THINK PIECE 3
TOWARDS SCHOOLS FOR ALL

'TACKLING EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY DOES NOT MEAN SACRIFICING HIGH STANDARDS. COUNTRIES WITH HIGHER AVERAGE ACHIEVEMENT TEND TO HAVE LOWER LEVELS OF INEQUALITY… BRINGING THE WORST PERFORMING STUDENTS UP DOES NOT MEAN PULLING THE BEST-PERFORMING STUDENTS DOWN.' UNICEF (2018)

There is not one single model of what an inclusive school looks like. What is common to highly inclusive schools, however, is that they are welcoming and supportive places for all of their students, not least for those with disabilities and others who experience difficulties in learning and/or socialisation. This does not prevent these schools from also being committed to improving the achievements of all of their students. Indeed, they tend to have a range of strategies for strengthening achievement that are typical of those employed by all effective schools, and their emphasis on supporting vulnerable students does not appear to inhibit these strategies.

A CULTURE OF INCLUSION

Successful schools are inclusive in the sense that all the students are expected to make progress in their learning. This does not happen by chance. Rather it occurs as a result of the way the school is managed in order to create an atmosphere where everybody – students and staff - feels valued and supported. Another key factor is the emphasis placed on tracking and supporting the progress of all of the students.

When schools are successful in moving in a more inclusive direction, there is usually a degree of consensus amongst adults around values of respect for difference and a commitment to offering all students access to learning opportunities. Whilst this consensus is unlikely to be total, it is indicative of the growth of a *culture of inclusion*. In addition, 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 amongst families and other community stakeholders associated with the school. These schools are also likely to be characterised by forms of organisation (such as specialist support being made within the ordinary classroom, rather than by withdrawal) and practices which could be regarded as participatory by definition (such as cooperative group work).

STRUCTURES

Schools have been described as 'loosely-coupled systems'. This loose-coupling occurs because schools consist 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 often characterises education.

On the other hand, what we see in more inclusive schools are social processes that are intended to co-ordinate the actions of staff and children behind agreed principles. These have to work in ways that do not reduce the discretion of individual teachers to practice according to their own preferences. Teaching is a complex and often unpredictable 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 adjust their practices in the light of the feedback they receive from members of their classes.

Consequently, teachers must have sufficient autonomy to make instant decisions that take account of the individuality of their students and the uniqueness of every encounter that occurs. What is needed, therefore, is a well-coordinated, co-operative style of working that gives individual teachers the confidence to improvise in a search for the most appropriate responses to the students in their classes; in other words, a more tightly coupled system without losing the benefits of loose coupling.

SCHOOL ORGANISATION

How, then, can such arrangements be achieved? Relationships are the key to establishing greater coordination. Researchers have suggested that school relationships may be structured in one of three ways: *individualistically, competitively or cooperatively*.

In schools with an individualistic form of organisation, teachers tend to work alone to achieve goals which may be unrelated to the goals of their colleagues. Consequently, there is little sense of common purpose, no sharing of expertise, and limited support for individuals. Furthermore, such schools often move towards a more competitive form of organisation.

In a competitive system, teachers (and students) strive to do better than their colleagues, recognising that their fates are negatively linked, since the success of any individual is likely to be enhanced by the failure of others. In this win-lose struggle to succeed it is almost inevitable that individuals will celebrate difficulties experienced by their colleagues, since these are likely to increase their own chances of success.

Clearly, the organisational approach that is most likely to create a positive working atmosphere within a school is one that emphasises cooperation. Therefore, the aim must be to encourage a more lightly coupled system within which the efforts of individuals are coordinated in order to maximise their collective impact. In such a school, individuals are more likely to strive for mutual benefit, recognising that they all share a common purpose and, indeed, a common fate. Furthermore, individual teachers know that their performance can be influenced positively by the performance of others. This being the case, individuals feel proud when a colleague succeeds and is recognised for their competence.

IMPLICATIONS

A school that is based upon a cooperative structure is likely to make good use of the expertise of all members of its community, provide sources of stimulation and enrichment that will foster their learning and development, and encourage positive attitudes to the introduction of new ways of working. This may require new thinking and practices amongst senior members, who have to:

- **Challenge the status quo of traditional approaches to teaching;**
- **Inspire a clear mutual vision of what the school should and could be;**
- **Lead by example, using cooperative procedures and taking risks; and**
- **Encourage staff members to persist and keep striving to improve their expertise.**

Senior staff must also place a strong emphasis on the building of cooperative teams and the use of inquiry to stimulate experimentation with new ways of working.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

- **Are schools organised in ways that encourage collaboration and experimentation amongst the staff members?**
- **Are there high expectations for all the students?**
- **To what extent does your school have a culture of inclusion?**

FURTHER READING

- Ainscow, M. and Sandill, A. (2010) Developing inclusive education systems: the role of organisational cultures and leadership. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 14 (1), 1-16
- Hargreaves, D.H. (1995) School culture, school effectiveness and school improvement. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 6 (1), 23-27
- Harris, J., Carrington, S. and Ainscow, M. with Comber, B, Ehrich, L., Klenowski, V., Smeed, J. and Spina, J. (2017) *Promoting equity in schools: collaboration, inquiry and ethical leadership.* London: Routledge
- Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (1989). *Leading the cooperative school.* Edina: Interaction Book Co.
- Weick, K.E. (1985) Sources of order in underorganised systems: Themes in recent organisational theory. In Y.S. Lincoln (Ed.), *Organisational theory and inquiry*. Beverley Hills : Sage