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Book Review

Mel Ainscow, *Developing Inclusive Schools: Pathways to Success*. Routledge, 2024. ISBN 9781032571430. 244 p. £29.99.

"Every learner matters and matters equally" (UNESCO, 2017). This oft quoted phrase is inarguable but does not represent the reality in many (or perhaps most) education systems around the world. The challenge of course lies in implementation. What needs to be done to make schools and education systems more equitable? What is the role of each of the agents within an education system, from policy makers to communities to classroom practitioners? These are the questions Mel Ainscow's new book seeks to address. He charts his efforts to apply and refine the thinking presented in his 1999 book *Understanding the Development of Inclusive Schools* (Ainscow, 1999). He starts by reiterating his position of inclusive education as needing to move away from an approach concerned primarily with serving disabled children within general education settings to a broader aim of eliminating the social exclusion that arises from attitudes and responses to diversity in race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender and abilities. Simply, every learner, no matter their characteristics or background, has the right to receive effective educational opportunities. No learner should be excluded either explicitly or implicitly (and looking at where exclusion happens is a good way to identify the barriers to inclusion). He argues that there is still work to be done in many places both at home and internationally to move away from the use of a medical approach that explains educational difficulties in terms of a child's deficits. This new book, then, is a continuation of his call to reform education systems in a way that is broad in its thinking about inclusion and is not solely focused on mainstreaming a small number of children.

Some might question whether this admirable intention is feasible? At what cost? Ainscow quotes the conclusion of the Salamanca conference (which he was heavily involved in organising) that "regular schools with [an] inclusive

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orientation are the most effective means of … achieving education for all" (p19). He underlines that there is sound justification for the shift on educational, social and economic grounds. He draws on OECD findings to make the point that international evidence suggests it is perfectly possible for "countries to develop education systems that are both equitable and excellent" (p25).

Ainscow has long been at the forefront of international thinking and activity in the field of inclusive education, and he draws on this extensive experience throughout the book via vignettes. These in part serve to remind us that we all bring local cultural assumptions to our understandings of inclusion wherever we are in the globe. For example, he reflects on visits to schools in Ghana where all children are educated in the same place, regardless of disability, as a matter of course. "Where else would they go?", asks a local practitioner to whom this interpretation of inclusion is self-evident. Ainscow looks at the pervasiveness of the term 'SEND' (special educational needs and disabilities) to distinguish students who are disabled in some way, in several countries, in contrast to Portugal which has successfully moved away from such categorisation. He terms Portugal's move a "paradigm shift": a movement away from the individual gaze towards a model which centres flexibility in the curriculum and dialogue between home and school. Importantly, as he highlights, this shift depends not only on schools, but on communities, local authorities, and researchers, each of whom must value inclusion and equity as core principles.

Change is possible, then. Ainscow argues for regarding working towards inclusion as being a process, a process that is too complex and too heavily context-specific for a simplistic recipe to be written and copied. He reminds us of a set of ingredients (pp6 – 12) he presented in his earlier book:

1. use existing practices and knowledge as starting points for development;
2. see difference as opportunities for learning rather than problems to be fixed;
3. scrutinise barriers to student participation;
4. make effective use of available resources to support learning;
5. develop a language of practice amongst teachers;
6. and create conditions in schools that encourage a degree of risk-taking.

These ingredients describe a process of identifying and removing barriers to enable the presence, participation and achievement of all students, and involving a particular emphasis on groups of learners at risk of marginalisation, exclusion or underachievement.

How are these ingredients best embedded? Much of the book emphasises a shift to processes of social learning, drawing on evidence to generate questions, stimulate reflection, and prompt experimentation. This centring ways of working through collaborative enquiry to create new knowledge makes links to Wenger's (1998) communities of practice.

The collaborative enquiry-based approach promoted here is based on four principles: engagement with different stakeholders to interrupt assumptions and bring about different ways of thinking; taking action and improving practice in school; working with, acknowledging and drawing on expertise; and development of capacity in the local area to ensure sustainable change.

Ainscow stresses the importance of understanding and changing local patterns by problematising them, and by developing a common language through discourse. He describes using critical incidents as "interruptions" to be used to disturb and disrupt the understandings which sustain current practice, interrupting our tacit assumptions and using critical incidents as a way of allowing us to freshly view and identify the barriers. What can be changed within the system? How can we develop our practice, to reduce exclusion? This is the paradigm shift: towards creating an inherently inclusive system, away from the impulse to find a 'response' to the children who are currently under-served. He advocates for this collaboration at different scales: within schools, between schools, across boundaries, and also beyond the school gate, with other local actors such as families.

The collaborative enquiry methodology described, a bottom-up approach, can counter top-down directives and policy imperatives, although there are tensions as critical engagement with policy and practices can then lead to challenging questions of the current educational context (Drew et al., 2016). Whilst there is a wealth of thought-provoking materials here, we wonder whether there needs to be a more explicit focus on the purpose of the educational enquiry, that is the 'why' in educational terms. In focusing on the "educational purposes, principles and values" the tendency to reduce collaborative inquiries to "instrumental and/or short-term concerns, for example serving narrow mechanisms for implementing policy or developing new technical approaches" (Drew et al., 2016: p95) might be averted. Drew et al's model (Ibid.) includes an additional step (stage 1 below) and asks practitioners to consider the why first – a critical interrogation, and so a *Critical Collaborative Professional Enquiry* (CCPE).

Stage 1: a conceptual phase which involves engaging with the 'big ideas' of the curriculum, considering fitness for purpose of pedagogies and addressing contextual conditions.

Stage 2: undertaking Critical Collaborative Professional Enquiry (CCPE), a methodology, derived from action research, comprising three phases: focusing, interrupting and sense making to trial new ways of developing school-based curriculum development with an impact on outcomes for teachers and their students (Ibid.: p96).

The collaborative work will need evidence to inform it, and Ainscow offers a number of possible ways to generate data, based on his extensive work with

schools and teachers worldwide. Taking a 'learning walk' and 'lesson study' are just two. He advocates starting with big questions: "Why are we failing some learners?"; and "What are the barriers experienced by some children and young people?". In his strong focus on hearing from stakeholders in the system (including students and communities) to try to find the story under the statistics, he reminds us that we need good qualitative data to make sense of the quantitative. He offers cautions, however. Having the space to think and talk doesn't necessarily lead to changes in the intended direction. The activity can serve to entrench thinking and resistance instead. He also notes that shifting people's underlying assumptions is rarely, if ever, a smooth process. Those in leadership need to have the confidence and skills to navigate the inevitable turbulence, and indeed to be able to recognise the turbulence as evidence that things are shifting.

Throughout, he forefronts the role of the researcher in this collaborative space, arguing for an emphasis on co-creation of investigations into practice. He is not advocating a 'research adopted into practice' approach, but for recognising and utilising the knowledge that researchers bring and the capacity they have to act as critical friends. He makes a persuasive argument for the value of heavily involving researchers but what might be some of the implications of trying to implement at scale? Could this approach be taken system-wide, beyond smaller scale research projects? That would translate to a lot of researchers to draw upon. There are also questions perhaps about depth of knowledge. We would argue that a high-level focus on 'inclusion' also needs specific deep knowledge across a range of underpinning specialist areas. A school or network of schools wishing to examine gender, for example, would need to be able to draw on advisers with relevant knowledge, and distinct to schools wishing to focus on neurodivergence, or social class. This is not to advocate a siloed approach, but one that understands specifics and nuances of inequalities in an intersectional way (Scottish Government, 2022).

Ainscow is candid that none of this of course will be straightforward: this is "*technically simple, socially complex*" (p175). Schools don't exist in isolation. They each consist of a unique set of people and personalities, operating within a given political and economic environment, influenced by sometimes tacit sets of norms and assumptions. Broad, top-down policy cannot take this local nuance and context into account. The role of policy makers and system leaders, then, must be to find ways to first centre inclusion as a priority for all practitioners and then stimulate the conditions that lead to local innovation.

Ainscow is presenting us with, as he terms it, a 'sequel' to his 1999 book. There is an ongoing emphasis on the complexities involved, and there will inevitably be further evolution of thought as actors at all places within the sys-

tem locally and globally continue to trial, reflect, and discuss. For now, though, this is a provocative and ambitious vision of how a shift to more inclusive practice might be achieved. It reminds us, wherever we are, that our assumptions and expectations are heavily grounded by local context, and that we can and should look around internationally to see what can be learned. Not to import unthinkingly, but to allow our thinking and assumptions to be interrupted, to prompt us to ask fundamental questions about our beliefs and our practices, to better serve all children and young people.

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