

Engaging teachers, engaging learners

Action research for developing inclusion in secondary schools

Many teachers remain unconvinced by the principle of inclusion. This project shows that collaborative action research can draw more teachers into the exciting challenge of engaging all their pupils in learning. It also shows how to get action research going in schools. Teachers should have ownership of the research and work collaboratively, and there should be a focus on the effects of their practice on pupils' learning and participation. We also describe how educational psychologists can support and challenge as facilitators.

- Many secondary school teachers are unfamiliar with action research, and feel there are major challenges for them in implementing inclusion.



This calls for a simple model of action research which involves teachers developing shared ownership of an issue, taking action and paying attention to the consequences for pupils' engagement.

- Without ownership by teachers, action research is just another imposition on teachers' time and energy. With ownership, it can release their energy and creativity.



This process needs protecting from external agendas, so that teachers have the freedom to act meaningfully.

- Teachers' assumptions about pupils and their learning are challenged when they notice and reflect on the consequences for learners.



Seeing pupils differently is a step towards a richer pupil-teacher relationship, which both teachers and pupils see as valuable and which challenges the limitations of current discourse.

- Both school leaders and trusted external facilitators such as educational psychologists have a role in facilitating this process by support and challenge.



Facilitators need to understand action research and know how to support the developmental process to empower teachers and ensure wider impact.

The research

Linking inclusion and action research

Prosiect Dysgu Cydradd is about facilitating teacher engagement in more inclusive practice. The Welsh word 'Dysgu' means both 'teaching' and 'learning', whilst 'cydradd' means 'equal' – the stem 'cyd' means 'together'. So the project title embodies an inclusive aspiration to learn and teach on equal terms, with and from each other.

Inclusion is about 'reducing the barriers to participation and learning' (Ainscow and Booth, 2002). It involves those who work in education posing questions about the engagement of young people in their learning and then taking appropriate action in terms of the organisation of schools, subjects and lessons. This includes

- asking questions about how a school adapts to and works with the diversity of the student population,
- finding out about and working with what pupils bring with them to school, rather than viewing differences in terms of deficits
- taking account of the understandings that young people have of school and education, rather than seeking only to engage more young people in existing school practice.

Conceived in this way, inclusion is not a quick fix that can be bolted on, but requires ongoing dialogue between teachers and learners. It requires teachers' active engagement, because inclusion and exclusion are processes that happen minute by minute and lesson by lesson.

What we did

In this small-scale study, we worked with seven secondary comprehensive schools (five in Wales and two in England) to develop their inclusive practice using action research. In each school, a group of teachers worked together to develop a piece of action research to enhance pupils' attitude to and engagement with learning. Educational psychologists (EPs) facilitated the process by regular meetings with the teacher group. We as researchers followed what the teachers, school leaders and EPs did in order to understand the challenges of the process in each school. Questionnaires were developed to investigate teacher, pupil and EP opinions before and after the process; focus group discussions were held with teachers (see Figure 1) and pupils to further develop an understanding of their perspectives; head teachers were interviewed at the beginning and the end of the project; and EPs contributed their views about the development of the process in regular project meetings.

The project took place in two successive phases (June 2005- March 2006 and

Facilitators valued the initial teacher focus groups as a tool for exploring group dynamics, teacher engagement, and teachers' thinking about pupils' participation and how their actions can influence it. The focus group questions draw on elements of the 'theory of change' approach to planning and evaluating interventions in complex contexts. Its phases are :
1. Describe the problem: 2. Identify some causes: 3. Suggest some approaches...

1. Begin by thinking of a pupil or group of pupils that you teach, who you consider to be relatively disengaged from learning. In what way are these pupils disengaged, or not fully participating? How do you know? How would you describe the problem? In what way does it matter to you?
2. What do you think are some of the reasons for this relative disengagement? Are there any common problems or issues which tend to explain why such pupils are disengaged or not participating fully in lessons? What are the underlying issues or barriers to learning and participation? What do you think are some of the consequences of this problem?
3. What sorts of approaches might help such pupils to become more engaged? What has already been done, if anything, either by individuals or at a strategic level? Is it mostly down to individual teachers? Or other staff? Or about policy for working together? What stands in the way of these ideas for tackling the problem?

Figure 1: Key questions for teacher focus groups

June 2006-March 2007) so that in Phase II we could explore ways of responding to challenges identified in Phase I.

What we found

Triangulation on the basis of the actions and opinions of teachers, educational psychologists and other participants such as school leaders points to the features of an action research process that is effective in engaging teachers. It shows that action research can only partly be a rational, planned and systematic activity. It is also an emergent process, in which possibilities are created and constructed over time. Surprises happen and the facilitator needs to tap into modes of change as they emerge. Fluidity, learning and alertness to opportunities are central features for everyone involved. The left hand column of Figure 2 summarises the key elements of a successful action

research process – collaboration, ownership, attention and reflection. To achieve these conditions, with many contrary influences pulling teachers in other directions, support and challenge are often needed. The right hand column of Figure 2 summarises the skills needed by the facilitator to make these essentials a reality.

The facilitator must enable a project to move forward despite contrary pressures: give guidance and support without assuming leadership; sustain momentum and engagement without taking ownership; and maintain the right balance between action and reflection. Facilitators adopted a number of approaches that worked well in different settings. The minute taker assumed a low-status role but was able to maintain momentum and direct the detail of the process. The conversationalist occasionally stopped the discussions short with a really well

Key element	Challenges for facilitators
<p>Collaboration between teachers is necessary if they are to tackle action research in the context of their working life in school and become more fully engaged in working on pupil learning and participation.</p>	<p>Identify and work with a group with the explicit intention of addressing something of shared importance to the group.</p> <p>Facilitate the group whilst maintaining a collaborative relationship of different professionals working together.</p>
<p>Ownership - teacher identification and ownership of an issue are necessary if they are to engage in an open-ended way despite the professional risks.</p> <p>Ownership by the school (and school leadership) makes it more likely that an initiative it will be able to compete for priority</p>	<p>Help the group to identify a focus meaningful to them which they can connect to pupils' engagement in and attitude to learning.</p> <p>Contribute to the maintenance of momentum without taking ownership</p>
<p>Attention and reflection - systematic evaluation of the consequences of actions is necessary if teachers are to refine and develop their current interpretations and solutions.</p>	<p>Offer non-directive support for this process.</p> <p>Enable a balance between action and reflection that nurtures teacher engagement.</p>

Figure 2: The essentials of action research: challenges for facilitators

directed critical question. The strategist kept cool in the face of the continuing frustrations of getting a group of teachers to debate and looked for alternative approaches in the expectation that something would happen soon. The carrier of the backpack of ideas allowed discussions to flow and brought out theoretical ideas as and when they were useful.

The support of the school management is also crucial. Direct involvement is less vital than active engagement, demonstrated for example by active concern and interest, help with access to resources and encouragement of dissemination. It is essential to maintaining a positive trajectory for the group and facilitating its impact across the school. Above all, school leaders must value the process of action research if they are to appreciate the importance of providing the professional space necessary to enable the teachers to use it to develop new thinking and practice.

We found that there was a resonance between what pupils (described in focus groups and in confidence to researchers) identified as important for inclusion and the changes that teachers aimed to bring about in their projects as a result of their reflections (see Figure 3). But in many cases, these were first steps in a process. We have evidence that teachers are sensitive to the needs of pupils, but may need opportunities for attending and reflecting if they are to take relevant action on the basis of their knowledge. Teacher responses to our questionnaires showed that in many cases, the new strategies that they were using had led to improvements in pupil-teacher relationships.

Several hundred pupils completed questionnaires before and after the teacher projects, about their perception of the relevant lesson and about their own self concept. We are mindful that many other influences contributed to pupils' perceptions during that time, but there are indications in some schools that teachers' strong engagement with the project had a positive effect on the average pupil perception of those lessons, in relation to differentiation and inclusion.

Pupil views	Relevant changes through teacher projects
Having opportunities for active involvement	Increasing pupil participation by getting responses using individual whiteboards Inviting pupils to set group targets for lessons with view to achieving rewards.
Being able to understand the work	Developing language aids for Welsh Constructive marking schemes Colour coding schemes
Having and making choices	Offering pupils the choice of learning through different materials.
Teacher interest in and responsiveness to pupil views	Increasing the amount and structuring of group work in response to pupil preferences Pupil mentoring scheme
Mutually respectful and warm relationship with teacher	Indirectly, many projects contributed to this, though none aimed for it directly.

Figure 3 Pupil views of what contributes to inclusion: how projects contributed

Major implications

For policy

If teachers need to make sense of concepts such as inclusion before they will influence their practice, there needs to be a shift in emphasis from standardised teacher development towards contextualised and teacher-owned action research. Although we did not find significant differences between the contexts in Welsh and English comprehensive schools, the National Assembly for Wales has begun to follow an educational pathway that diverges from the English system in some relevant respects, such as the removal of statutory assessment at the end of Key Stage 3, and the introduction of the Welsh Baccalaureate. Our hope is that these changes will be mirrored in Wales by more policy support for teacher and pupil-led development, following the simple structured approach that we have described.

For local authorities

Developments in children's services involve remodelling the role of EPs and other specialist services as new ways of working are developed. But our research findings should be set against the relatively traditional methods of interagency working now being promoted. These are typically individual pupil-centred, and have far less value than the mechanisms we have explored in influencing teachers' day-to-day practice. Practice guidelines developed in the project for promoting effective interagency working with teachers suggest a range of strategies that an educational psychologist or other appropriately experienced professional could use according to the demands of the situation. These include:

- Ways to prepare the ground with senior managers and teachers before beginning the project, by establishing knowledge and setting expectations about action research as a developmental process;
- What being a facilitator should and should not be, and distinguishing it from leadership;
- Strategies for maintaining momentum, for example facilitating the right balance

between reflection and action, remaining flexible to respond to new and emergent influences on the process;

- Playing a role in encouraging wider impact within the secondary school and beyond.

For teachers

Teachers do have choices. Our findings show that when teachers recognise the choices that they have, and the fact that they can make a difference to their pupils' experience and participation in school, a step change can take place in their level of satisfaction and fulfilment in the job. But not all the teachers in the schools that we studied felt appreciated and empowered by their senior managers. Some felt relatively disillusioned with their position in the school. Others felt that they had little understanding of some of their pupils, and had little to offer them. It was not only one type of teacher who got involved and became central to the success of a project. Some were experienced and others relatively new entrants to the profession. Some saw the project as a way of raising their profile within the school. Others were more interested in tackling a stubborn issue in terms of the pupils they felt unable to reach. What was common to all the teachers who became engaged in these changes was:

- A sense of enjoyment in working with at least some of their colleagues on questions of practice, with the opportunity to be creative together;
- An acknowledgement that their relationship with pupils was worth working on;
- Relatively little defensiveness about their practice, and openness to the ideas of others when it came to effectively motivating pupils – including the questioning of assumptions by a trusted external facilitator;
- Surprise and satisfaction from the sense of achievement that came with spending time addressing issues that were often ignored;
- An ability to link together outcomes of the project with (for example) appraisal needs, further professional development processes, and other agendas such as assessment for learning.

Taking a longer perspective, one of the most frustrating aspects of such work is when it runs out of steam. So a large section of our recommendations deals with ways of helping others in the school to consider applying its findings. This involves teachers in presenting their work to others in the school, and indeed in other schools, in a credible, succinct, and stimulating manner, and then helping other staff to take them forward by linking into other agendas and structures. It is common in schools to deal with projects, processes and structures as if they are separate from each other. We urge teachers and managers not to make so many distinctions, and to see themselves as working in a team of multi-skilled, adaptable and collaborative professionals.

Further information

The most comprehensive source of project publications is via the TLRP project website at <http://www.tlrp.org/proj/smbdavies.html>

The best overview is the project's End of Award Report, available at www.esrc.societytoday.ac.uk.

A book in the TLRP Routledge 'Improving Learning' series '*Improving the Context for Inclusion*' (forthcoming) uses the findings of the study to develop implications for practice of teachers, departmental heads, school leaders, educational psychologists and other potential facilitators, and researchers.

A series of conference papers focus on different aspects of the project:

Howes, A. and S. Davies (2007). *Engaged teachers, engaged pupils? Learning from cross-case analysis of secondary school action research work on inclusion*. British Educational Research Association Conference, London, 5th-8th September 2007.

Davies, S. M. B. and A. Howes (2006). *"I haven't got time to think!" Contradictions as drivers for change in an analysis of joint working between teachers and school psychologists*. 28th International School Psychology Colloquium, Hangzhou, China, 15th-20th July 2006.

Howes, A. and S. M. B. Davies (2006). *Designing for complex change? Critically evaluating an application of design study in relation to teachers developing more inclusive practices*. British Educational Research Association Conference, Warwick, 6th-9th September 2006.

Howes, A. and S. Fox (2006). *Understanding action research with professionals in schools: accounting for legitimate and persistent discourses as part of the real-world experience of changing practice*. British Educational Research Association Conference, Warwick, 6th-9th September 2006.

Davies, S. M. B. and A. Howes (2005). *What difference can we make, and how? Interpreting the challenge of inclusion in secondary schools in England and Wales through participants' theories of change*. Paper presented to the Annual Conference of the British Educational Research Association, University of Glamorgan, 15th -17th September.

Project website:

<http://www.tlrp.org/proj/smbdavies.html>

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The warrant

This project builds on existing, highly regarded research carried out in the TLRP Phase I project 'Understanding and Developing Inclusive Practices in Schools,' which explored the value of an action research network to develop inclusion in 25 schools. In this project, we narrowed the focus to secondary schooling, shifted from whole-school to departmental level, and aimed to promote educational psychologists as supporters of teacher-led action research.

The findings presented in this briefing are based on evidence from two years' engagement in seven school contexts, in the form of participants' perceptions gathered by questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and ethnographic observations. The data is both quantitative and qualitative, with questionnaires administered to more than 400 pupils. The quantitative data collected pupil opinions for key variables that relate to their experience of inclusion. Statistical analysis, as well as qualitative scrutiny, was used to test for change over the period of the teachers' projects.

The data gathered captures the process of developing a school action research project at the micro-cultural level of teacher experience and collaboration, and in terms of the macro-cultural factors that impinge on this from whole-school and wider agendas. Narratives of teacher experience illustrate aspects of the school context that can create affordances, and those that can result in dilemmas and tensions.

The two-phase design of the study enabled us to explore the factors that challenge teacher engagement (phase I) and to explore and test solutions in authentic education environments (phase II).

Key stakeholders were involved via regular meetings by video conference between teachers in Wales and England, networking between teams of teachers, a development team of EPs and researchers and the involvement of the project's advisory group. It ensured that the research is relevant to users. The intervention is designed to be possible in most schools in England and Wales, rather than needing particularly favourable conditions.

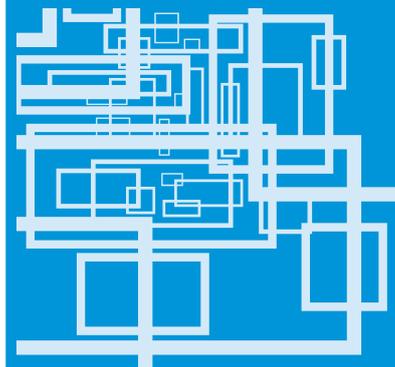
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Teaching and Learning Research Programme



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