems experienced in the classroom. For this reason I would argue that the special needs task may be most appropriately perceived as being about school improvement. Put simply this means that by improving overall conditions a school supports staff in developing a wider range of responses to pupils who experience difficulties in their learning. In so doing it adopts a way of working that is essentially about the 'reformation of ordinary education, to make it more comprehensive' (Vislie, 1994).

USING CULTURAL ANALYSIS

How does this work? In what ways do changes in what I have called conditions impact upon thinking and practice? At this point my argument becomes increasingly speculative. What I am suggesting needs a great deal more investigation before it can be recommended with any confidence. It also requires a shift from the structural frame of reference I have been largely using, towards a cultural analysis (Skrtic, 1991). Making this shift helps us to engage with some of the complexities of life within individual schools.

Hargreaves (1995) explores some of the complexities of using a cultural frame of reference when considering schools. He notes that cultures can be seen as having a reality-defining function, enabling those within an institution to make sense of themselves, their actions and their environment. A current reality-defining function of culture, he suggests, is often a problem-solving function inherited from the past. In this way today's cultural form created to solve an emergent problem often becomes tomorrow's taken-for-granted recipe for dealing with matters shorn of their novelty. Hargreaves concludes that by examining the reality-defining aspects of a culture it should be possible to gain an understanding of the routines the organisation has developed in response to the tasks it faces.

CREATING A 'LEARNING ENRICHED' SCHOOL FOR ALL

Certainly my impression is that as a school develops the conditions referred to above this tends to have an impact upon how teachers perceive themselves and their work. Throughout the establishment of structures that are geared to development, teachers may be encouraged to broaden their perceptions of their tasks, leading them to see improvement as being part of their professional responsibility.

The spreading of leadership functions, wider involvement of stake holders, and better availability of information, all create the incentives that motivate such changes; whilst participation in planning processes, engagement with evaluative data and a well thought out staff development policy provide invitations to take action. As a result, the school gradually becomes what Rosenholtz (1989) calls "learning enriched". That is, they are structured in ways that stimulate and nurture the learning of adults and, as a result, foster conditions that encourage the learning of *all* pupils.

We can go beyond these arguments, however, to consider yet a further possibility. It seems possible that as schools move in such directions the changes that occur can also impact upon the ways in which teachers perceive pupils in their classes whose progress is a matter of concern (i.e. those nowadays referred to as having special needs). What may happen is that as overall working conditions in a school are improved such children are gradually seen in a more positive light. Rather than simply problems that have to be overcome or, possibly, referred elsewhere for separate attention, such pupils may be perceived as providing feedback on existing classroom arrangements. Indeed they may be seen as sources of understanding as to how these arrangements might be improved in ways that would be of benefit to all pupils. This argument is given some support by Talbert and McLaughlin (1994) who suggest that there is now strong research evidence that norms of teaching practice are socially negotiated within the everyday context of schooling.

If this is the case (and I repeat that much of this is at present highly speculative), it might be argued that the children referred to as having special needs are 'hidden voices' that could inform and guide improvement activities in the future. In this way my central argument can be turned on its head: instead of responding to special needs through school improvement, we might argue for school improvement through special needs. In this sense, as my colleague Susan Hart has suggested, special needs are special in that they provide insights into possibilities for improvement that might otherwise pass unnoticed (Hart, 1992).

CREATING A CULTURE TO HEAR 'HIDDEN VOICES'

It is important to recognise, of course, that the cultural change necessary to achieve schools that are able to hear and respond to the 'hidden voices' is in many cases a profound one. Traditional school cultures, supported by loose-coupling and high levels of specialisms amongst staff who are geared to pre-determined tasks, are in trouble when faced with unexpected circumstances. On the other hand, the presence of children who are not suited to the existing 'menu' of the school provides some encouragement to explore a more collegiate culture within which teachers are supported in experimenting with new teaching responses. In this way problem-solving activities may gradually become the reality-defining, taken-for-granted functions that are the culture of the inclusive school, i.e. a school that is effective for all pupils in the community.

SOME FINAL REFLECTIONS

Increasingly my own work is guided by an intuitive belief in the kinds of argument outlined in this article. Specifically, I am seeking to work with schools and teachers in exploring the possible connections between the tasks of school improvement and special needs. However, this is by no means an easy direction to follow. On a personal level it makes considerable demands requiring me to engage with unfamiliar theoretical fields and collaborate with colleagues who have a far greater expertise in these areas. All of this can at times lead to a feeling of being deskilled, as old ideas and techniques derived from a career in the narrow world of special education come to be seen as being redundant to the task at hand. On a more positive note, however, this reconstruction of special needs provides wonderful opportunities for growth and learning. Adopting this perspective on the special needs task also leads to a further difficulty. Specifically the widening of the agenda for attention that goes along with this shift in perspective frequently leads to 'collisions' with colleagues who prefer to retain the traditional special needs focus on the characteristics of individual children, leading to their use of narrowly conceived forms of intervention. As we look to the future, therefore, it is important to find ways of exploring further the wider agenda set out in this article that can accommodate the dominant thinking in the special needs field. Otherwise we may find that some specialist colleagues, rather than giving their support to such moves, may become a significant barrier to change.

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