‘It is impossible to avoid policy’ comment on Mel Ainscow: promoting inclusion and equity in education: lessons from international experiences

Peder Haug

Department of Humanities and Education, Volda University College, Volda, Norway

ABSTRACT

Mel Ainscow has recently written an interesting and important article concerning a challenging aspect of inclusive education, namely how to practically implement the ambitious ideal of inclusion in schools, where inclusion refers to making basic education of a high quality available to all learners by identifying barriers to access to educational opportunities and resources to overcome those barriers. Schools should serve all children, especially those with special educational needs. To work towards inclusive ideals represents a fundamental shift in the traditional approach to teaching, certainly for most schools, in most countries. According to Ainscow, there is confusion about how to move policy and practice forward, a declaration which has found strong support among other researchers. Allan (2008, p. 10), for instance, writes that there is a deep uncertainty about how to create inclusive environments within schools and how to teach inclusively. The article contributes insights into how to reduce this uncertainty. The author presents many principles and practical suggestions for how to promote inclusive education. The intention here is to highlight some of the elements in Ainscow’s article that are of most importance. The conclusions drawn here would not be surprising or unfamiliar to Ainscow himself.

Introduction

Ainscow builds on his own and close colleagues’ work and experiences from around the world. It seems unlikely that there could be so many individuals with such extensive practice within this field. The main idea for how to promote inclusion in schools is referred to as a general ‘whole-system approach’, which focuses on five interrelated factors: school development, community involvement, administration, use of evidence and inclusion and equity as principles. Schools are placed at the centre of the model, which means that schools themselves are the starting point for the implementation. The article discusses how to move forward to ensure that schools become more inclusive institutions. The question discussed in the article concerns how to develop schools from inside. It seems that the strategy developed and presented is a typical bottom-up procedure, but this is actually not the case throughout. The model also implies that schools are dependent upon the support of several contextual influences and must relate to inclusive principles and bring inclusive evidence to bear on the way they carry out their work. The schools need support from administration, local communities and national policies, and this dialogue between different groups of strategic stakeholders and responsible parties is crucial. The approach is inspired by, among others, Senge (2000).

A whole-system approach

CONTACT

Peder Haug
peder.haug@hivolda.no
Volda University College, Volda, Norway

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This strategy for how to implement profound changes in, for instance, schools has been adopted by many projects and institutions. The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training has adopted the same key principles in many of their reform projects, and with positive results (Andreassen, 2015). A statement by the OECD is crystal clear on the need for such an approach:

"Developing inclusive education must be seen as a reform process. For it to work, many new attitudes need to be formed and practices developed, not only among education professionals, but across communities and societies as a whole. While these changes are taking place, many countries maintain a range of provisions to offer choice to parents and to give flexibility to local circumstances." (OECD, 1999, p. 51).

It is my view that the strategies recommended in the present article reflect the same approach to the challenges in developing this alternative foundation for schools.

What about policy?

While reading the article, a formulation from Thomas and Loxley (2007) came to mind: ‘Whether we like it or not, it is impossible to avoid policy.’ (p. 94). Is this also true of policy when working with schools to achieve inclusive values and practices?

The whole-system approach to inclusive education can be divided into two parts. Part one consists of the struggles within schools to develop inclusive strategies. To create inclusive national education, it is, according to Ainscow, strategic to start by changing the schools to support all learners, instead of integrating vulnerable students into existing systems. This part of the model concerns what occurs in and around the different schools. In Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) terminology, this part consists of the micro- and meso-systems (immediate environment and connections). To carry out change, however, schools are also dependent upon elements that they cannot control or determine, all of which have to be present to legitimate and support the implementation processes. Ainscow mentions several of them. This part is what schools depend upon and are affected by, but cannot directly influence or control. It is made up of the exo-, macro- and chrono-systems in Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) conceptualization (indirect environment, social and cultural values and changes over time). Theoretically, these two parts can be integrated into one model, as is the case in the article discussed here. In practice, however, they belong to different domains.

Most important in implementing inclusive education in schools is, in my view, that it has to be a national priority. To achieve these ambitious aims, national policy should both legitimate and support schools’ struggles for inclusive actions.

It could well be that the article under-communicates the difficulties involved in ensuring the national and regional support that enables schools to realize inclusive education locally.

This issue is associated with the characteristics of big and little policy (House, 1991). Big policy is the different nations’ overall priorities, the general elements of a contemporary education policy. Little policy here involves how, for instance, schools prioritize different aspects in their daily struggle. As I will discuss below, there is a need for coherence between big policy and little policy. If not, there will be competing initiatives within schools, which is also an issue in the article.

Strong international support for inclusive education

The article starts with a description of how, for decades, international organizations have encouraged inclusive educational developments. Several bodies within, for instance, UNESCO and the UN have been engaged in this struggle, and they have succeeded in gaining support from a whole range of countries to work for and promote inclusive education. The impression is that inclusive education as defined by these international agencies is widely supported all over the world.

In spite of formal international agreement between nations about inclusion, the consensus and readiness to act accordingly within nations is not as widespread (Haug, 2016). The reason for this could be that it is easy, non-commital and even a matter of prestige for nations internationally to agree on the ideal formulations about inclusive education. This argument is in line with Hardy and Woodcock (2015, p 117) who have asked: ‘If inclusion, for all its complexity, is such an important principle, why is it not a readily identifiable, stand-alone entity in policy? And why is inclusion so often only mentioned in passing in many policies?’

My concern is how inclusive thinking and practice develops in schools where there is little or weak national support and where there are even strong contradictions between inclusive ideas in individual schools and dominant national ideas and values.

In the national education policies of most countries there is competition and even conflicts between different imperatives about what constitutes education of high quality and how to achieve it. Political parties disagree about these issues. Some of the research literature refers to competing initiatives and national traditions to explain the weak implementation of inclusive education (Stangvik, 2014). I will argue that this is the case in, for instance, Norway. On paper, formulations on inclusive education are prominent in Norway, but in practice, progress is not so clear (Nordahl, 2018). For instance, as in most countries in Europe, ideas associated with New Public Management (NPM) have been put forward
for many years as important in order to be able to implement necessary developments in education (Hansen, 2011). Most central in NPM is market-orientation to achieve greater success in international production and trade. In this struggle, strategies like competition, privatization, testing and accountability are central elements. In Norway, for instance, it is also stated that increased pressure to achieve higher levels of performance affects teaching and promotes the need for more special education and more segregated approaches. Individual schools flouting national policy is not very likely (Mathiesen & Vedøy, 2012).

**International consensus on inclusive education**

One key concern is clarifying the definition of inclusive education. As I see it, we confront one especially important issue, which is the notion that it is possible to agree in countries all over the world on how to define inclusive education. It is stated in the Ainscow article that the definitions and conceptions of inclusive education presented, represent strong and widely accepted ideas about what inclusion is, and what its main objectives are. Parallel statements about the meaning of inclusive education have been put forward many times, for instance twenty years ago, when an OECD report claimed that there is agreement about what inclusive education is, and declared that the main challenges are a mixture of political will and resistance to change (OECD, 1999).

It is clear that there is a certain consensus internationally about the formal and primary definitions of inclusive education, but what is open to question is this notion that there is agreement on what inclusion is, particularly when it comes to practical consequences and actions. The practices of inclusive education in schools differ both between and within many countries (Haug, 2016), as Ainscow also points out. There is probably no single practical model of inclusive education that can be adopted in every country, which means that it is a challenge for schools to implement inclusive policies under contrasting national and local values. As several researchers have stated, the understanding and the practice of inclusion are closely embedded within the historical national traditions, and to export one definition of inclusive education to all countries, could thus be seen as a form of imperialism. As David Mitchell (2005) has argued, inclusion goes beyond education and should involve transformations across all government and agencies at all levels in society. Inclusion could thus depend upon changes in nations’ overall ideological environments. It is unthinkable that this will happen, at least not in the same way, all over the world. Mitchell (2005) has also observed that cultural values and beliefs, levels of economic wealth, and histories mediate conceptions of inclusive education, taking on different meanings in different countries and even within countries. He seems to believe that countries can learn from each other’s experiences, but it is important that they give consideration to their own particularities as well. This also goes for exporters of inclusive philosophies and practices – they must respect local values. I find it reassuring that the article accepts and encourages this way of thinking. There are references to developments in three countries where progress has been made along different lines, and an important force in these developments has been national legislation. These countries are Italy, Finland and Portugal.

**National consensus about inclusive education**

My final concern when it comes to both the definition and practice of inclusive education is the vertical dimension of the issue. This dimension refers to the priorities, definitions and understandings of inclusion in the chain from the national assembly, government, through central state administration, into municipalities and thereafter to schools, teachers, parents, pupils and local communities. Coherence in understanding and practice between these different bodies is a prerequisite for successful implementation (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Or conversely, in general, lack of consensus between different levels in school organization is damaging to the implementation of important changes.

Ainscow is also concerned about consensus, in particular that schools should pay attention to the building of common inclusive values within school communities. It is not sufficient to have consensus within schools; consensus should be national, from top to bottom. This indicates that a bottom-up strategy within schools must be supplemented by a kind of top-down effort to secure connectedness or coherence between the different levels within the school organization.

To be able to support school developments, there ought also to be compatibility between external policy and school values. Again, this kind of consensus cannot be generated or controlled by individual schools. Other agents also have to be able to see it.

At the end of the article, Ainscow also admits that the starting point must be both policy-makers and practitioners coordinating their efforts to make schools better places for all students, and especially for vulnerable groups.

**Summary**

In this short commentary on Mel Ainscow’s article, I have chosen to focus on a few issues connected to the whole-system approach, which is the article’s framework for thinking about how to promote inclusion and equity within education systems. This kind of approach
is an interesting and well accepted theoretical model for implementation of inclusive education. I claim that this model in practice should at least be divided into two parts. One part concerns what goes on in and around the different schools. This part consists of the immediate environment and its connections. Part two concerns matters that schools are dependent upon and affected by in creating inclusive education, but can nevertheless not directly influence or control. This part consists of the indirect environment, social and cultural values and changes over time.

My comments have dealt with the second part of the model, especially concerning the formulation of national and regional policy, which explains the title of this article: ‘It is impossible to avoid policy’. In my view, to implement inclusive education in schools, inclusion must be a national priority. My remarks centre around three issues, all related to the fact that practices of inclusive education in schools differ both between and within countries. The first challenge is that inclusive thinking and practice in schools is dependent upon strong, explicit and unambiguous national support. The almost unanimous international support for inclusive thinking can lead us to believe that this is also true of their national policy, but this is not necessarily the case. The second issue is connected to the notion that the international consensus about the formal understanding and primary definitions of inclusive education are mirrored within nations as well. I question this agreement when it comes to different nations’ educational values and practices. National and local ideas differ, and when they contrast inclusive ideas as in many cases they do, it is not likely that schools are able to implement inclusive policies. My third concern refers to the different priorities, definitions and understandings of inclusion within nations in the chain, from the national assembly, government, central state administration, municipalities, schools, teachers, parents, pupils and local communities. There ought to be consensus and coherence both between and within the different levels of the school organization. This is often not the case. The conclusion is that to influence national policy and understanding of inclusive education is very decisive in implementing those same ideas.

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