National College
for School Leadership

Leadership that promotes the achievement of students with special educational needs and disabilities: full report

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Resource

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Executive summary

This report presents the findings of a study into the nature and forms of school leadership that promote the achievement of students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEN/D). The study analysed practices in schools that are relatively successful in promoting the achievement of this group of learners. The analysis was informed by earlier research through a review of relevant literature.

The schools in the study demonstrate that it is possible to achieve both excellence and equity. They also suggest that the presence of a diverse student population can, under the right organisational conditions, stimulate the collaborative arrangements that encourage innovative ways of teaching hard to-reach groups.

The study points to the following organisational conditions that are associated with the success of these schools in fostering the achievement of all their students, including those who are seen to have SEN/D.

Culture and ethos: The schools share a strong sense of common purpose that provides the basis for the development of practices that take account of the learning of every student. This seems to be part of a well-established culture and ethos that emphasises the importance of respecting and responding positively to diversity in all senses.

Practice: Practice varies considerably from school to school, and indeed within schools. In this practical sense there were no obvious common patterns. What was common, however, was an emphasis on staff working together in ways that supported their efforts to adapt lesson plans in response to individual needs within their classes. In this context, they were often involved in balancing tensions between individual and group needs, drawing on child-to-child support and promoting access to the curriculum an educational experiences through adaptation and acquisition of additional resources.

Structures and systems: The schools all had finely tuned structures and systems in place to support the learning of individual students and to support staff in responding to the challenge of learner diversity.

These systems facilitated effective management and co-ordination, and were underpinned by expert staff occupying teaching and non-teaching roles within the school. The schools also had the ability to tap into wider sources of support.

Management and leadership: Senior staff in the schools were proud of their success in improving the achievement of all children, irrespective of their characteristics, circumstances or impairments. They themselves showed their deep commitment to this by their actions. In particular, they encourage teamwork and collaborative problem-solving. In this way they model their deep commitment to the learning of every child. As a result, they help to foster organisational cultures within which differences are seen as being less a source of difficulty and more a stimulus for continual school improvement.

The report concludes by summarising the lessons from the study, reflecting on what they mean for policy and practice. It argues that the findings should be considered in the context of the current policy emphasis on finding ways of raising overall standards whilst, at the same time, closing the gap between high- and low-achieving groups. Finally, consideration is given to the implications for leadership development programmes.

Introduction

This report presents the findings of a study into the nature and forms of school leadership that promote the achievement of students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEN/D). The study, which was conducted by a team from the University of Manchester and commissioned by the National College for School Leadership, focuses on three overarching research questions.

1. What forms of leadership practice promote achievement among students with SEN/D?

2. How do school leaders interact with different stakeholders to promote the achievement of students with SEN/D?

3. What are the implications for leadership development, and the management and co-ordination of provision to support the achievement of such students?

The report is in three sections. The first section offers a summary of the literature relating to leadership that promotes the achievement of students with SEN/D and, in so doing, highlights the complexities involved. The second section presents the key findings from the study. In so doing, it defines a series of organisational conditions that seem to be associated with the capacity of schools to foster achievement among diverse groups of learners. Finally, the third section offers our reflections on leadership for promoting the achievement of all students, and teases out the implications for policy and practice.

Promoting the achievement of children with special educational needs and disabilities: what does the literature suggest?

In exploring the relationship between leadership and the achievement of students with SEN/D, it is important to take account of the complexities and uncertainties surrounding current policy and practice, in particular the following.

— Population changes: Developments in medical science have led to significant changes in the nature of the population of learners defined as having special educational needs. In particular, there has been an increase in the number of students with more severe and complex impairments, and those with various forms of autism.

— Problems of definition: Making sense of these changing populations is made even more complex by the uncertainties that exist regarding how needs should be defined. This means that a child defined as having special educational needs in one school or local authority might not be so categorised in another context. There is also some variation in the use of terminology, although the legislation and guidance only uses the term 'special educational needs'.

— The emphasis on inclusion: Further complexity is added by the increasing emphasis that has been placed on inclusive education. Once again there is considerable variation across the country with respect to how this concept is interpreted and to the extent it has informed local policies. The recent trend towards the co-location of special schools within mainstream school contexts is yet further evidence of a field that is in transition.

— Difficulties in determining progress: Given all of this complexity, it is hardly surprising that there is considerable debate within the field about how best to measure the progress of learners with special educational needs. For some groups, such as students with sensory impairments or those with emotional and behavioural difficulties, the usual test and examination measures are often appropriate, although there remain problems regarding how best to compare the progress of cohorts in different schools. Measuring the progress of youngsters with more severe learning difficulties presents particular challenges.

We take the view that responding to children with special educational needs should be seen as part of a wider set of issues relating to the education of all children who experience difficulties in school and, ultimately, of all children.[1] In taking this position we believe that the distinction between 'SEN/D' and 'non-SEN/D' children is now rapidly becoming outmoded, in that it overlooks the considerable developments that have occurred in the ability of the education system to identify and respond to a wider range of difficulties.

It is worth adding here that researchers who have reviewed the evidence using specialised methods for particular categories of students conclude that there is little support for a separate special needs pedagogy (Davis & Florian, 2004; Lewis & Norwich, 2005), the implication being that good teaching is good for everybody. An added complication here relates to the contribution of special schools. Increasingly, efforts are focused on finding ways of using their expertise and resources in ways that will add support to the changes taking place in mainstream schools.

Perspectives on educational difficulties

It is now widely accepted internationally that all children, irrespective of their background, personal characteristics or medical history, have a right to be educated (Ainscow & Miles, 2008). In this country, this is reflected in the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 (SENDA 2001; HM Government, 2001) that provides a legal basis for the education of children with special educational needs, and outlines the conditions determining their placement in mainstream schools. A key issue in this respect relates to whether the inclusion of a child with SEN/D is incompatible with the 'efficient education for other children', and that the school and local authority have no 'reasonable steps' available to them to resolve the incompatibility (Black-Hawkins, Florian & Rouse, 2007).

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1 For a fuller description of the arguments presented here, please refer to the supporting literature review prepared as part of this project.

Government policy is oriented towards the inclusion of children with SEN/D in mainstream schools in order to ensure the best possible social and academic outcomes. There is therefore a clear need to identify best practices that can inform developments in the field, not least in respect of the actions of school leaders.

Considerable disagreement remains, however, with regard to the means by which the education of such children can best be achieved (Mittler, 2000; Florian, 2007). In simple terms, this can be seen as a debate about two overall orientations to addressing educational difficulties. The first of these, usually referred to as the medical model, seeks to explain educational difficulties in terms of the learners themselves. As a result, the focus is on assessing and responding to the young person's characteristics, including any impairments they may have. This means that inclusion is seen as providing individual support in order that those with SEN/D can be integrated into the mainstream. The second orientation, known as the social model, by contrast, explains difficulties in education in terms of the contexts in which learning takes place. This suggests that the task must be to restructure schools and classrooms in response to learner diversity (Dyson & Millward, 2000). From this perspective, inclusion can be seen as a process of 'school improvement with attitude' (Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2006).

SEN/D and achievement

Charged with the task of exploring ways of improving parental confidence in the special educational needs system, the recent Lamb inquiry (2009) reported that 'educational achievement for children with SEN/D is too low and the gap with their peers too wide'(p2). The reason given for this is the long-term effects of the overall educational system and a society that places insufficient value on 'achieving good outcomes for disabled children and children with SEN'. The report suggests:

> The culture and organisation of too many schools is still to focus the best teachers on those children with the highest abilities. However we also need the best teachers and better-targeted resources to those most in need.

Lamb inquiry, 2009:2

It goes on to argue that there is a need to challenge and to change the current culture of low expectations for children with SEN/D.

It also draws attention to alarming statistics regarding disproportionate exclusions from schools, stating that 'children with SEN are eight times more likely to be excluded than their peers'(p3).

There is, therefore, an urgent need to focus on what can be done to improve the achievement of students categorised as having SEN/D. However, in so doing we have to be sensitive to the complexities involved, including those referred to earlier.

By adopting a perspective based on the social model, our attention is drawn to the ways in which special educational needs are defined. This can be seen as a process of social construction, based on an assessment of the needs of individual students carried out by particular people in particular places, at particular times. This in turn can lead to a form of circularity, in that a child can be described as having a learning difficulty, requiring special educational provision; or, the same child can be said to need special educational provision and therefore has a SEN/D (Black-Hawkins et al, 2007).

It is therefore unsurprising that there are large variations between school, local and regional incidence of special educational needs (Norwich, 1997). This is reflected in the evidence that there is a five-fold variation in the number of special educational needs statements found across local authorities (Audit Commission, 2002). To some extent, this variation occurs because of social, geographical and historical factors, but it is also influenced by local policy decisions (Lewis et al [in draft], cited in Lamb inquiry, 2009).

Moving on to the issue of the impact on children's progress, it is important to draw attention to the different ways in which terms such as attainment, standards and achievement are used in the field. Often attainment is seen as children realising particular academic outcomes, whilst standards are the minimum performance criteria for these outcomes. Achievement, however, may be defined as the progress of an individual learner between two points in time (Black-Hawkins et al, 2007). This implies a value-added approach that is, arguably, a fairer indication of both the achievement of children with SEN/D and the role of the school in supporting their progress (Florian et al, 2004).

This discussion would not be complete without considering the tensions between inclusion on one hand, and the Standards agenda and accountability culture on the other. In the current policy context, schools are primarily judged in terms of the academic attainment of their students.

Results are reported in performance league tables and, of course, schools know that they are in a competitive market to attract students, particularly those who will contribute positively to overall measured performance.

In this policy context, schools tend to prioritise policies that make them more effective and competitive. This is an approach that can deprioritise and discourage effective responses to pupil diversity (Ainscow et al, 2004). It has also been argued that some schools are concerned that becoming more inclusive might affect how they are viewed externally (Dyson & Millward, 2000).

Responding to vulnerable learners

What, then, are the organisational conditions that can help to foster the achievement of students with SEN/D? Much of the literature that is relevant to this question looks more broadly at vulnerable groups of learners. It also tends to pay more attention to the participation of such groups rather than their achievement. Nevertheless, it points to factors that make schools more responsive to challenging students.

So, for example, Skrtic (1991) argues that schools with what he calls 'adhocratic' configurations are more likely to respond to student diversity in positive and creative ways. Such schools emphasise making good use of a variety of professional expertise through collaborative processes. They are also places where students who cannot easily be educated within established routines are not seen as simply having problems. Instead they are seen as challenging teachers to re-examine their practices in order to make them more responsive and flexible. Broadly speaking, these themes are supported by a literature review that examined the effectiveness of school actions in promoting the inclusion of vulnerable groups of learners (Dyson, Farrell, Polat, Hutcheson & Gallannaugh, 2004). In summary, it suggests the following:

— Some schools are characterised by an inclusive culture. Within such schools, there is some degree of consensus among 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 may not necessarily remove all tensions or contradictions in practice.

— There is likely to be a high level of staff collaboration and joint problem-solving.

— The extent to which such inclusive cultures lead directly and unproblematically to enhanced pupil participation is not clear. Some aspects of these cultures, however, can be seen as participatory.

— Schools with inclusive cultures are likely to be characterised by the presence of leaders who are committed to inclusive values.

— The local and national policy environment can act to support, or to undermine, the realisation of schools' inclusive values.

On the basis of this evidence, it is suggested that schools pay attention to the development of inclusive cultures and, particularly, to the building of some degree of consensus around inclusive values within school communities (Dyson et al, 2004). This leads the authors to argue that school leaders should be selected and trained in the light of their commitment to inclusive values, sensitivity to vulnerable groups and capacity to lead in a participatory manner.

Particular forms of leadership can be effective in promoting quality, equity and social justice in diverse student environments (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005: 23-26). These include:

— developing more powerful forms of teaching and learning

— creating strong communities of students

— fostering collaboration between teachers and parents

— nurturing educational cultures among families

Such approaches are consistent with the view that inclusion is essentially about attempts to embody particular values in particular contexts (Ainscow et al, 2006). Discussions of inclusion and exclusion can help, therefore, to make explicit the values that underlie what, how and why changes should be made in schools. Inclusive cultures, underpinned by particular organisational conditions, make those discussions more likely to occur, and more productive when they do occur.

Culture and leadership

Our analysis so far points to the importance of cultural factors. This in turn brings us back to concerns about leadership in organisations. Schein (2004) suggests that cultures are about the deeper levels of basic assumptions and beliefs shared by members of an organisation. These beliefs operate unconsciously, defining how these organisations view themselves and their working contexts.

The extent to which these values include the acceptance and celebration of difference relate to the extent to which students are enabled to participate. They also relate to a commitment to offering educational opportunities to all students, and the extent to which this is shared across a school staff (Kugelmass, 2001).

Cultures can have a reality-defining function. They can enable those within an institution to make sense of themselves, their actions, and their environment Hargreaves (1995). A current reality-defining function of culture is often a problem-solving function inherited from the past. In this way, today's cultural form created to solve an emergent problem often becomes tomorrow's taken for-granted recipe.

Changing the norms that exist within a school can be difficult, particularly within a context that is faced with so many competing pressures and where practitioners tend to work alone in addressing the problems they face (Fullan, 1991). On the other hand, the presence of children who are not suited to the existing menu of the school can act as a catalyst for change. In developing a more collaborative culture, teachers can support one another in experimenting with new responses. In this way, problem-solving activities gradually become the reality-defining, taken-for-granted functions that are the culture of a more inclusive school.

The implication of all of this is that becoming more inclusive is a matter of thinking and talking, reviewing and refining practice, and making attempts to develop a more inclusive culture. Consequently, inclusion cannot be divorced from the contexts within which it is developing, nor the social relations that might sustain or limit that development (Dyson, 2006). This suggests that it is in the complex interplay between individuals, and between groups and individuals, that shared beliefs and values and change exist. It also suggests that it is impossible to separate beliefs from these relationships.

Nias (1989) describes a culture of collaboration developing as both the product and the cause of shared social and moral beliefs. Hopkins et al (1994) contend that in organisations striving towards change, school culture is constantly evolving. This evolution takes place through the interaction of members of a school with each other, and through their reflections on life and the world around them (Coleman & Earley, 2005).

In order to bring about the cultural change that inclusion demands, it is essential to consider the values underlying the intended changes (Kugelmass, 2001).

Cultural change is directed towards a 'transformative view of inclusion, in which diversity is seen as making a positive contribution to the creation of responsive educational settings' (Ainscow et al, 2006:15).

This involves developing the capacity of those within schools to reveal and challenge deeply entrenched, deficit views of difference. Such views define certain types of students as 'lacking something' (Trent, Artiles & Englert, 1998). Writers involved in facilitating and evaluating such processes repeatedly identify the role of leadership as critical for sustaining changes in beliefs, values and practice (Lipsky & Gartner, 1998; Ainscow, 1999; Leo & Barton, 2006; Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2003).

Leadership and achievement

The research we have summarised indicates that teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and actions create the contexts in which children and young people are able to participate and learn. This suggests that a key task must be to develop education systems within which teachers feel supported, as well as challenged, in exploring more effective ways of facilitating the learning of all students. This has major implications for school organisation and leadership, and for overall educational policy. It raises the question of what actions are needed to move thinking and practice forward; in other words, what are the levers for change (Ainscow, 2005)?

Leadership has been found to be a significant factor in successfully implementing processes of inclusion (Chadbourne 1997; Leo & Barton, 2006). Zollers, Ramanathan & Yu (1999) examined 1,000 schools in the USA and found 7 common elements in schools with successful inclusive practices.

These elements were:

1. visionary leadership
2. collaboration
3. refocused use of assessment
4. support for staff and students
5. funding
6. effective parental involvement
7. curricular adaptation and effective instructional practices

Chadbourne (1997) too found that the role of the principal was critical in the implementation of an inclusive programme. Kugelmass & Ainscow (2004) identified features shared by headteachers in three countries who were successful in fostering inclusive ways of working:

— an uncompromising commitment to inclusive education

— clearly defined roles, responsibilities and boundaries

— collaborative interpersonal style

— problem-solving and conflict resolution skills

— understanding and appreciation of the expertise of others

— supportive relationships among staff

The Lamb inquiry asserts that:

> School leaders set the ethos that either welcomes or sidelines disabled children and children with SEN; and they create a culture where parents are either confident to engage with the school or feel they are a nuisance.

Lamb inquiry, 2009:22 (our emphasis)

Meanwhile, Ofsted (2006) suggests that children with SEN/D make outstanding progress in schools with the following features: a strong ethos, specialist staff, focused professional development for all staff, the encouragement of high expectations, and a commitment by leaders to ensure that all students have opportunities to succeed.

It is, therefore, encouraging that a review of leadership literature indicates that the issue of inclusion is increasingly seen as a key challenge (West, Ainscow & Notman, 2003). It is argued, for example, that with increasingly diverse populations schools need to thrive on uncertainty, have a greater capacity for collective problem-solving, and be able to respond to a wider range of learners (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1999).

The most helpful theoretical and empirical leads, however, are provided by Riehl (2000) who concludes that school leaders need to attend to three broad types of task:

1. fostering new meanings about diversity

2. promoting inclusive practices within schools

3. 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 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 sensemaking, promoting inclusive cultures and practices in schools, and building positive relationships outside of the school may indeed foster a new form of practice.

Riehl, 2000:71

Implications for the study

What, then, are the implications of all of this for our investigation of ways in which school leaders can foster the achievement of children with disabilities and others categorised as having special educational needs? What are the factors that we need to keep in mind as we interrogate practice in the field?

The literature we have summarised here suggests that supporting vulnerable learners is less about the introduction of particular techniques or organisational arrangements, and much more about processes of social learning within particular contexts. The use of evidence as a means of stimulating experimentation and collaboration within a school, and between schools and the communities they serve, is seen as a key strategy. As Copland (2003) suggests, enquiry can be the engine to enable the distribution of leadership that is needed in order to foster participation in learning, and the glue that can bind a community together around a common purpose.

It seems to us that all of this has major implications for leadership practice within schools. In particular, it calls for efforts to encourage co-ordinated and sustained efforts around the idea that changing outcomes for vulnerable groups of students is unlikely to be achieved unless there are changes in the behaviours of adults. Consequently, the starting point must be with staff members, in effect enlarging their capacity to imagine what might be achieved, and increasing their sense of accountability for bringing this about. This may also involve tackling assumptions, most often relating to expectations about certain groups of students, their capabilities and behaviours.

In the next section we analyse the thinking and practices of our sample of schools. In so doing, we use the ideas gleaned from our reading of the literature to help us in defining the organisational conditions and leadership practices that are associated with their success.

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Leadership and the achievement of learners with special educational needs and disabilities

It is important to highlight at the outset that the primary, secondary and special schools that took part in this study were chosen because there is evidence that they are relatively successful in promoting the achievement of children with SEN/D. They have also all been recognised by Ofsted for their strong leadership and can be assumed to have a strong generic capacity for school improvement. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that we observed what seemed to be effective leadership practice in these schools. Having said that, the study has revealed that something extra goes on in these schools that enables them to achieve more with vulnerable groups of learners. In this sense, these are 'good schools plus', where the 'plus' is an extra dimension promoting an ethos and sense of purpose to support the learning of all children, irrespective of their personal characteristics or circumstances. In this sense, all children are considered to have special needs, and it is just that some are formally designated as having special educational needs and/or disabilities.

It is worth adding at this stage that, while we have looked at good schools plus, our broader experience tells us there are also good schools minus, ie schools that do well in general for most of their students but where some children are left isolated and marginalised. Given these complexities, there is therefore a need to define what needs to be done to make schools both excellent and equitable. In this sense, the findings of this study should be seen in the context of wider national efforts to close the gap between the achievements of students from richer and poorer families.

Organisational conditions

In what follows we draw on the data we collected in the 26 schools in order to capture what it is that enables them to do so well for all their students, including those with SEN/D. Linking to themes from our literature review, this led us to identify a set of organisational conditions that appear to be associated with their success and the leadership practices that help in fostering these conditions.

Whilst we cannot say with certainty that there is a direct causal relationship between the presence of these conditions and better outcomes for students with SEN/D, the patterns are sufficiently firm to convince us that these are, at the very least, key ingredients.

The conditions we highlight relate to the following aspects of the work of the schools:

— culture and ethos

— practices

— structures and systems

— leadership and management.

In what follows, we explain each of these, using extracts from our data to illustrate what they involve.

Culture and ethos

The most noticeable feature of the schools was the ways in which headteachers and other senior staff were so persistent in focusing the attention of their colleagues on the learning of every student, whatever their background, level of attainment or personal characteristics. Explanations for this emphasis were often informed with reference to sets of beliefs and values, most frequently articulated in relation to the concept of inclusion. A typical example of this was one senior leader in an academy who explained that all children had particular needs and that integration was a process and inclusion a philosophy:

> "We set out to meet the needs of all children in the school. If we are not the best place for a specific child, perhaps he should not be here. If he is here, we have no excuses!"

Headteacher

Similarly, a teacher at Crosston Primary School reflected:

> "We have a real ethos here of acceptance and equality. "

Reception teacher

In the cases of learners seen to be vulnerable, the focus on inclusion often went beyond attending to their individual needs and penetrated family life beyond school. One teacher at Bankfield Primary School articulated this as:

"The imperative to improve lives by paying attention to whole families, not just individual learners is particularly evident in the area of special educational needs, given the wide cultural and linguistic diversity of the school population."

Teacher

The sense of a deep culture and inclusive ethos is, of course, consistent with what school effectiveness research would lead us to expect in schools that are successful. What was particularly striking in most of these schools, however, was that the extent to which all of this had led to a strong sense of common purpose that pervades everything – leadership styles and arrangements, ways of working, aspirations, priorities for school development and the lived behaviours of everyone who works in these organisations.

For these schools, inclusion means valuing everyone, making everyone welcome, ensuring that the environment (physical and emotional) is hospitable to everyone, celebrating diversity and seeing that achievement is diverse. In other words, inclusion is the key to both the values and the vision, and involves an ongoing search for effective ways of supporting the learning of each and every student. As the head of an urban secondary school explained:

"We are always trying to find ways of getting through the barriers – that's what inclusion is all about."

Headteacher

It is worth noting here that for some of the schools, student mobility added to the challenges that teachers faced in respect of diversity within their classes. As we have stressed, much of the success of these schools was underpinned by an inclusive school culture: positive relationships are a key factor in maintaining this culture.

Transient student populations can make it more difficult to generate and maintain such relationships. On a more positive note, the necessary emphasis on welcoming new arrivals, in the main, seemed to further strengthen the inclusive ethos of the schools.

Summary

These schools share a strong sense of common purpose that provides the basis for the development of practices that take account of the learning of every student. This seemed to be part of a well-established culture and ethos that emphasises the importance of respecting and responding positively to diversity in all senses.

Practices

It was very apparent in the schools that members of staff had high expectations about what could be achieved in classrooms and that these expectations existed for all the children. This seems to grow out of the inclusive values that permeate the schools. It demands that all should achieve their full potential in all aspects of life and education, whether this be related to the development of social or cognitive skills.

Classroom environments in the schools varied in terms of layout and patterns of activity, reflecting the preferences of individual teachers and, to some extent, the house style encouraged by their schools or departments. In this sense, there was no common pattern that could be defined. Nevertheless, the classrooms we visited were usually conducive to learning and designed to engage all members of the class. In some instances, particular arrangements were made to facilitate the involvement of individual students. So, for example, in one school all the classrooms had been fitted with a system that improves sound quality for students, especially those who have hearing impairments. This is rare, and has been shown to have a significant impact on learning by students with hearing impairments.

What was most noticeable was that classroom practices were responding to differences among the students. Many of the senior staff we met explained this in terms of what they referred to as personalisation, although what this meant in practical terms varied considerably in different contexts.

Whatever the details of practice and, indeed, the styles of teaching adopted, what was common was the way staff were preoccupied with children as individuals, through the use of what were seen as personal learning pathways.

There was, however, a continual strategic dilemma that had to be faced in the schools as they attempted to respond to learner differences: is inclusion about treating everybody in the same way, or does it involve offering different levels of support?

What struck us was that practitioners seemed to resolve this dilemma on a case-by-case or even moment-by-moment basis, using professional judgement to make their decisions.

In this sense, inclusive practices for staff involved processes of thinking on their feet, as staff members adapted their lesson plans in response to the reactions of individual students. What was crucial, of course, was that such decisions were being made within a context where there are agreed principles that help to guide individual practitioners. The approach was summed up by the leader of Manor Secondary School when she said:

> "Equality of opportunity is not about giving everybody the same thing; it is about giving them the thing that enables them to do what they want."
>
> Headteacher

A noticeable feature of some of the schools was the extent to which 'giving them the thing that enables them to do what they want' was achieved by offering class members greater responsibility for their own learning. In these contexts, materials and equipment are arranged in ways that enable children to get at them without assistance, meaning the children can carry out tasks with less adult attention. This leaves staff free to observe what is happening, intervening as and when they perceive this to be necessary. Within these busy and complex environments, the adults are seen engaged in a continual process of instant decision-making, adapting their existing plans and, indeed, formulating new plans in the light of decisions made by students.

This form of what has been called 'planning in action' (Ainscow, 1999) involves a sophisticated form of improvisation. It involves teachers in making what are often intuitive judgements about how best to proceed in the light of their observations of their students' reactions to classroom tasks and experiences. The evidence suggests that the skills of the teachers in making such judgements are enhanced by the formal planning processes in which they participate. In general these formal processes address two broad areas: (i) the nature of the curriculum experiences that are to be offered to all the students; and (ii) the perceived needs of each child, including those who are seen as having special needs. It does seem that the understanding, confidence and sensitivities that emerge as a result of these planning processes provide members of staff with preparation and support as they carry out necessary improvisations during the day.

The emphasis placed on teamwork is also very evident in all of the schools. This provides many incidental opportunities for staff to assist one another, share ideas and, of course, observe one another's practice. There is considerable research evidence to support the view that this type of mutual observation in the classroom can be a powerful stimulus for teacher development. However, our observations in the schools point to certain pressures that this can also generate. Specifically, these arise from what one teacher describes as a goldfishbowl feeling in which pressure can be generated as a result of staff being under almost constant scrutiny by their colleagues.

The overall emphasis in the schools 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, volunteers, including parents, are involved in a similar style.

Within some of the schools the issue of how support is used remains one of considerable debate. For example, teachers worry about the potential dangers of assigning Teaching Assistants (TAs) to particular children, something that tends to be encouraged or even required by the wording of statements. The concern of some staff is that such arrangements may encourage dependence on the assistant and, at the same time, inhibit child-to-child interaction.

One primary school teacher summed up her own position as follows:

> "We always try to make sure that equal attention is given to all children... they are entitled to a carefully planned curriculum which other people can implement at different times. So they all get more adult attention because of our overall curriculum planning."
>
> Primary teacher

What has to be stressed, however, is the high levels of task engagement of the students, including those seen as having special needs. Relevant to this, teachers reported high levels of the use of peer-support mechanisms, with students being actively engaged in supporting each other's learning. For the special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) at Molton Hill School, this was viewed in the broadest sense as the development of an inclusive community ethos:

"I think some of the biggest support we have in this school is through peer groups. You explain to the class that 'this young person could do with some help with this' or 'when they're working perhaps you could help them get their equipment out' and how powerful is that? Someone who, potentially, in a truly inclusive environment, could be their nextdoor neighbour who, when they leave school might say 'we're going to watch the football at the pub, would you like to come with us?' and help them on the bus or whatever. That breeding of understanding has been a massive challenge but also one of our biggest successes I feel."

SENCO

In many of the schools, classrooms and learning experiences were viewed as fluid spaces where individuals come and go. At one level this may seem at odds with an inclusive culture and highlighted yet another strategic dilemma faced by staff in these schools.

On first sight, withdrawing children from classes does not appear to be inclusive; however, for some staff, children going out of classes for additional help was viewed as inclusion in action. Withdrawal was used to equip children with the tools necessary to access the curriculum, and was therefore seen as part of the inclusive journey. In the minds of many staff, it was a process associated with catering for difference. Furthermore, the large numbers of children moving in and out of classrooms for a variety of different activities and at different times negated any stigma being attached to the process.

Matthew's experience of schooling was described to us by his teacher at Parklands High School and was illustrative of a number of similar accounts we heard in the schools:

"Matthew came to the school in Year 7 with a statement for [attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder] (ADHD). He thought he was fine until Year 5 or 6 when he went on holiday to his Nan's caravan and kept falling out of bed, having night terrors and sleepwalking. He was advised to take melatonin to help him sleep, but does not need to take it now. He is not on any other medication, and his mum has helped him to find strategies to deal with his difficulties. He does not feel his ADHD gets him into trouble, 'it's just me messing around and talking with my mates'. He describes himself as cheeky, that he laughs a lot, and that he is 'twisted and evil' in his humour.

His reading and writing were poor but for the last year he has had special classes and his reading age has gone from 8.8 years to 10.2. He has just received an award for excellent work in English at prizegiving. The support he gets in school is not just for him but for the whole class and he feels he can draw on the whole class to get help when he needs it. He welcomes the one-to-one support he receives and thinks it helps him in other lessons like science because he can read the questions better.

However, there are times when he thinks that the support should be there when he needs it, not when someone is available to give it. He is very positive about school and says the best things about it are his friends and 'learning new things'. The worst things about school for Matthew are the tests and changes in teachers. It takes time for him to get to know teachers and for them to get to know him, so he finds the changes difficult. "

Teacher

In the schools it was apparent that the teachers were held accountable for the progress of students with SEN/D in exactly the same way as they were for all other students. The significant difference was that their progress was monitored and reviewed even more closely. To assist in this process, individual education plans (IEPs) were used as working documents and structured in such a way that assisted staff in planning their lessons to ensure the participation and learning of particular students.

In some instances, the fact that certain students required considerable individual support – for example, in terms of personal and social skills, toileting and eating, as well as academic achievement – created strategic dilemmas.

The headteacher at Bridgeforth Community Special School, reflecting on such challenges, noted:

> "This is not an easy balance to strike in a school context where many learners experience considerable pain and some have a limited life expectancy. Yet the highest possible educational standards are achieved through rigorous tracking processes, excellent teamwork and attention to individual needs in each classroom. "

Headteacher

Tracking systems played a major role in supporting the academic progress made by students in the schools we visited. These systems had clear and specific mechanisms to link with supporting academic progress. For example in Parklands High School, all children's progress was monitored by progress leaders for Foundation Stage, Years 1/2, Years 3/4 and Years 5/6, and discussed by the senior leadership team (SLT) at half-termly intervals. Where there were concerns about a child's progress, he or she may be given a personal intervention learning plan (PILP). This is a system to encourage early intervention involving setting termly individual targets (broken down into four-weekly targets) and planning frequent, short interventions on a weekly basis to address the issues in hand. The SENCO had overall responsibility for monitoring these plans. The system runs alongside other systems for reviewing the progress of children with an identified SEN/D, all of whom have an IEP.

In another school, class lists contained comprehensive information about students relating to levels and targets. Information about the needs of students on the special educational needs register were included on each class list, together with information detailing appropriate support strategies to guide their learning. These were reviewed and revised on a half-termly basis.

Summary

Practice varied considerably from school to school, and indeed within schools. In this practical sense there were no obvious common patterns. What was common, however, was an emphasis on staff working together in ways that supported their efforts to adapt their lesson plans in response to individuals within their classes.

In this context, they were often involved in balancing tensions between individual and group needs, drawing on child-to-child support and promoting access to the curriculum and educational experiences through adaptation and acquisition of additional resources.

Structures and systems

The key focus for us, of course, was on what was going on in the schools that was helpful in promoting effective inclusive practices of the sort we have described. A key factor here seemed to be the existence of arrangements to support staff in raising the achievement of all their students. As we have already indicated, the emphasis placed on teamwork that existed to varying degrees in all the schools was a key factor.

Beyond this emphasis on working together, it was apparent that staff felt that they were well managed and, as a result, were aware of their roles and responsibilities and how these fitted with the contributions of their colleagues. There were also tenacious and responsive tracking systems of the contributions of both staff and students.

For the adults, these took the form of the usual challenge and support mechanisms in place in most schools, including performance management and continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities. What was significant, however, was that in most cases these systems left space and offered encouragement to practitioners to experiment and take risks in trying to find ways of reaching those students whose progress remained a cause for concern.

For the students, we observed levels of tracking that would be considered well above the norm in most schools. For example, the SENCO at Parklands High School reflected on the identification of students experiencing difficulties and the importance of linking them with a positive relationship with an adult:

> "We regularly have [SLT] tasks where we go through and name 50 young people who are experiencing difficulties and we can name and find somebody who knows someone who that child gets on with – it might be the caretaker, it might be Jacky the cleaner or the deputy head, all the relationships are quite different."

SENCO

In another school, students were tracked on a daily basis and action taken on any incident the next day. The rationale was that, because of the nature of the children involved, very small issues could quickly mushroom out of control if not dealt with immediately. Therefore, one aspect of maintaining a calm environment, conducive to learning, was to deal with issues quickly as they arose, rather than letting them fester and escalate.

Beyond these school-wide systems, it was apparent that the headteachers in these schools recognised that the most important factor was the strength of their staff. This being the case, they had established effective mechanisms for developing a blend of appropriately talented and skilled staff to maintain the underlying culture and ethos of the school. If a vacancy existed, or the school needed a person with a particular expertise, formal and informal networks were used to identify potential candidates who might have the expertise, and importantly fit the school's sense of purpose.

A deputy head in one of the secondary schools argued that the appointment of more committed staff was a vital part of the school's success. He explained that considerable care was taken in making appointments:

"We looked for teachers who want to work with our children. We try to put people off at interview: If you don't like diversity this is not the place for you. It's very, very hard."

Deputy headteacher

Indeed, this being the case, he believes that it is better to grow your own Staff through delegated leadership, talent-spotting and promotion opportunities.

A common approach to growing your own involved talent-spotting within the organisation and investing in staff development to reinforce the inclusive ethos. All the schools gave particular weight and status to the SENCO, and in one case had three, including the headteacher. SENCOs in these schools came from a range of backgrounds and were almost all experienced practitioners, skilled in communication and developing positive working relationships with both staff and students.

Most had invested heavily in their own CPD in order to develop the varied repertoire of expertise necessary to perform this complex and challenging role. However, specialist expertise was not the preserve of the SENCO, and CPD was considered vital for all staff.

In fact, all the schools had well-established systems of in-house staff development. Usually these were linked to processes of internal monitoring in order to determine areas for attention. Often staff meetings provide the contexts for discussion of what is involved, and then teachers and teaching assistants are encouraged to work together in trying out new approaches. Mutual observation procedures provide the means of gathering evidence about the impact of these experiments, leading to an emphasis on group reflection. This bears many of the features of collaborative action research, a process of enquiry undertaken by practitioners in their own workplaces. The aim is to improve practice and understanding through a combination of systematic reflection and strategic innovation.

Within the schools, professional learning activities are further strengthened by the way performance management procedures are used to help individual members of staff – teachers and teaching assistants – determine their own priorities for change. These procedures seem to help in personalising the school improvement agenda, whilst at the same time offering forms of individual support for colleagues as they seek to take their own thinking and practice forward.

The headteacher of Bankfield Primary School spoke about the school's approach to staff development, emphasising that this was focused on support staff as well as teachers:

"We have a strong commitment to developing staff – including [teaching assistants] (TAs). They've all had intensive SEN training. Our TAs do not wash paint pots – they take a major role supporting children [who speak English as an additional language] and SEN children. The best compliment I ever had was from a GTA [Graduate Teaching Assistant] student five years ago – it took him three weeks to work out which were teachers and which were TAs! Two of our former TAs are now teachers in the school. "

Headteacher

Where staff had been inherited from previous regimes or had lost sight of the overall ethos, they were soon challenged and supported to develop or rekindle their commitment to the school philosophy; otherwise they tended to move on quickly.

A teacher at Parklands High School commented:

"People either come here and stay as staff, or they leave very quickly. "

Teacher

The schools were also outward-looking and generated additional capacity by tapping into resources located elsewhere in the system. Many were expert networkers and experienced in partnership working. They had also developed very strong links with other agencies and had the ability to draw on expertise and resources located in other schools either through informal networking or as part of a federation.

In one context, resources for supporting students with SEN/D were coordinated through a secondary school and its feeder primaries. Headteachers of all the participating schools meet once every half term, when support issues are discussed. Funding for common priorities is drawn from this partnership, including funding for a speech and language technician who works across the schools, a shared parent support worker, and a literacy support programme that is used across the schools.

The schools were all proactive in seeking support for SEN/D provision from external sources. For example, in one school a link with a university had been developed to support provision for a student who presented particular challenges.

For most schools, the main aim of partnership working was early intervention. Parents recognised this approach and were appreciative of the way that everyone worked together to address their children's difficulties, even where these difficulties presented significant challenges. It is worth adding at this point that for those within the schools, these various structures and systems for supporting the work of staff and students were largely taken for granted. In other words, they had become integral parts of the day-to-day working of the organisations. This was illustrated by a senior leader in an academy who commented:

"Things work like clockwork here. Everyone knows the systems and how they work."

Assistant principal

Nevertheless, it must be stressed that the existence of these arrangements was a vital factor in supporting staff in responding to diversity within their classes. It occurs to us that there would be a lot that other schools could gain from learning about the way these systems operate.

Summary

The schools all had finely tuned structures and systems in place to support the learning of individual students and to support staff in responding to the challenge of learner diversity. These systems facilitated effective management and co-ordination, and were underpinned by expert staff occupying teaching and non-teaching roles within the school. The schools also had the ability to tap into wider sources of support.

Leadership and management

As we have seen, the complex processes that enable these schools to do well with all of their students, including those with SEN/D, involve a high level of co-ordinated effort involving many stakeholders. This involves support for the adults involved, as well as for children and young people. It also sometimes requires that staff are challenged in respect to their attitudes and behaviour towards certain students. Unsurprisingly all this requires effective and sensitive forms of management and leadership.

Here, it was apparent that the contributions of the headteacher were always central to what had occurred. Our own impression was that one of their most important roles had been in fostering a sense of common purpose. Driven by a strong personal commitment to equal opportunities, many of the heads seemed to have been remarkably successful in leading the whole school community – staff, students and parents – in ways that had led to a wholehearted commitment to the principle of educational inclusion.

At the same time, the work of other senior staff was also very significant. Indeed, a striking feature of all the schools was the way these colleagues carried out their tasks with a strong sense of moral purpose in relation to the achievement of all their students. This involved them in investing time, enthusiasm and resources to promote an inclusive culture, where student and staff learning were treated as the core priority.

It was noticeable, too, that senior staff seemed to be trusted and had high levels of credibility. It was evident that they lead by example. As senior staff in schools that are effective in addressing diversity, they are prepared to do any task to support children, from changing nappies to feeding. It was also noticeable that every incident was followed up in ways that made staff feel they were being supported in addressing the challenges they faced.

The sense of all of this was captured by an assistant head of one secondary school who explained:

> "Leadership here is about working collaboratively with the staff, keeping everyone informed – and 'practise what you preach'! I don't ask people to do things I won't do. The head and [SLT] are all hands-on – of course we make it clear to support staff that personal care is their primary role, but we do some of that ourselves too... It is easier to set clear expectations when staff members know you know what their job involves, have done it, will do it yourself... expect it done properly, but appreciate what that involves."
>
> Assistant head

These school leaders also recognised the importance of distributing leadership to allow staff to take responsibility for all students. The headteacher at Bankfield Primary School highlighted the tension between wanting to take charge and allowing others to take a lead, especially as she herself came from an SEN/D background. Ultimately she had to understand the importance of empowering staff to make decisions:

> "I've always believed that as staff gain in confidence and competence, you move to a distributed form of leadership. Everything, including SEN, is about empowering staff to make decisions. I'm an ex-SENCO myself, and it's tempting to intervene, but you have to empower staff. "
>
> Headteacher

The confidence of the headteachers in their staff was an important factor in setting the tone for the modus operandi of the schools. In one school, where the head had been in post for over 10 years, a deputy reflected on how secure the head was in her own practices and how trusting she was about devolving leadership to others, giving staff plenty of freedom, while insisting on the highest possible standards in both care and education. The SLT in this particular school considered the mix of skills and talents to be an important ingredient of success, with each member of the SLT making a unique contribution to the school.

Senior leaders modelled their expectations through their actions around school and were explicit about their expectations of the whole school community.

There were strong lines of communication and any decisions made permeated quickly into changes in practice. As we have explained, the emphasis placed on teamwork was a key feature, and headteachers actively encouraged and supported critical reflection. For example, in one school, TAs were paid for an extra half-hour a week to provide written feedback to the headteacher, who in turn responded to their ideas by annotating the form with her own suggestions and discussing the feasibility of implementing them.

As noted earlier, all the schools are successful in terms of their overall performance, as measured by tests and inspections. However, what seemed to be more important to senior staff was the emphasis placed on valuing and supporting the progress of individuals. Indeed, small steps forward for particular students were seen as moments for widespread celebration. Commenting on the implications of this approach within an education system that places so much emphasis on standards, the deputy head at Moor Lane Primary School commented:

> "I think, on the whole, our parents don't take a blind bit of notice of league tables... the school's got a very good reputation in the local community. The reputation isn't that the children reach hugely high standards, it's just that we meet the needs of the children in a broad and varied way."
>
> Deputy headteacher

It was significant in this respect that many staff within the schools felt that their success in improving the performance of their more challenging students has somehow contributed to the raising of overall standards. It seems possible, therefore, that as these schools have strengthened their capacity to respond to student diversity, this has led to the sorts of cultural change referred to in the literature we summarised in section 1 above.

Summary

Leaders in these schools were proud of their success in improving the achievement of all children, irrespective of their characteristics, circumstances or impairments. They themselves showed their deep commitment to this by their actions. In particular, they encourage teamwork and collaborative problem-solving. In this way they model their deep commitment to the learning of every child. As a result, they help to foster organisational cultures within which differences are seen as being less a source of difficulty and more a stimulus for continual school improvement.

Lessons, reflections and implications

In this final section we draw out what we see as the key lessons of the study. We then reflect on what these mean and consider the broad implications for leadership development.

Drawing out the lessons

Through our engagement with relevant literature and our analysis of data collected in the schools we visited, we have formulated the lessons from our research in the form of organisational conditions that seem to be associated with high achievement among students with SEN/D. We stress again that it is not possible to claim with certainty that the existence of these conditions is the direct cause of the schools' success in this respect. All we can say is that the patterns are strong across the sample, such that we feel that our findings are at least worthy of consideration.

It is also important to note that when it comes to matters of detail in respect of school organisation and practices, there are noticeable differences between the schools and, sometimes, within the schools themselves. The patterns we have identified are much more at the level of overall principles. In other words, they suggest possible ingredients, rather than a recipe.

Bearing these words of caution in mind, our study points to organisational conditions that are associated with the success of these schools in fostering the achievement of all their students, including those who are seen to have SEN/D. In summary, these conditions are as follows.

In terms of culture and ethos: The schools share a strong sense of common purpose that provides the basis for the development of practices that take account of the learning of every student. This seems to be part of a well-established culture and ethos that emphasises the importance of respecting and responding positively to diversity in all senses.

In terms of practice: Practice varied considerably from school to school, and indeed within schools themselves. In this practical sense there were no obvious common patterns. What was common, however, was an emphasis on staff working together in ways that supported their efforts to adapt their lesson plans in response to individuals in their classes.

In this context, they were often involved in balancing tensions between individual and group needs, drawing on child-to-child support, and promoting access to the curriculum and educational experiences through adaptation and acquisition of additional resources.

In terms of structures and systems: The schools all had finely tuned structures and systems in place to support the learning of individual students and to support staff in responding to the challenge of learner diversity. These systems facilitated effective management and co-ordination, and were underpinned by expert staff occupying teaching and non-teaching roles within the school. The schools also had the ability to tap into wider sources of support.

In terms of management and leadership: Senior staff in the schools were proud of their success in improving the achievement of all children, irrespective of their characteristics, circumstances or impairments. They themselves show their deep commitment to this by their actions. In particular, they encourage teamwork and collaborative problem-solving. In this way they model their deep commitment to the learning of every child. As a result, they help to foster organisational cultures within which differences are seen as being less a source of difficulty and more a stimulus for continual school improvement.

These factors reinforce the idea that developing more inclusive schools is essentially a social process that has to occur within particular contexts. In this sense, inclusive school improvement is about learning how to live with difference and, indeed, learning how to learn from difference. Consequently, the most important factor is the collective will to make it happen.

Finally, it is worthy of mention that it is no accident that the schools involved in this study have gained a reputation for being able to respond to diversity and support the participation and learning of children with special needs. As reputations have been forged, some of the schools have become beacons of success, attracting pupils from far and wide. In a sense, their success had led them to become magnet schools or in effect special, yet ordinary, schools.

Reflections

Reflecting on the experience of carrying out this study, we feel that it was significant that many staff within the schools felt that their success in improving the performance of more challenging students has contributed to the raising of overall standards. Our somewhat tentative explanation of this relates to the cultural changes that appeared to have been developed within the schools. The indications are that this has had an impact upon the ways in which teachers perceive students in their classes whose progress is a matter of concern.

It seems that as the overall climate in a school improves, such students gradually come to be seen in a more positive light. Rather than simply presenting problems that have to be overcome – or referred elsewhere for separate attention – these students are now perceived as providing feedback on existing classroom arrangements. In this way, they become sources of understanding as to how these arrangements might be improved in ways that benefit all students. If this is the case, those children referred to as having special educational needs represent hidden voices that can inform and guide improvement activities in the future. As Susan Hart (1996) suggested many years ago, special needs are special in that they provide insights into possibilities for development that might otherwise pass unnoticed.

This argument echoes the seminal work of Susan Rosenholtz in the USA, particularly her analysis of what she refers to as 'moving', or 'learning enriched schools'. She concluded that the defining feature of such schools is the emphasis they place on collaborative ways of working. Furthermore, her research led her to argue that such arrangements have an impact on how teachers perceive themselves and their work, and indeed how they see the students in their classes (Rosenholtz, 1989).

It is important to recognise, of course, that the cultural changes necessary to achieve schools that are able to hear and respond to the hidden voices are in many cases profound. Traditional school cultures, supported by rigid organisational arrangements, teacher isolation and high levels of specialisms among staff who are geared to predetermined tasks, are often in trouble when faced with unexpected circumstances. On the other hand, the presence of children who are not suited to the existing menu the school offers provides some encouragement to explore a more collaborative culture within which teachers are supported in experimenting with new teaching responses.

In this way, problem-solving activities may gradually become the reality-defining, taken-for-granted functions that characterise the culture of the inclusive school.

In making this argument we are conscious of the limitations of the evidence upon which we draw. If we have got it right, however, it is an argument that is potentially groundbreaking in terms of national concerns about the high proportion of low-performing students in our schools. This being the case, there is a strong case for more in-depth study of organisational cultures and leadership practices in schools of the sort we have examined.

Implications

We believe that the findings of this study should not be seen as an agenda that is separate from the overall policy debate about improving the school system. Rather they need to be considered in the context of the current emphasis on finding ways of raising overall standards whilst, at the same time, closing the gap between high-and low-achieving groups.

Speaking in September 2010, the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, argued:

> "Schools should be engines of social mobility – the places where accidents of birth and the unfairness of life's lottery are overcome through the democratisation of access to knowledge."
>
> Gove, 2010

The reality is that many of the students who come to be categorised as having SEN/D are simply those that schools have not been able to motivate and teach effectively, and who therefore have restricted access to knowledge. A recent report from Ofsted (2010) has stated that:

> Pupils currently identified as having special educational needs are disproportionately from disadvantaged backgrounds, are much more likely to be absent or excluded from school, and achieve less well than their peers, both in terms of their attainment at any given age and in terms of their progress over time. Over the last five years, these outcomes have changed very little.

> Past the age of 16, young people with learning difficulties or disabilities comprise one of the groups most likely not to be in education, employment or training.

Ofsted, 2010:5

The Secretary of State's statement suggests that we can anticipate a new wave of efforts to address the challenge of equity within the English education system. The schools in our sample are sources of optimism in this respect. They demonstrate that it is possible for schools to achieve both excellence and equity. As we have argued, they also suggest that the presence of a diverse student population can, under the right organisational conditions, stimulate the collaborative arrangements that encourage innovative ways of teaching hard-to-reach groups.

It seems to us, therefore, that policymakers need to use these schools as a source of challenge to other schools. Put bluntly, these schools challenge our assumptions and demonstrate what is possible – why aren't all schools like this?

At the same time, schools like this can be used as a resource in stimulating and supporting developments in other schools. The new policy emphasis on what David Hargreaves has called a self-improving school system is a very helpful formulation in this respect, as are developments in the various city challenge initiatives, where types of hub school and partnership arrangements have been found to be a powerful strategy for moving expertise around and developing localised solutions to the challenge of school improvement in challenging settings.

Headteachers and other senior staff must play a key role in offering leadership within such a self-improving system. Inevitably, this has implications for the content of professional development programmes.[2] They must be geared to supporting them in taking on the roles of system leaders in relation to the agenda of student diversity. Specifically, professional development programmes need to:

— provide opportunities for school leaders to become more sensitive to differences among children and young people, including those from different economic circumstances, with impairments, and from differing cultural and linguistic backgrounds

— challenge beliefs and values about diversity

— encourage the study of the practice of senior staff in schools that are successful in achieving high standards with diverse student populations

— assist in the development of skills in collecting and engaging with school-focused data in order to identify the barriers within their organisations that make it difficult for some students to participate and learn

— strengthen skills in co-ordinating processes of group problem-solving

In summary, we argue for the development of a new cadre of system leaders focused on student diversity. We believe these leaders would have the capacity to facilitate the necessary shifts in culture and ethos, practice and structures and systems to promote the achievement of all students, including those with SEN/D.

2 The leadership framework using the guiding principles of management, navigation and partnership (Mongon & Chapman, 2012 forthcoming) would seem a helpful conceptualisation to spport the work of these system leaders.

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Appendix 1: Methodology

Phase 1: What do we know?

The literature review builds on existing studies exploring leadership that promotes achievement in students with SEN/D. The review includes drawing on the work of UK academics, policymakers and commentators and the wider existing literature, including relevant international sources (such as the quite extensive research on extended schools and multi-agency work carried out in the US, Australia and the Netherlands). The review involved literature searches using sources including the Education Resource Information Centre (ERIC) and the American Educational Research Association (AERA).

Phase 2: Exploring current practice

Identification and selection of schools

In negotiation with the steering group, a sample of schools were selected to provide a range of contexts and leadership challenges in order to build theory generating cases (Yin, 1994). In addition to sampling on the basis of structural arrangements, maximum variation sampling (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) was used to construct a sample on the following dimensions:

— schools where the examination performance for students with SEN/D is improving at a faster rate than national average

— schools with current leadership which is judged as 'excellent' by Ofsted inspection and/or evaluation by a local authority, school improvement partner or other recognised inspection body

— schools with different structural characteristics (all-phase, pupil referralunit (PRU), federation, academy etc)

— schools located in a range of socio-economic and geographicalsettings (inner city, urban, suburban and rural)

— schools with different student populations (uni- or multi-ethnic and withdifferent proportions of faith populations)

In order to explore the questions outlined by the National College, the cases were structured to illuminate:

— how leadership practices have raised achievement among pupils with SEN/D

— leadership qualities and practices that have raised achievement

Appendix 2: Case study schools

Pseudonyms
Shirley Primary School, South
Ludgate Primary School, South
Moor Lane Primary School, London
Crosston Primary school, London Huxton School
Slaithgate Church of England Primary School, South
Monkton Primary School, South
Our Lady's Church of England Primary School, North Green Park School
Lever Street Primary School, North Stainley Primary School St James School
Wood Lane Primary School, North
St Peter's Primary School, North
Harrop Cross School, Midlands Millfield School
Compton Green School, Midlands
St Mary's RC College, North
Bainbridge High School Technology and Sports College, North
Molton Hill School North
Bridgeforth Commnity Special School, North
Greystones Special School, MIdlands
Burnside PRU, North
Cambridge House Childrens Centre, South

Pseudonyms Childrens' vignettes
Bankfield Primary School
— Jake
— Nadia
Parklands High School
— Matthew
— Steven
Upper Vale Special (Secondary) School
— Avelina
— Jack

Appendix 3: Data collection and analysis

Data collection consisted of interviews (n= 4-10 per case) and the collection of documentary evidence. All interviews were semi-structured to provide an optimal combination of flexibility and ability to adapt to the flow of the interview, while staying firmly within the parameters and research questions of the study. Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes and drew on perspectives from a range of stakeholders. Individual stakeholders will vary depending on the context of the case but will come from three main sources:

1. school staff: including headteachers, senior leaders, teachers and non-teaching staff

2. interested local stakeholders: including governors, parents and students

3. interested others: including local authority staff from different backgrounds and departments

Documentary evidence was used for two key purposes. First, as previously mentioned, to identify key stakeholders through a paper trail created by minutes of meetings etc. Secondly, documents were also used to triangulate the perspectives of key stakeholders. The scrutiny of documents included: Ofsted reports; development and action plans; minutes from meetings and other available relevant documents. Accounts of practice were constructed for each case. These were returned to key respondents for validation. Data collection and data analysis were closely integrated (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This strategy allowed the team to scrutinise hypotheses as they emerged from data analysis and refine data collection strategies as the study progressed.

Phase 3: Validating findings

Phase 3 of the project tested and refined the themes, patterns and trends emerging from the within- and between-case analysis to generate a robust set of findings and explore their implications for different stakeholder groups. Focus groups with headteachers, senior local authority staff, students and parents of children with SEN/D drew out the key messages from the research to reflect on the implications of the findings for:

— work for the provision of professional development for school leaders and children's centre leaders

— the work of directors of children's services and their senior teams

Team analysis days

A distinctive feature of our approach to this project was the team analysis day.For this project we had three days where our core team and researchers were joined by members of our internal advisory board to test and refine the within case analysis and identify key themes, patterns and trends within the data, explore alternative explanations and consider the implications for research, policy and practice.

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