

SPRING 2003

Inclusive Leadership; Leadership for Inclusion

Using evidence from case studies of leadership practice in schools in three countries (England, Portugal and the United States), this report addresses the implications of reforms calling for inclusive education.

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Introduction

This report addresses the implications of reforms, calling for inclusive education on leadership roles in schools. It provides evidence from case studies of leadership practice in three countries to address the overall question, “What types of leadership practice foster inclusion in schools?” The data from these studies will be examined within a theoretical framework that both throws light on the impact of contextual, cultural and community influences on such leadership practices and then allows for the emergence of themes across these diverse settings.

Defining ‘inclusive education’

The issue of inclusion is high on the educational reform agenda in the United Kingdom and overseas. In the United States, it is generally thought of as an approach to serving children with disabilities within general education settings. Internationally, inclusive education has broader aims and is defined as a reform that supports and welcomes diversity among all learners. The research reported in this paper applies this broadened definition. The aim of inclusive education is understood as eliminating social exclusion that is a consequence of responses to diversity in race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender and ability (Vitello and Mithaug, 1998). Children with disabilities and other special educational needs are among these students.

The models of leadership examined in this paper were found in schools in the United Kingdom, Portugal and the United States that serve culturally and linguistically diverse groups of children, including significant numbers from low income families. In each of these schools, children with disabilities and/or other special educational needs are educated in general education classrooms alongside their peers. Inclusive education is understood as an approach to education designed to assure every child’s basic human right to an individually, culturally and developmentally appropriate education. Set within the context of the United Nations’ push for ‘Education for All’, the aim of inclusive education in these settings is to increase participation and learning of pupils who are vulnerable to marginalisation within existing educational arrangements (World Education Forum, 2000).

Leadership and inclusion

The research described in this report explores the relationship between leadership processes and inclusive education. It is set in the context of a selective literature review of theoretical contributions, empirical studies and accounts written by or about school leaders. In carrying out this review, it was assumed that leadership takes different forms in different places, not least because of the way it reflects local history, culture and legislation. Each source was treated individually, seeking to make clear the context from which it emerged. The power of this process was that it enabled comparisons and contrasts to be made in ways that allowed thinking and practice across contexts to emerge.

Inclusion is increasingly seen as a key challenge for educational leaders. For example, Leithwood et al (1999) suggest that with continuing diversity, schools will need to thrive on uncertainty, have a greater capacity for collective problem solving, and be able to respond to a wider range of pupils. Fullan (2001) describes five mutually reinforcing components necessary for effective leadership in times of change: moral purpose, understanding the change process, relationship building, knowledge creation and sharing, and coherence making. Sergiovanni (1992) also points to the challenge of student diversity and argues that current approaches to school leadership may well be getting in the way of improvement efforts. He suggests two main reasons for the failure of these approaches: there is a tendency to view leadership as behaviour rather than action, as having to do with persons rather than ideas; the emphasis on bureaucratic, psychological and technical-rational authority has led to the neglect of professional authority.

Adopting a similar perspective, Lambert et al (1995) argue for a 'constructivist' view of leadership. This is defined as "the reciprocal processes that enable participants in an educational community to construct common meanings that lead toward a common purpose about schooling". From their perspective, leadership involves an interactive process entered into by both students and teachers. Consequently, there is a need for shared leadership, with the principal seen as a leader of leaders. Hierarchical structures have to be replaced by shared responsibility in a community that becomes characterised by agreed values and hopes, such that many of the control functions associated with school leadership become less important or even counterproductive.

Riehl (2000) develops "a comprehensive approach to school administration and diversity", focusing specifically on the work of school principals. She concludes that school leaders need to attend to three broad types of task: fostering new meanings about diversity; promoting inclusive practices within schools; and building connections between schools and communities. She goes on to consider how these tasks can be accomplished, exploring how the concept of practice, especially discursive practice, can contribute to a fuller understanding of the work of school principals. This analysis leads the author to offer a more positive view of the potential for school principals to engage in inclusive, transformative developments. She concludes: "When wedded to a relentless commitment to equity, voice, and social justice, administrators' efforts in the tasks of sense making, promoting inclusive cultures and practices in schools, and building positive relationships outside of the school, may indeed foster a new form of practice."

Research by Spillane et al (2001) expands upon these issues. Their work examines the complexity of school leadership and provides a theoretical framework for the research presented in this paper. Their study of 'distributed leadership' challenges the notion that school leadership resides in any one individual. They point out that although tasks may be performed by a single person, the impact of his or her action on the organisation reflects a variety of socio-cultural features and demonstrate how "...social context is an integral component, not just a container, for intelligent activity" (Spillane et al, 2001). Their research highlights the importance of looking beyond school headships and other formal leadership roles in understanding leadership practice in schools.

Methodology and modes of inquiry

Our engagement with the literature led us to conclude that in order to move toward more inclusive practices it is necessary to make the 'black box' of school leadership more transparent. With this in mind, our studies focused on examining the nature of leadership in fostering practices that respond positively to pupil diversity. We assumed that comparison of different countries and communities would help throw light on this issue. At the same time, we wanted to avoid the common pitfalls of comparative discourse: the idea that there is a single national perspective on matters to do with education, and the notion that practice can be generalised across countries without attention to local contexts and meanings. In these senses we were building on a previous study of inclusion and exclusion in eight countries (Booth and Ainscow, 1998).

The tendency to present single national perspectives, matched by a common failure to describe the way practice is understood within its local and national context, reflects a positivist view of social science in which research in one context is amalgamated with that of another. In this way, statistics can distract our attention from the ways in which attitudes, policies and institutions exclude or, at least, marginalise certain groups of children and young people (Stubbs, 1995). This is in marked contrast to studies where there is a deliberate attempt to draw out nuances of meaning (Peters, 1993; 1995). Careful analyses of differences in perspective, context and meaning can enhance rather than reduce the contribution an examination of unfamiliar contexts can make to local practice (Fuller and Clark, 1994).

This leads us to argue that the power of comparison involves using the stimulus of more exotic environments to reconsider thinking and practice in familiar settings. Bearing these arguments in mind, we engaged in a comparative analysis of leadership practice in schools in the United Kingdom, Portugal and the United States where there is evidence of progress towards greater inclusion of vulnerable groups of students. Each account is based on detailed evidence collected over a period of at least three years by one of the authors, using participant observer approaches that involved observations, interviews and document analysis. These data explore differences in perspectives, context and meaning. Towards the end of a three-year period, one author visited schools and reviewed the data and analysis of the other author. Her review was directed at providing a critique of the grounded theory that had been constructed about each school. This assured the trustworthiness of analysis and interpretations, and offered additional and/or alternative perspectives. This paper examines issues related to leadership that emerged from that analysis.

The issue of trustworthiness is a particular challenge to this form of research. Commenting on this issue, Schon (1991) suggests that appropriate rigour in the reflective study of practice should focus on validity (eg how do we know what we claim to know?) and utility (eg how useful is the research to practitioners). These concerns were addressed by using three forms of triangulation: comparing and contrasting evidence from different people within a particular context (eg teachers, support staff and students); scrutinising events from different angles by making use of a variety of methods for collecting information; and using our different perspectives (one American, the other English), as a means of testing interpretations.

A comparative analysis of three 'inclusive' schools

The three schools selected for comparative analysis were chosen because each represented organisational cultures whose stated mission reflects a broadened definition of inclusive education. Each serves a culturally and linguistically diverse population of students and educates children with disabilities and other special educational needs in general education classrooms alongside their peers. Although they have these attributes in common, each represents very different political and socio-cultural contexts. Their size, location, community, student population, traditions and roles of formal leaders are described in the following case-study summaries.

United States – 'Betsy Miller School'

This elementary school is located in a small city (population 30,000) in the State of New York. It serves approximately 350 children in pre-school, kindergarten and grades one through five. Although slightly more than half of its students are white and come from middle class families in the neighbourhood surrounding the school, the overall population of the school is diverse. Approximately one third are African-American, Asian and/or Latino. Most of these children are either bussed by the school district from less affluent neighbourhoods or are voluntarily enrolled and transported by their parents or guardians. Approximately 15 per cent come from families in which English is not the dominant language. Classrooms generally have 20 students, including three or four children classified as eligible for special education services and two to four others for whom English is a second language.

Teachers support one another through instructional teams that meet weekly for planning, discussion and problem solving. These teams are organised by grade levels (Kindergarten and First Grade; Second and Third Grade; Fourth and Fifth Grade). Teachers stay with the same group of children for two years through a process called 'looping', a practice not seen in any other school in the district where it is located. Betsy Miller is unique in several other ways, the most significant being the way support is provided in classrooms.

Under a process called 'blended services', individual classrooms operate as teams headed by a 'lead teacher' certified in elementary education. Each lead teacher shares teaching responsibilities in the classroom with either a half-time teacher 'collaborator' and/or para-professional. Additional support personnel collaborate with instructional teams or individual classrooms depending on student need. Students are not pulled out of classrooms to receive special education or other support services. Rather, curriculum and instruction are designed to be accessible for all children by classroom teachers with the support of instructional teams. Classroom activities have 'multiple entry points' that allow equal participation by all children. Goals are set by teachers, parents and children at the beginning of the year to monitor progress. This assessment process has, however, been challenged by recent state mandates calling for uniform learning standards.

The principal who lead the school for seven years and is associated with the inclusive reforms that now characterise its operation left in 1995. In spite of the fact that there has

been a different principal every year since then, the staff at Betsy Miller have sustained their commitment to inclusive education. This has required considerable struggle and skill. Although Federal and State statutes continue to support diversity, regulatory mechanisms that reflect deficit models conflict with the strengths' based and child-centred focus of this school. Recent regulations requiring schools to demonstrate achievement of mandated learning standards through state-wide, standardised assessments have provided new challenges.

United Kingdom – 'Eastside School'

Eastside School in London was designed as an inclusive setting for 420 pupils in the age range four to 11, plus the equivalent of 52 nursery places. Its student population includes approximately 70 per cent on free school meals, 68 per cent who are bi or multi-lingual, including children who are immigrants and/or asylum seekers from east-Asian, middle-eastern and African countries. There is a 16 per cent mobility ratio among families, ie people coming and going, and being rehoused in the community.

The aim of the school is to provide all pupils with access to the mainstream curriculum and everyone is regarded as a full member of the school community. With this in mind, the school building is organised in a way that is intended to promote the integration of special needs provision into the daily life of the school. Built in 1992, it was designed to provide an 'inclusive setting' that is fully accessible to all children, staff and members of the community, including individuals with physical disabilities. The school building has four wings, each of which has its own suite of interconnected, open areas. The wings operate with a multi-disciplinary team co-ordinated by a teacher who is known as the 'team leader'. There is also a 'curriculum co-ordinator' on each team monitoring the progress of children who have statements of special education need and assisting the four teachers and various support assistants on her team in developing and adapting curriculum. An overall pattern has evolved that guides the work of each of these teams. This working pattern is informed by the strong emphasis placed in the school on encouraging pupil autonomy. The overall emphasis is on providing support within the classroom, making particular use of what might be described as 'natural' sources of support, particularly the children themselves. Specialist personnel are encouraged to work in the classrooms and, to varying degrees, volunteer helpers, including parents, are involved in a similar style. The children themselves are given a large degree of independence to shape their programme of activities during much of the school day.

The headteacher at Eastside has been there since it opened 10 years ago. The deputy head also serves as the school's special education needs co-ordinator (SENCO) and has been at the school for seven years. Both administrators support "...a shared vision of developing relationships and a curriculum that ensures that everyone feels valued, respected and reaches a high level of achievement". Whilst the great majority of children in the UK go to their local neighbourhood schools, there is a long tradition of schools fulfilling the role of 'sorting offices', selecting and preparing pupils for their future destinations in life. Thus the idea of selecting and grouping children on the basis of their perceived academic potential is well established and has survived despite attempts to introduce a more comprehensive orientation. The existence of various forms of separate special education provision can be seen as part of this overall pattern of differential educational response. In this context, Eastside primary school is particularly interesting.

Recent challenges facing the school include being cited by OFSTED for poor academic performance in literacy and numeracy.

Portugal – ‘DaCosta School’

DaCosta School serves an economically disadvantaged and culturally diverse district in Lisbon. It has a population of approximately 1,000 students in the age range of 10 to 16 years. Among these are growing numbers of non-Portuguese speaking children who have arrived from former Portuguese colonies or as refugees from other African, middle-eastern and eastern European countries. The student population also includes children with significant cognitive and physical disabilities. Although in Portuguese schools there is a noticeable acceptance of the rights of students with disabilities to attend their local schools, discrimination towards students from minority ethnic groups is evident in some schools, particularly in relation to black children and those from gypsy families. This is not evident at DaCosta, however, where a commitment to inclusive education in its broadest sense is clearly evident.

Special education ‘support teachers’ and teaching assistants support children with special education needs in general education classrooms. Support teachers also work with classroom teachers to modify and adapt the general education curriculum. As is true throughout Portugal, class sizes are small by international standards and well staffed with teachers and support staff. Teachers have a reasonable degree of discretion regarding curriculum, such that they can offer flexible responses to students. Teachers at DaCosta are concerned that the national curriculum and standardised assessments being proposed by the Ministry of Education will interfere with the inclusive approaches they have developed. Teachers here and elsewhere in Portugal have low status, are poorly paid and if they have not met the criteria for permanent placement at a school can be moved to another school each year, making it very difficult to create the kind of long term improvement strategies needed to assure a school-wide commitment to innovation. DaCosta has been fortunate in having had an 80 per cent retention rate among its teachers during the last three years.

The administrative structure of this and other Portuguese schools is collaborative and distributed among staff. There is a noticeable emphasis on democracy. The school’s president is a teacher elected by staff and parents every three years. The president at DaCosta is assisted by two vice-presidents who were also elected from among teachers who have permanent placements at the school. These three teachers make up the executive council and are responsible for overseeing school-wide management. There is considerable input into the executive council from the entire staff, particularly from those teachers who work on committees designed to develop school-wide policies and practices and/or address specific issues of concern. Some committees work in the local community with outside agencies to develop and monitor services for students and their families. Teachers also meet regularly as teams to discuss student progress.

In recent years the school has been part of a national action research project, focused on the development of inclusive practices. A team of teachers, including the president, has led this initiative. They have carried out surveys of staff, students and parents and, as a result, have implemented strategies to make their school more inclusive. These have involved the collection and use of more detailed evidence through mutual

classroom observations, including group analysis of video recordings. Possibly the most powerful strategy they have used to promote the development of inclusive education involved interviews with students, carried out by an advisory team from outside the school. The school's co-ordinating team for the project analysed transcripts from these interviews and used extracts as the basis of staff development activities in the school. Some extracts were also used on posters that were displayed in the staff room, inviting teachers to write their reactions to comments made by the students. More recently, DaCosta took the lead in creating a network of local schools that are assisting one another in fostering more inclusive forms of education.

Common themes related to inclusive education

Analysis of the case-study data revealed that although these schools looked different from one another and represented very different contexts, they shared common features. These are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Themes related to inclusive education across all three settings
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Initial motivation for inclusion supported by external forces
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Uncompromising commitment and belief in inclusion
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Differences among students and staff perceived as a resource
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teaming and a collaborative interaction style among staff and children
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Willingness to struggle to sustain practice
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inclusion understood as a social/political issue
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Symbolism (visual and linguistic) communicated ideals and spread commitment across the school and community

In each case, these school leaders were prompted to create settings that supported diverse groups of students when outside forces that included policy initiatives and parental pressure motivated change. Although the following statement by the head of Eastside describes one specific situation, it reflects similar experiences and perspectives articulated by leaders at the other two schools:

What is important to being inclusive is a philosophical approach to enable schools to include children with special needs. So, what's happened [here] and is happening more and more in local authorities is that there was a core of people who were in quite powerful positions who said, "Yeah. Inclusion is a really, really good thing and we've got to do it. Yeah, it's going to be hard and all the rest of it, but it's a really good thing." So, that's where you set a climate that allows innovation. And because it was a parental movement, it's kind of a different thing from being a top down model from officers. (Head, Eastside)

The development of inclusive approaches did not emerge as a mechanical process in which any one specific organisational restructuring, or the introduction of a particular practice, generated increased levels of participation among students. Rather, the evidence suggested that the development of an inclusive culture required a shared commitment by staff to processes that produced an overall enhancement in participation

among everyone at the school. The president of DaCosta expressed her understanding of this process in the following way:

In order to have an inclusive school, you have to have teachers who have a mentality that is inclusive. And we cannot demand that, have rules to impose that. It's group work, it's a culture, it's a philosophy, and it's a policy.

Each school developed school wide structures to support their inclusive philosophy. These structures were characteristically collaborative.

I believe quite strongly that inclusion is a management and organisational structure. It isn't about how you spent the money you have on this individual child. It's about looking holistically at the school and groups of people. The other idea is about a support system that you get through a team working. (Head, Eastside)

Leaders at each of these schools also emphasised how conflict was inevitable within these collaborative arrangements. They expressed an acceptance of and willingness to struggle in working with one another, children and parents.

They got to feel comfortable with working in teams, people observing them, being part of a group, not egocentric, be able to share ideas. They've got to be able to work in a team, deal with difficulties and share. They got to be able to say, "You're really getting on my nerves today". And we have in our staff handbook, suggestions for how to approach people. We have a rule: if someone has really upset you, you have to go back and try to talk to them about it. And if you can't, you have to get someone to come and help you. Sometimes that's my role. (Head, Eastside)

Staff and team meetings were described as times for active debate as well as mutual problem solving. The principal at Betsy Miller explained how parents often became included in this process:

In a sense, there was nothing that we couldn't do, as long as we all agreed to do it together. The power of the collaboration piece, and having the staff buy in, was that as long as they were comfortable... I've learned that the quickest way to create change is to bring the staff with you. If they are convinced that this is going to work, then the parents just follow.

Every once in a while somebody comes along and says, "Why doesn't this goddamn thing look like it should". But, by and large, because the teachers had bought into it and had that kind of enthusiasm, they brought the parents along. And then it wasn't just my idea, it was something that was grounded in real experience, and that's the way ultimately all the major changes occurred. The staff reassured parents, not just reassured them but basically gave parents evidence that their kids were learning.

The collaborative approaches used by the staff at each of these schools enhanced the skills they needed when implementing team teaching approaches with their own

students. Their work with one another also helped staff develop an appreciation for the ways in which differences between individuals provided opportunities for enrichment. This was seen in the way adults related to one another as well as how they interacted with children. The deputy head at Eastside described her understanding of how respecting individual differences impacted on the way she worked with teachers:

All teachers have different skills. There are things that I'm really, really good at doing and there are things I am really, really not very good at doing. People have to know that just because I am a deputy head, I'm not an expert at everything.

I let people know what they're good at. "Hey, you're really very good at that. I couldn't do that." I think people have to know that they can do better than you.

The political nature of inclusive education was acknowledged by each of the leaders interviewed as they struggled to reconcile demands for accountability from their respective governing agencies with the immediate social and emotional needs of their students. The principal at Betsy Miller put it this way:

The significant thing for me was that as a public school with all the normal obstacles that are built into public schools, we could make (inclusion) work. That we could teach heterogeneously, we could be inclusive, and we could survive, and teach our kids, and produce by and large kids that are as well educated as any kids. I think in public education there is an obstacle around every corner. Almost naturally built into every step you take. The only thing that keeps you from doing whatever it is you want to do is what you let do it.

Betsy Miller's staff was responding to continually changing educational policies that reflected shifts in the United States from liberal to conservative control of state governments. Like all other American schools, it was regulated and monitored by State and Federal Departments of Education as well as its local school district. Teachers' commitment to the creation of what they called an 'anti-bias zone' began in the late 1980s during a period of progressive reforms. The programmes teachers had designed with this support, addressed historic inequities in the provision of public education for racial, ethnic and linguistic minorities, as well as children with disabilities and other special educational needs. The political landscape had, however, shifted and by 2002 these programmes became threatened. Public education policies in the United States were moving away from their earlier focus on social equity to assuring academic accountability.

Teachers at Betsy Miller were facing these challenges in the absence of an experienced leader who shared their commitments to inclusive education and was able to negotiate with centralised bureaucracies. In contrast, having consistent leadership allowed Eastside to respond to similar dilemmas and sustain its central commitment to inclusive education. The headteacher was able to work with the staff to refocus teaching practices in ways that conformed to new external demands, while remaining committed to the foundational values and beliefs of the school. When first created, Eastside followed an early education, open-school model. Children chose activities and teachers facilitated children's explorations. This approach changed after the first inspection by OFSTED

forced the school to adopt a more explicit focus on literacy and numeracy. The head described how she and the staff responded:

Well, we were kind of forced into adopting this because we had the first OFSTED. Which in some ways was very good and exciting but in terms of literacy, they said we had some serious weaknesses. So, one way doing the required 'action plan' was to adopt the literacy strategy. In a way they were right. We were a bit too woolly about what our approach to literacy was and didn't train people. The second OFSTED was amazingly good. And our scores have certainly gone up.

The political concerns at DaCosta also related to anticipated shifts in national education policy that staff feared might threaten the continuation of inclusive schooling in Portugal. This led a group of teachers to begin working with other schools in their region to form a unified political force. Teachers from DaCosta also began working with community agencies to develop integrated services for their students in the face of limited educational funding:

Ten teachers from the school are engaged in voluntary work to create a support room to be located at a community association. [In this way] they can provide support for students from this school and others... We hope to put together (something that addresses) their social realities in more general ways, so we don't have to be forced to work in a curricular way within the general education structure. Another thing we are doing is to be included in a network of health and youth in the town. We have a teacher who goes to those meetings and then there is a school, health centre and local authorities, working together. (President, DaCosta)

Staff at each school developed symbols and took actions that communicated their commitments to one another and the community. At DaCosta, teachers created posters they displayed throughout the school, using visual images supporting their belief in inclusion and democratic leadership. At Betsy Miller, there was a conscious creation of a shared language to describe programmes to its frequent visitors. At Eastside, staff commitment was visible in slogans promoting inclusive values posted about the school. Eastside also hoped to enhance support from the local community by inviting community members to use its facilities while the school was in operation. School leaders supported all of their actions.

Themes related to leadership

In each setting one individual held an official position of responsibility for the operation of his or her school. In the cases of DaCosta and Eastside, one or two other formal leaders shared the role of 'positional' leader. Although given different titles, they behaved similarly: at Eastside, they were known as head and deputy head; at Betsy Miller, principal; at DaCosta, president and two vice-presidents. All created and supported non-hierarchical organisational structures but were laissez-faire. In fact, they were not at all reluctant to be autocratic when faced with decisions that reflected values and beliefs central to inclusive education. For example, when discussing how teachers were selected for the school, the head of Eastside explained, "People buy into the culture or don't stay. We indoctrinate." In describing his interactions with teachers during his first two years at the school, the principal at Betsy Miller explained how he consistently questioned teachers' referrals to special education and required all children to be included in general education classrooms.

But initially until it was established and institutionalised, I had to browbeat in particular some of the classroom teachers into accepting the fact that this was the way it was going to be done. And teachers are like all of us; they will wait and see if it's going to go away. So initially there was that notion, but I have sort of a pit bull mentality, so I would just keep saying it over and over again. Every committee or special education meeting, whenever we talked about classifying a kid, I would sing the same tune, "What is classification going to give this kid that we can't give the kid already". (Principal, Betsy Miller)

Each school employed the kinds of collaborative practices identified as central to inclusive schools (Ainscow, 1999; Ferguson et al, 1996; Lipsky and Gartner, 1996; Pugach and Johnson, 1995; Stainback and Stainback, 1991; 1996). They were organised in ways that required interaction and participation among adults and children. Day-to-day responsibility for how the school operated was distributed among the staff. There was a clear understanding that in addition to positional leaders some staff members held more specific leadership roles and responsibilities than others. These individuals shared the inclusive philosophy and belief system of the positional leaders. At Betsy Miller, functional leadership was distributed among all teachers and professional support staff who had been at the school for several years. They facilitated team meetings, worked in one another's classrooms, carried out staff development projects, and represented other staff at the school-wide decision making council, and/or mentored new teachers. At Eastside, members of the staff were assigned specific roles as team leaders and curriculum co-ordinators, assisting other teachers with instruction and classroom management. At DaCosta, teachers with permanent positions at the school ran committees that directed policy initiatives and curriculum innovations and lead the school-wide project for creating and developing a school-wide commitment to inclusion.

Table 2 summarises the shared and unique features of leadership exhibited by positional and functional leaders at each of these three schools.

Table 2: Leadership in inclusive schools
I. Features shared by 'positional' and 'functional' leaders
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uncompromising commitment to inclusive education
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearly defined roles, responsibilities and boundaries
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborative interpersonal style
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problem solving and conflict resolution skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding and appreciation of expertise of others
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive relationships with staff
II. Roles unique to 'positional' leaders
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiate and support non-hierarchical organisational systems and structures within the school
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsible for managing demands and requirements emanating from outside the school
III. Roles unique to 'functional' leaders
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsible for collaborating with and supporting colleagues in instruction and classroom management

Differences between the roles of positional and functional leaders reflected the expectation that one individual needed to respond to the hierarchical and bureaucratic educational systems in which their schools operated. Positional leaders were both responsible for organising and managing their schools and held accountable by centralised, external management systems for the performance of the staff and students. Coupled with their commitment to inclusive education, these demands motivated positional leaders to initiate and develop non-hierarchical organisational systems and structures to support staff.

Sustaining their schools' inclusive cultures meant managing demands and requirements emanating from outside the school. This required a good deal of political understanding and negotiation skills to manage sometimes contradictory demands from within and without the school. The positional leaders at DaCosta were the only formal leaders who held classroom teaching and administrative responsibilities. Although this limited the time they could spend addressing outside issues, it enabled them to remain closer to the day-to-day concerns of teachers. Their relationships with teachers were therefore closer to that of functional leaders at other schools whose primary role was offering support to other staff. Positional leaders provided support to functional leaders but there were few, if any, supports for positional leaders.

Conclusion and discussion

A theme running through our analysis of leadership practice is the importance of cultural factors in promoting (or inhibiting) student participation. The similarities between the themes listed in Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate how leadership was embedded in the culture of each school. By 'culture' we mean the norms, values and accepted ways of doing things that are reflected in observed practices. In each setting, central to both sustaining inclusive educational practice in general and leadership in particular was an uncompromising commitment to principles of inclusion among both positional and functional leaders. The development of more inclusive approaches did not emerge from our studies as a mechanical process in which any one specific organisational restructuring, or the introduction of a particular practice, generated increased levels of participation. Rather, the evidence suggested that the development of an inclusive culture requires a shared commitment by staff to processes that produce an overall enhancement in participation among all participants.

Given the problematic nature of the notion of culture, it is important to consider what this involves. One aspect of culture seemed to be the values and attitudes held by school staff. The extent to which these values include the acceptance and celebration of difference and a commitment to offering educational opportunities to all students, coupled with the extent to which they were shared across the staff, relate to the extent to which students actually are enabled to participate in schools. Authentic participation is evident when all students learn alongside others, collaborate in shared learning experiences, actively engage with learning and have a say in their education. More deeply, participation means being recognised, accepted and valued for oneself (Booth and Ainscow, 2002).

Using these criteria, there were lower levels of participation among students with special education needs by students at DaCosta than either of the other two schools. For example, during free recreational periods, students with special educational needs often chose to meet with one another in the resource room rather than join their classmates in the student café or school yard. Some students with disabilities also received significant amounts of instruction in separate settings outside general education classrooms. This was not the case in either of the other two case-study schools. These differences cannot be explained as a consequence of the severity of the impairments among students at DaCosta. Students with special educational needs at Eastside with even more severe impairments received all instruction in the same setting as every other child. The students at DaCosta were, however, older than those at either of the other two schools studied. As early adolescents, they faced social exclusion from their peers more often than the primary school children at either Eastside or Betsy Miller.

Although the staff at DaCosta expressed concern regarding the social isolation of some students, they had not yet addressed this issue. DaCosta was the most recent of the three to develop its school-wide commitment to inclusion. Unlike the other two, staff turnover interfered with its continuing development. Government policies allowed more senior teachers to request placements in locations believed to be more desirable. Yearly changes among staff had created instability and hindered the creation of a shared level of commitment to inclusion across the school.

A second aspect of school culture that emerged across settings was the significance of collaboration. The willingness and ability of staff with different specialisations to work together was seen as essential for 'blending' support services available for children with special educational needs. Collaboration was both a form of practice and a manifestation of the inclusive values of these schools as they attempted to create a community in which all individuals – staff and students – were valued. Within this context, leadership became redefined and distributed, reinforcing a sense of community and of mutual trust within which it was embedded. These findings are similar to those of other researchers who report joint problem solving as a feature of their case studies of inclusive schools (Ainscow, 1999; Dyson and Millward, 2000). Kugelmass (2001) and Hunt et al (2000) also describe the collaborative development in which school staffs engaged. Responding to student diversity requires school staff to move beyond established practices, that in turn demands a process of learning about new practices and a willingness to struggle. These processes take place most effectively within a collaborative context.

The collaborative nature of inclusive school cultures has clear implications for the nature of leadership and decision-making. First, it leads us to conclude that strong school leaders, committed to inclusive values, are crucial to promoting and supporting collaboration. In all three schools, positional leaders modelled collaborative practice in their everyday interactions with staff as well by developing formal and informal opportunities for staff to collaborate with one another. The importance of collaborative processes point to the importance of distributed leadership and participative decision making. The 'strong' leaders we met were supporters and enablers of staff as they engaged in a collaborative process of school development. They would not, however, hesitate to be autocratic when faced with decisions impacting on the foundation of their schools' inclusive cultures.

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