Inclusion in classrooms and school management

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Abstract

A global recognition of students' rights requires school and institutions to recognize and value all students through providing for their diversity. The move towards more inclusive schooling requires schools to manage their professional development on two levels: reculturing of the school to reflect inclusive beliefs and values; and enhancement of teacher skills and knowledge to better address the learning needs of all students.

1   Introduction

An efficient way for management to implement both aims of reculturing of the school and enhancement of teacher skills and knowledge is through the process of action research (AR), which advises using a critical collaborative reassessment of inclusive school practice by staff working together providing benefits for all involved in the professional development process. The journey of learning is recorded along with discussions for future directions and actions. This process of change involves schools in creating a climate of collaborative effort and ownership of the change process. However it is important that the process is owned by school staff, as the most effective change occurs when it is driven from within.

This AR model can be adapted to the basic principles of working together through collaboration with at least one other colleague; making time and prioritising space for discussion and planning of change for improving student inclusion and learning; trying to record the plans for their implementation and their outcomes; followed by evaluation and appraisal of the activities carried out. This cycle can be repeated again and again. The process does not need a university stamp of approval or a formal academic course to validate it.

Inclusion is a process aimed at increasing all schools' inclusive practices to expand diversity regardless of their current state. Inclusive policies will increase diverse learning needs forcing staff to reconsider their roles, teaching styles/methods and the curriculum. However, to bring about effective change, school leaders and teachers must be actively involved in the change process together. This will determine the capacity of the school to become more inclusive. An inclusive school culture engages the whole school community in collaborative forms of learning and is steered by democratic planning processes.

Collaborative AR supports much of what is currently known about how individuals learn, and assists teachers to achieve personal accomplishments through their professional relationships in the process. There is joint accountability to build a strong relationship with end goals in mind; to teach one another and learn from one another. And, in the process, a culture of empowerment is created and diverse voices proliferate, as inclusive practice becomes part of the fibre of the organization.

2   The investigative process

The investigative process begins with a recognition and response to individual or group requests for increased knowledge and skills to meet diverse learning needs: Teachers are wary of quick-fix innovations that are forced upon those at the bottom of the chain of command. Teachers need to be in control of their own learning and

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advancement, so professional development strategies should be designed to meet the diverse professional needs of a group of adult learners.

Training, access to information and support must all be sustained, as staff development is most powerful when it is conducted long enough and often enough to assure progressive gains in confidence, knowledge and skills. As change is a process not an event, members of educational institutions will need to be trained and retrained throughout their career.

The professional development process involves collaborative partnerships and peer mentoring developed through creating opportunities for discussion with colleagues. Peer collaboration will succeed in developing an inclusive school culture, which is committed to change, and creates better learning opportunities for all students. The sharing of successes and difficulties in the application of new strategies facilitates learning about the underlying concepts. Peer collaboration and mentoring reduces isolation creating more open and critical feedback, encourages risk taking and diversity, provides more opportunities to learn, and reduces anxiety. Those involved should not be afraid to allow failures to occur and to learn from their acceptance that failure as well as success is part of the Professional Development (PD) process for inclusion.

Teachers are encouraged to consider shared school beliefs, values and knowledge and the influence of these on school organization, policy and practice. A shared vision understood by all contributes to the culture of a school. Opportunities for school staff to reflect and possibly reconstruct beliefs and values related to student rights and education will affect how teachers think about schooling, their students, the curriculum and their own teaching approach. Increased collegiality and cooperation between staff results in organizations where everyone is recognized as having something worthwhile to share with others.

Inclusion is about recognising diversity in its many forms in relation to a person's ability, academic potential, behaviour, also their background, culture and ethnicity.

Inclusion encompasses all aspects of humanity and is recognised to varying degrees in our education system. In Europe and other countries, but not all, it is a political imperative to include all children in community based educational institutions. Yet, apart from physical space in state schools there are issues related to:

- finding a self-review approach to analyse our *cultures, policies and practices* and to identify the barriers to learning and participation that may occur within each of these areas.
- *deciding our own priorities for change* and evaluating our progress.
- using it as an *integral part of existing development policies*, encouraging a wide and deep scrutiny of everything that makes up a school's activities.

The Inclusion Index (Booth & Ainscow 2002) may provide a framework for head teachers and teachers for school development and change. Each dimension of the Index is divided into a number of indicators. `The indicators represent statements of *aspiration* against which existing arrangements can be compared in order to *set priorities* for development' (Booth et al. 2000: 11). Following each indicator, a number of questions can be used to encourage thinking about various issues related to inclusive education. The intent is threefold:

(1) *to establish existing knowledge, and understandings about culture, policy and practice in the school,*
(2) *to consider priority areas for school and teacher development, and*
(3) *to manage and document the process of change.*

The first area for investigation is the school, its culture, values and aims. What are the school and professional development needs? Can we create a plan of action to meet these needs, and how do we evaluate and re-appraise the process?

If the context involves an outside consultant/s then school meetings of staff, (or a self-selected group), and outsiders is the start of the process. It is important that school hierarchies are not reinforced. Then a collaborative working partnership between consultants and school can be established through discussions about the school, its community and their understanding of the investigative process linked to practitioner and action research (O'Hanlon 2003).

The most important aspect of the process is ensuring that all participants feel a sense of commitment and ownership and have some control throughout the development of the process.

An example of this would be to:

- organise a PD development day (or after school session) when pupils are absent.
- use the Index as a framework to identify barriers to learning and social inclusion and make a record of what is found
- use the record to plan changes and collect evidence about what is happening
- do this in line with the nature of issues raised and who has been associated with their identification.

For example, if concerns are raised about student behaviour, than a 'behaviour' group can be identified, perhaps a 'school policies' group, a staff-student group, a *curriculum* group and/or a *parent partnership* group.

The development of a School Inclusion Plan is a priority and may become reality through a co-ordinating team/collaborative group to bring ideas and support all staff in making the school an inclusive school. *Individual Teachers are always part of a collaborative team.*

3   Getting started: the research focus and issue; finding the barriers

The process can begin by thinking about a *problematic situation* that needs to be addressed. The research questions are then investigated and action is taken for their amelioration. The situation raises different questions which creates research *questions* e.g.,

- how can LSAs (learning support assistants) support inclusive practice in the school?
- or, is the school making full use of LSAs to improve the support of pupil learning in the classroom?
- or, you may choose to start with an issue e.g., some staff feel that LSAs should take over the teacher's role when administrative tasks are pressing.

The problematic situation is generally heartfelt and pressing. The situation is causing concern, like feeling that the school or you, in your classroom, are not making full use of the LSA. The *research* questions are simple and honest queries that can be explored through investigation. An *issue* is usually a contentious action or statement about an aspect of practice which is questionable or controversial.

The general research *topic* in each case might be similar as in the above examples, such as researching the support role of the LSA. The research methods are planned in relation to the research topic, questions and issues. It is important to focus down on the questions and issues specific to inclusion in the context of the topic to be investigated. What is involved is a process of continual problem solving, which may raise more questions than answers. The topic and specific focus will vary from school to school, teacher to teacher, etc., yet, universally some of the areas for action will inevitably encompass:

- changes to the school culture and climate to make schools a more inclusive working environment for teaching and learning
- developing collaborative working relationships among and between teachers, SENCOs, non-teaching staff, pupils and outside agencies
- structural and organisational change (timetabling etc.), to include co-operative arrangements with external services and other schools
- the use of technologies to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of teaching, learning and assessment
- improving the learning of all pupils with due regard to differences in ability, social background, race and language.

Discussion with colleagues will ensure that the research question is relevant to you and will contribute in some way to whole-school development. There is a need for the practitioner researcher to contextualise their specific situational problems and consider what is possible in any situation; therefore the Inclusion Index serves only to demonstrate the wide range of topics possible in the investigation of inclusive practice. It is also possible to build up your own alternative research questions based on current pressing situations giving cause for concern. Developing inclusive practice demands collegial support, therefore negotiation with colleagues is a necessary condition for success. There may be school development priorities or vested interests to consider. There may be a lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities related to the LSA (learning support assistant). There may be sensitivities about the school's success record with specific pupils e.g., ethnic minority or Traveller pupils.

Unlike many other research methodologies, action research is not amenable to the design of a static research plan. When compiling a research plan, it is the process and direction of the research, rather than its outcomes that are crucial. Remember a successful outcome is not always possible, it's the journey to achieve it that represents the learning. The plan should include the initial research question or issue followed by questions such as:

(1) What do we want to uncover in the research?
(2) Will the research lead to better policy or practice for inclusion?
(3) What types of evidence are needed to answer the research question?
(4) What can be learned from other relevant research on inclusive practice?
(5) How will the evidence be collected, where and from or with whom?

(6) How will the data be interpreted?
(7) How will the evidence be recorded for the purpose of reflection and interpretation?
(8) Has time been built in to discuss the evidence and allow on-going feedback from participants?
(9) How will records of evidence be compiled to justify the interpretations and conclusions reached?
(10) How will the process of gathering evidence, its analysis and dissemination, be organised to fit time schedules for the research?
(11) Are there any financial implications of your research which need to be supported?

4 Examples of research questions

You may, begin with the hypothetical question;

'How do LSAs support inclusive practice in the school?'

Then follow up by,
(1) Investigating what exactly LSAs do in the classroom.
(2) Investigating LSA practice which can be interpreted with respect to updating the school inclusion policy and influencing school-wide practice.
(3) Detailed observations of the LSA in the classroom, their attention to individual or groups of pupils, time spent with pupils, time spent with the teacher, time spent in preparation and clearing up, and the organisation of lesson plans and tasks with the teacher.
(4) Finding out what form the lesson follow-up with the teacher takes, and how unexpected problems are resolved in the classroom when possible disruption occurs. Other research questions will arise from issues identified after the initial data collection, to check out what is actually happening in the classroom.
(5) Trawling the literature related to the use of LSAs in books, journals and through IT, and talking to colleagues and others about their use of LSAs.
(6) Collecting the evidence via observational checklists devised after initial observations have been carried out. LSAs will be interviewed. They will be invited to triangulate the data with the class teacher, colleagues and pupils. Other teachers, pupils and those associated with the issues that emerge will be involved in individual and group discussions. If any audio or video evidence is seen to throw light on difficult data, then this will also be employed in consultation with participants.
(7) Interpretation of the data will take place within a coding frame, agreed in relation to data emerging from interview transcriptions, questionnaires etc. in situ. Frequencies and percentages will be tabulated if appropriate from observational checklists. Data will be presented in bar charts and tables as appropriate. However, it is expected that most of the data will be qualitative, and will be combed for relevant categories, key words and phrases which may lead to new knowledge. Expected information will be contrasted with unexpected information and charts of the data will be drawn up under appropriate research sub-headings. The meaning of the data will be the yardstick for its selection for the research record. Selection of data and its significance will need to be justified throughout.
(8) Keeping a research log of all the data, which will be under the control of one person. Data from the log will be shared at staff meetings and possibly with a research group beyond the school. Staff and colleagues in both groups will be invited keep a research journal and to share their views at joint meetings.
(9) Considering how time can be carved out to ensure ample discussion of what is taking place as the research develops. If it can be agreed, time could be taken during breaks or after the official school closing, otherwise we will need specially designated time for the research.
(10) Reaching agreement about the official account of the research: Continual discussion and feedback during the data collection and its interpretation will take place. Triangulation of data is essential to widen perspectives and to allow the subjectivity of participants to be lessened.
(11) Meeting deadlines is something that can only be negotiated during the research process. The time for the beginning and the end of the research can be decided in advance, but in the interim, other deadlines and meetings will need to be negotiated in situ.
(12) Thinking carefully if finding time outside of the working day has financial implications i.e., cost of cover for staff when attending meetings or collecting data.

5   Conclusion

No-one proceeds with a research project on their own. Being part of a research support group allows colleagues to act as mentors, advisors and critics to guide and support any plans for change. Simply taking a specific action as a result of interpreting evidence on an individual basis is a risky endeavour. Everyone needs to reflect on the evidence, consider possible alternative interpretations of the data, and through discussion with others, decide on what is the best course of action before proceeding. The initial evidence to confirm that the research question is a worthwhile and genuine basis for investigation is critical to the direction of the research. Often, right from the start, mistakes can be made about the initial perception of the situation, which may come to light early when confirming the issue. Therefore the right school or classroom focus for individuals in specific professional situations is crucial to success. A key factor in the school review is the value position of the researcher, the people in the situation, the educational culture and each person's understanding of the inclusion issue to be investigated and advanced. Involving senior management in a review for inclusive schooling is crucial to an all-school evolution.

References

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