What, in practice, does inclusion mean? Inclusion in action: an in-depth case study of an effective inclusive secondary school in the south-west of England

Elias Avramidis, Phil Bayliss and Robert Burden

What is inclusivity and what challenges does it pose for schools and teachers?

Government policy in the UK supports the principle that children with SEN should, where possible, be educated in mainstream schools. The paper summarised here examines an LEA-identified 'excellent' inclusive school to see what 'inclusivity' is taken to mean. It also looks at who and what inclusivity covers, what constraints may bound it, whether it is effective, and whether such research can act as a blueprint for other schools.

The research suggests that:

- the school was successfully building an 'integration' model of inclusive practice;

- there were strong perceived *academic* benefits for included students, but less evidence of successful *social* integration;

- successful implementation of inclusion required restructuring of the physical environment, resources, organisational changes and instructional adaptations; and

- there was a need for ongoing professional development.

It was clear from the research that even a successfully integrated school encountered difficulties in becoming fully 'inclusive'.

The authors also highlight the dilemma facing schools: the conflict between equity for all, and the requirement to show strictly defined academic excellence. They suggest that this perceived conflict may continue to disadvantage the already disadvantaged.

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Recently the focus of educating children with significant learning difficulties has moved from 'integration' to 'inclusion.' This is, simply, a change from the process of 'integration' – where children are placed in existing provision, to a policy of 'inclusion', which, according to the authors, "requires restructuring educational environments to foster a sense of belonging in all children." The Salamanca Declaration (Unesco, 1994) has been used in many parts of the world to formulate strategies towards inclusive schooling. It states that "inclusive schools are the most effective at building solidarity between children with special needs and their peers." The principles of this declaration are also reflected to some extent in the UK Green Paper *Excellence for All Children* although the paper does not define 'inclusive' nor suggest that all children should be transferred to mainstream schools.

Research into special educational needs (SEN) has led some practitioners and policy makers to the view that SEN may not arise from problems which lie with the students, but in the way the schools are *organised* to meet the requirements of all pupils.   The authors suggest that pressures on schools to increase academic excellence can act as a barrier to the kind of organisational change necessary for a school to become more inclusive by meeting the needs of all pupils.

While some schools have changed the way in which they are organised to meet these requirements, the authors refer to research which suggests that this approach poses a great dilemma for education because of the perceived conflict between equity (inclusivity) and excellence. A move towards inclusivity is, they suggest, likely to be more problematic than might have been assumed.

What did the researchers set out to do?

This research was part of a project investigating inclusion in one South Western LEA which had adopted a policy of inclusion and was committed to making it work in practice.

The researchers set out to:

- gain a better understanding of the personal views of key stakeholders in a secondary school about inclusion of pupils with additional needs; and

- examine the school's organisational response to the official LEA policy on inclusion.

They started from the belief that developing 'inclusive schools' is not an easy task and the process may be more complex than theorising and research in the field has originally assumed.

By examining exemplary inclusive practice at an identified 'effective' and 'inclusive' school, the authors hoped to uncover rich data about inclusivity in action, and to identify the factors that underlie successful inclusion.

The case study school

The study looked at Hunfley Community School (a pseudonym is used here to protect the school's anonymity), a co-educational comprehensive 11-16 school with a roll of 675 in the south west of England. It had a wide catchment, and, as an LEA-resourced school for students with physical disabilities, also took a considerable number of its students from outside the catchment area. The school had been largely modified to accommodate these students – for example, wheelchair users had access to all major parts of the site. The school catered for a wide range of students and for years had been implementing integrated programmes to include students with:

- emotional and behavioural difficulties;

- physical disabilities; and

- (more recently) other significant disabilities.

Hunfley also offered a wide range of community activities for adults alongside, and integrated with, the curriculum of the school. It had a large Curriculum and Learning Support Department,

with a head, three learning support teachers, and eight learning support assistants. This department had evolved as the process of increasing integration was being implemented.

Because the school was identified by its LEA as providing a good example of inclusive practice, the researchers were able to use it to examine the effectiveness of the policies of the LEA itself. Subsequently, an Ofsted inspection characterised Hunfley's practice as 'excellent.'

How was the study designed?

The research involved a series of visits to the school over one academic year. The principal data collection was by semi-structured interviews of managers, Learning Support, teaching and support staff, students, parents, and LEA representatives. The research specifically explored:

- vision;

- skills;

- incentives;

- resources; and

- action planning

in achieving effective inclusive practice.

The researcher also undertook participant observation in the Curriculum and Learning Support Department, and critical analysis of documents such as the school's SEN policy and students' individual education plans.

What the study found

The research found that in Hunfley school:

- participants expressed positive attitudes towards inclusion to the extent that the overall school ethos could be characterised as inclusive. For example:

  - students with SEN were not excluded from any activity in their class;

  - withdrawal from lessons was minimal, with most support provided in the classroom;

  - all students participated in the mainstream life of the school;

  - special attention was given to the use of language and terminology – for example 'curriculum and learning support' was used rather than SEN;

  - parents felt that communication with teaching staff was 'outstanding.'

- participants' views, however, still reflected *integration* rather than *inclusion*. For example they did not believe that all SEN students should automatically be included in mainstream schools- rather, the placement of a child in mainstream education should depend on 'feasibility'. The staff and head were agreed that widening participation, in particular for students with emotional and behavioural problems or students with severe learning difficulties, could only be achieved with appropriate resourcing;

- the school, parents, and the students themselves agreed that students with SEN who had been integrated into the school benefited academically. Hunfley has a 98% success in grades A-G at GCSE;

- it was not clear whether students with SEN who had been integrated into the school benefited socially. Although parents were happy with the progress of their child at the school, they were disappointed about social outcomes. This was in part due to the fact that many children with disabilities came by bus from out of catchment: they had to make a new friendship base, and had less opportunity for carrying it on out of school hours;

- there was some evidence of bullying at the school (was this targeted at pupils with disabilities?);

- school participants highlighted the restructuring of the physical environment, adequate resources, organisational changes, instructional adaptations and ongoing professional development as essential for the successful implementation of inclusion;

- participants felt personal and professional satisfaction in implementing inclusive practice. However they felt that the policy should be LEA-wide rather than confined to a few designated schools. As the deputy head commented "because we have a very good reputation for including students with additional needs, we have got the label that the school is good for SEN, and that is not the label that we want because we are losing the brightest of the students locally."

Conclusions drawn from the research

The authors concluded that their findings supported those of other research as to the basic dilemma of an inclusive approach – the principle of equity (inclusivity) in education may conflict with the principle of excellence as measured by academic achievement. It may mean, for example, that schools with a high proportion of SEN pupils may lose academically able students to other schools which do not have a SEN 'label.'

This dilemma, they say, brings into question prevailing notions of effectiveness, particularly whether a school is effective if it produces good academic outcomes, irrespective of social outcomes. The introduction of performance tables and the pressure to raise standards, they say, may mean that pupils with SEN may not be welcome in schools. The authors question

whether schooling can be thus divorced from the social, cultural and political context in which the school is embedded.

In practical terms, the authors conclude that inclusion is not 'one single unidimensional variable' with one best course of action leading to an effective inclusive school. Even if a school is inclusive in some respects, exclusionary practice still occurs. Instead of examining schools to see if they are or are not inclusive, the emphasis should be on understanding the *processes* by which inclusion and exclusion operate in all schools in order to support inclusive practice in ways which are acceptable to all those most directly involved – including teachers, pupils and parents.

Implications

In completing this digest the authors began to ask the following questions about implications for practitioners:

- Hunfley School managed to provide support for SEN pupils in the classroom and minimise pupils' withdrawal from it. How closely do additional adults, for example, Learning Support Assistants (LSAs), work with you to help keep SEN pupils in the class? What do your LSA and other colleagues think would support them in this task?

- The study highlighted the relative social isolation of SEN pupils transported in from far away. Could later transport home after extra-curricular activities be scheduled and provided for your pupils, to enable them to benefit from joining in these activities?

- Teachers in the study were clear that resources had to be sufficient to meet the needs of SEN pupils. If you have responsibility for resources in any aspect of the curriculum, how do you consider and cater for SEN within your budgetary constraints?

- How confident do you feel in your ability to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse group of pupils? Do you feel you might benefit from professional development in any area of special needs?

In completing this digest the authors began to ask the following questions about implications for school leaders and governors, SENCOs and LEAs:

- Teachers in the study noted that professional development and adopting new teaching methods could support successful inclusion. What kind of teaching skills are necessary for teaching a diverse population of students with different abilities and needs? How could schools' professional development programmes take account of these?

- What is the role of external experts in preparing staff to support students with additional needs, e.g: teaching strategies, differentiating the curriculum, behaviour, specific needs such as speech therapy?

- Participants in the study raised concerns that their success in addressing inclusion could lead to being labelled as 'good for SEN pupils' and losing more academic pupils. To what extent can LEAs set up and support inclusive programmes across all schools, so as to address perceived conflicts between equity and academic excellence?

- Procuring adequate resources and making changes to the physical environment of the school were highlighted in the study as being vital to successful inclusion. What mechanisms exist for ensuring that the needs of all pupils are considered and balanced when drawing up annual and five-year plans for spending?

Where can I find out more?

You can find other TRIPS digests on the theme of inclusion at:
http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/research/themes/inclusion/

For more detailed summaries of research, with case studies by teachers, General Teaching Council Research of the Month summaries on the topic of inclusion are available at:
http://www.gtce.org.uk/research/romtopics/rom_inclusion/

Schools can work towards an Inclusion Quality Mark intended to deal with inclusion in its widest sense and across all aspects of school life: http://www.inclusionmark.co.uk/

The Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education website offers news and information about inclusive education. Available at: http://inclusion.uwe.ac.uk/csie/csiehome.htm