

PROMOTING EQUITY IN EDUCATION

THINK PIECE 2

DEVELOPING INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

'WE ALREADY KNOW ENOUGH TO EDUCATE ALL OUR CHILDREN EFFECTIVELY. THE BIG QUESTION IS, DO WE HAVE THE WILL TO MAKE IT HAPPEN.' (EDMONDS, 1979)

Research suggests that 'schools know more than they use'. This means that the starting point for strengthening the work of a school is with the sharing of existing practices through collaboration amongst staff, leading to experimentation with new ways of working that will reach out to all students. There are, however, factors within the traditions of schools that make this difficult, not least the way in which teachers tend to work alone with the classroom door closed. What is proposed here means that such organisational barriers have to be removed so that practitioners are in a position to learn from one another.



A LANGUAGE OF PRACTICE

At the heart of the processes in schools where professional learning takes place is 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 difficult to experiment with new possibilities.

Much of what teachers do during the intensive encounters that occur is carried out at an automatic, intuitive level. Furthermore, there is little time to stop and think. This is why having the opportunity to see colleagues at work is so crucial to the success of attempts to develop practice. It is through shared experiences that colleagues can help one another to articulate what they currently do and define what they might like to do. It is also the means whereby space is created within which taken-for-granted assumptions about particular groups of learners can be subjected to mutual critique.

An engagement with evidence of various kinds to study teaching within a school can help in generating such a language of practice. This, in turn, can foster the development of practices that are more effective in engaging learners who are seen as hard to reach. Specifically, it can create space for rethinking by interrupting existing discourses and questioning usual ways of working.

The starting point for such processes is often with a consideration of statistical evidence regarding student progress. However, the need to dig deeper into factors that influence progress usually requires an engagement with qualitative forms of evidence. Particularly powerful techniques in this respect involve the use of mutual lesson observation, sometimes through video recordings, and evidence collected from students about teaching and learning arrangements within a school.

CREATING INTERRUPTIONS

Under certain conditions such approaches provide *interruptions* that help to make the familiar unfamiliar in ways that stimulate self-questioning, creativity and action. In so doing they can sometimes 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.

Here, the concern with the principle of equity means that there has to be a focus on the thinking that lies *behind* actions and the impacts of such thinking on practices. In particular, there has to be a concern with the attitudes and

assumptions that influence what teachers do, some of which may be unconscious, and how these can be modified through dialogues with others, especially with learners themselves.

A powerful approach for introducing this kind of professional learning is *lesson study*, a systematic procedure for the development of teaching that is well established in Japan and some other Asian countries. The goal of lesson study is to improve the effectiveness of the experiences that teachers provide for all of their students. The focus is on a particular lesson, which is then used as the basis for gathering evidence on the quality of experience that students receive. These lessons are called research lessons and are used to examine the responsiveness of the students to the planned activities. Our recent research has explored how students who are trained as researchers can contribute to such processes of professional learning.

CULTURES AND LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

All of this points to the importance of forms of leadership that encourages colleagues to challenge one another's assumptions about particular students. Research suggests that some schools are characterised by an 'inclusive culture'. Within such schools, there is a consensus amongst adults around values of respect for difference and a commitment to offering all students access to learning opportunities.

This consensus may not be total and does not necessarily remove all tensions or contradictions in practice. On the other hand, there is likely to be a high level of staff collaboration and joint problem solving, and similar values and commitments may extend into the student body, and into parent and other community stakeholders. The implication is that senior staff within a school have to create a climate within which professional learning can take place.

IMPLICATIONS

Evidence from the OECD suggests that countries where teachers believe their profession is valued achieve higher levels of equity in learning outcomes. With this in mind, schools need to be reformed and practices need to be improved in ways that will lead teachers to feel supported in responding positively to student diversity – seeing individual differences not as problems to be fixed, but as opportunities for enriching learning. In this way a consideration of difficulties experienced by students can provide an agenda for change and insights as to how such changes might be achieved.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

- **Do schools encourage teachers to collaborate in developing their practices?**
- **Are teachers encouraged to innovate in order to find more effective ways of engaging all students in lessons?**
- **Are the views of students taken into account?**

FURTHER READING

- Ainscow, M., Dyson, A., Goldrick, S. and West, M. (2016) Using collaborative inquiry to foster equity within school systems: opportunities and barriers. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* 27(1), 7-23
- Ainscow, M. and Messiou, K. (2017) Engaging with the views of students to promote inclusion in education. *Journal of Educational Change*, 19(1), 1-17
- Dyson, A., Howes, A. and Roberts, B. (2004). What do we really know about inclusive schools? a systematic review of the research evidence. D. Mitchell (ed.), *Special Educational Needs and Inclusive Education: Major Themes in Education*. London, Routledge
- Riehl, C.J. (2000) The principal's role in creating inclusive schools for diverse students: a review of normative, empirical, and critical literature on the practice of educational administration. *Review of Educational Research* 70(1), 55-81
- Schleicher, A. (2015), *Schools for 21st-Century learners: Strong leaders, confident teachers, innovative approaches*. OECD Publishing: Paris