Making Space in the Standards Agenda: developing inclusive practices in schools

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ABSTRACT In spite of the focus on inclusive education in recent years, there is a relative dearth of studies which explore the complexities of the move towards greater inclusion. This article seeks to redress this situation by reporting some interim findings from a three-year study of schools' attempts to develop more inclusive practices, involving teams of researchers from three higher education institutions working in partnership with 25 schools, in three local education authorities. The development took place within a national policy environment which focused heavily on the issue of 'standards' narrowly defined. This article reports the way that this context helped to form schools' responses to inclusion and the ambiguities in these responses. It argues, however, that the view of schools' actions as entirely determined by this external agenda is as erroneous as the image of them battling heroically against it in the name of inclusive values. Rather, to a greater or lesser extent, schools tried or were impelled to find spaces within the 'standards agenda' where different values and priorities could be realised. The article outlines some of the factors which made this process more or less likely to occur and offers an important new way of thinking about the development of inclusive education.

Inclusion and Standards in English Education Policy
In recent years there has been an increasing commitment to the development of inclusion in English education policy. The first indication of this came in the 1997 Green Paper (Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 1997a), in which the Government clearly aligned its policy with the Salamanca Statement on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994), calling on countries to adopt inclusion as a principled position. Since then, there has been a series of programmes of action, funded projects and guidance documents that have
indicated the seriousness of the Government’s intentions in this field. Most recently, the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001) has delivered a strengthened right for all children to be educated in regular schools and the Government has issued statutory guidance to schools and local education authorities (LEAs) setting out for them how they should: ‘actively seek to remove the barriers to learning and participation that can hinder or exclude pupils with special educational needs’ (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2001, sec. 7).

However, the impact of this undoubted commitment to inclusion has been complicated by two factors. The first is that attempts to understand precisely what the Government means by inclusion have proved frustrating. The guidance document quoted above, for instance, offers a somewhat circular definition: ‘Inclusion is a process by which schools, local education authorities and others develop their cultures, policies and practices to include pupils’ (DfES, 2001, sec. 6). The Programme of Action, intended to implement the 1997 Green Paper, simply offers a set of alternatives:

- The term can be used to mean many things including the placement of pupils with SEN [special educational needs] in mainstream schools; the participation of all pupils in the curriculum and social life of mainstream schools; the participation of all pupils in learning which leads to the highest possible level of achievement; and the participation of young people in the full range of social experiences and opportunities once they have left school. (DfEE, 1998, p. 23)

Other documents again have seen inclusion as an issue not simply in special needs education, but in provision for all groups of children who have historically underachieved in the education system (e.g. Office for Standards in Education [OFSTED], 2000). This version of inclusive education relates directly to the Government’s wider ‘social inclusion’ agenda, which is concerned with ensuring that all social groups participate in the opportunities and activities of ‘mainstream’ society, principally through having sufficient skills and accreditation to enable them to compete in a highly demanding labour market (Blunkett, 1999a, 1999b, 2000).

The second complicating factor is that the inclusion agenda, however defined, has been promoted in a context where the major thrust of ‘mainstream’ government education policy has been concerned above all with issues such as ‘excellence’ and ‘standards’ (see, for instance, DfEE, 1997b). Phillips & Harper-Jones identify four dominant themes in this policy:

- a determination to raise educational standards;
- a quest to undertake the modernisation of educational systems, structures and practices;
- a commitment to promoting choice and diversity within education; and
- a preoccupation with … the culture of performativity. (Phillips & Harper-Jones, 2003, p. 126, emphases in the original)

These concerns have led the Government to retain – and in many cases strengthen – competition between schools for students, the accountability of
schools and teachers for their students’ performance and the reshaping of pedagogy and curriculum around narrowly defined attainment targets. On the face of it, these strands in policy seem somewhat hostile to conventional notions of inclusion. For the Government, there is no contradiction between its inclusion policies and what has come to be called the ‘standards agenda’; both, it claims, are about ‘excellence for the many, not just the few’ (Blunkett, 1999a). Other commentators, however, have been less sanguine, pointing to the very different demands of creating schools which welcome all learners on the one hand and of focusing on narrowly defined performance targets on the other. There is, at least, what Thomas & Loxley (2001, p. 96) describe as an ‘incremental dissonance’ that arises from tensions between these agendas.

All of this creates a difficult situation for schools. They are encouraged to become more inclusive and can see undeniable evidence that national policy is moving in this direction. However, it is not entirely clear what ‘becoming more inclusive’ means when policy texts offer such different and nebulous definitions. More significantly, schools are expected to become more inclusive at the same time as they pursue a standards agenda based on notions of ‘excellence’, in support of which are brought to bear the powerful levers of market competition, public accountability and direct government control. The dilemmas faced by schools in this situation are, as McLaughlin & Rouse (2000) point out, part of an international phenomenon deriving from the standards-based reforms of education systems in many countries. Moreover, they add, resolving these dilemmas is:

> an important task, because the competitive nature of some of the reforms has the potential to create losers as well as winners. It seems likely that the losers will be those who are already the most disenfranchised members of society. It is therefore vital that the reforms are not allowed to reinforce existing inequalities in education by producing an educational under-class. (McLaughlin & Rouse, 2000, p. 9)

The Study

The research reported here sought to track the way in which a group of schools addressed the tensions and contradictions in the current situation. The study, ‘Understanding and Developing Inclusive Practices in Schools’ (Grant L139251001), was one of four research networks set up as part of the largest single programme of education research ever funded in England – the Economic and Social Research Council’s Teaching and Learning Research Programme. It took the form of a collaborative, action research project linking three university research teams, three LEAs and 25 schools, nearly all of which were in urban areas. Each of the three university teams worked with eight or nine schools in one of the three LEAs, whose participation was negotiated with the individual LEAs and headteachers. The investigation was guided by four questions:
What are the barriers to participation and learning experienced by students?
What practices can help to overcome these barriers?
To what extent do such practices facilitate improved learning outcomes?
How can such practices be encouraged and sustained within LEAs and schools?

In the context of this project, these barriers were not understood as existing for any particular group (for example, pupils identified as having special educational needs), but potentially for any pupils within schools.

In this article we report on interim findings from the arm of the project managed by a team at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne and involving eight schools – two secondary, five primary and one junior – from a single LEA, ‘Southfields’, in the north of England. Crucially, unlike many schools which figure elsewhere in the inclusion literature (Dyson et al, 2002), these were not schools which were specially selected because of an outstanding commitment to inclusion or the presence of exemplary inclusive practices. They were in many respects rather ordinary schools. Indeed, some of their teachers were openly relieved to discover that the project did not involve them in accepting more students with special educational needs into the school. At the start of the project in 2000, each school was asked to establish a small team, including the headteacher, and to identify a focus for taking action to develop inclusive practices. We did not seek to determine for schools what these practices should look like or how they should develop them, since the aim of the research was to take these matters as problematic and investigate them in the contexts both of the individual schools and of the somewhat ambiguous national policy contexts within which the schools’ efforts were located. We did, however, make them aware of the approaches to inclusion embodied in the Index for Inclusion (Booth et al, 2000) – where inclusion is seen as being about overcoming barriers to participation and learning – and in the achievement-focused OFSTED (2000) guidance cited earlier. We also made them aware of the different emphases (to put it no more strongly) in these approaches.

Over the course of the next two and a half years, schools developed their chosen initiatives, supported by members of the LEA advisory team. The study’s action research methodology meant that initiatives involved inquiry as well as action and we encouraged schools to make evaluation intrinsic to their projects, the university team providing advice and assistance in this task. In addition, we carried out some independent data collection both to supplement schools’ own evaluation data and as the basis for a critical engagement with project teams about the actions they were taking and the ways in which they might be developed. Data were analysed both by school teams and by university researchers using appropriate standard methods, so that, for example, themes in interview and observation data were identified through a coding process, and different sources and types of data were triangulated with one another. Regular review meetings took place in all the schools when data collected by the schools and/or the university team and analyses of this data
provided the basis for discussion. The schools also met as a group with the LEA and university teams, usually on a half-termly basis, to discuss progress and share findings and there was an annual national conference for all participants in the network. All of these occasions provided the opportunity for the validation of findings. Although the extent and nature of the data collected in each case varies, extensive documentary, interview, observational and learning outcomes data were gathered from most schools over more than two school years.

**What the Schools Did**

The eight schools pursued very different courses of action. Some made what could be characterised as radical and ambitious plans for developing inclusion. One of the secondary schools, for example, decided to develop the skills of some of its students to act as a reference group which could feed back to the staff what it was that made students feel positive about the school and therefore attend. Feedback from these students would provide a basis for the school to initiate development building on the positive aspects of the school’s provision. One of the primary schools sought to achieve a cultural transformation in the school so that it would become a ‘learning community’ and planned to use the *Index for Inclusion* as a stimulus for operationalising its vision. Most of the schools, however, decided to pursue what were initially fairly narrow courses of action and five of them settled on initiatives to improve writing. Although their ultimate aims were similar, these five schools planned to pursue them in a variety of different ways. It is the action taken by two of these schools that we will describe in more detail below; one we will call Oliver Street Primary School, and the other Everingham Primary School.

**Oliver Street**

Oliver Street Primary School was located in an inner-urban area with all the social and economic problems associated with industrial decline. Like many schools in similar situations, Oliver Street was involved in a complex array of targeted projects and initiatives, which required all the skills of its experienced headteacher to prioritise and coordinate and which had already directed its attention towards marginalised groups of children before our ‘inclusion’ project was mooted.

The school team considered developing some of these initiatives as part of the project but instead settled on an initiative that focused on concerns about pupils’ performance in a core curriculum area, namely, writing. The headteacher explained this as a priority in terms of the entitlement of the children in the school to a high standard of education:

*To be honest, being in Oliver Street, because of it being a very low socio-economic area … the national priorities or the LEA priorities we can’t argue with. We need...*
She was concerned that despite the school’s best efforts, and the introduction of increasingly structured approaches to teaching and learning, results seemed to have reached a plateau. Before the project began, teachers had been involved in some in-service training with a member of the LEA’s extended advisory team (the ‘Quality in the Classroom’ coordinator) on the use of thinking skills approaches in the classroom, which the school believed might be a useful avenue to explore as a means of stimulating better writing. Two teachers committed themselves to taking a Year 2 class together for one lesson a week, when they employed new questioning techniques and evaluated the impact of new practices on the participation and learning of pupils in the group.

On the basis of a positive evaluation at the end of the first year, the school invested in training and resources, for all teachers in the school, to continue the development work. In addition, the two teachers who had initially worked on the project took on new partners to coach in ‘inclusion’ lessons. They were increasingly enthused by the impact the new approaches appeared to be having and their impressions were supported by a more formal evaluation. Records of lesson observations demonstrated the way that teachers’ questioning skills had developed over the course of the project, the developing role of children in questioning their peers and the growing sophistication of the discussions that were taking place in lessons. Moreover, writing test results for the first two cohorts of children targeted for the intervention showed a dramatic improvement on previous years and these improvements were sustained.

**Everingham**

Everingham was a large primary school in a small seaside town and had a 13-place support base for children in Key Stage 2 (aged 7 to 11) with moderate learning difficulties (MLD). The school was characterised by a high degree of stability, although at the time the project began the intake had changed marginally as a result of local housing policy.

The school’s original initiative arose out of a concern that some children performed less well in writing than in other aspects of literacy and particularly that there was a (limited) problem of boys’ underachievement. The project group believed that by focusing on non-fiction, the school could improve children’s (and particularly boys’) performance in writing. During the first year of the project displays of non-fiction work were mounted, the LEA’s Literacy Consultant delivered training to all teachers on the teaching and assessment of non-fiction writing, there was a review of planning for non-fiction work in the literacy hour and (ongoing) work on developing the library began. After a year the school was somewhat disappointed by the lack of obvious evidence of impact and revised its original course of action.
The project group decided to enhance its work on non-fiction writing by seeking the support of the LEA’s ‘Quality in the Classroom’ coordinator. She introduced a range of techniques to teachers through twilight training and by modelling them over a period of a term in Year 6 classes. These techniques included the use of alternative forms of recording, ways of managing pupil groupings more flexibly, methods of managing the pace of lessons and of establishing high expectations of pupils. At this stage the school also incorporated into its plans a response to some issues in relation to statemented children (‘statements’ specify the provision to be made for a child’s special educational needs, and local authorities then have a statutory duty to arrange for the provision to be made). Teachers had been experiencing difficulties trying to involve these children in lessons during the limited times they spent in mainstream classes and the school decided to increase the amount of time they spent with their peers. This change seemed to tie in nicely with the introduction of the ‘thinking skills’ approaches, in which there seemed to be potential for encouraging statemented children to participate more.

Data collected by the school in the second year of the project, supplemented by our own interview data, provide evidence of changes in practice across the school and of the success of the school in arousing the interest of pupils in non-fiction. Moreover, teachers were enthusiastic about using drama and discussion activities to help certain children to demonstrate knowledge and skills which they would be unable to do through the medium of writing. They were equally enthusiastic about collaborative working as a means of dispelling preconceptions in children about the scope that existed for learning from different members of their class. Children themselves described being surprised by what they had found out about other pupils in their ‘thinking skills’ lessons. A boy in Year 6 described the impact made on him by the progress of one of the statemented children. It was:

\[\text{like a bomb dropping on me … She has brought [statemented boy] on to be … like if he's stuck, he'll have a try. His behaviour is much better. Some abilities are just unreal. Since [the Quality in the Classroom coordinator] has come in his ability has risen above other people. (Southfields 3, 17.1.2002)}\]

Making Sense of the Data

One consequence of allowing schools in the project the autonomy we did do is that it gave rise to considerable diversity across sites in terms of both action and evaluative frameworks and this is an issue we have had to address in our analysis. Nonetheless, a number of common themes have emerged.

The Importance of Context

In looking for common themes, we have been struck by the way that the action schools took was affected by the wider, particularly policy, context in
which they operated. Given the backdrop of the ‘standards agenda’, against
which all educational policy governing schools takes shape, it is hardly
surprising that a preoccupation with standards was the running thread
throughout all that schools did during the course of the project. This is
perhaps most clear in the selection of the pedagogy of writing as a focus for
development by five of the primary schools, including Everingham and Oliver
Street, where the concern with national assessment performance was explicit.
Raising attainment in writing was a national priority as schools were shaping
their projects, and its urgency was strengthened in the schools discussed here
by its adoption as such by the LEA.

However, the ‘standards agenda’ could clearly be seen to be operating in
the other schools too, for example, in the case of the school which sought to
develop a learning community and which set in train a course of broad
development to achieve a cultural transformation. Although the school
identified a range of success indicators for its work across the dimensions of
staff culture, pupil involvement, community involvement and teaching and
learning, the headteacher and other stakeholders were quite explicit in stating
that the terms by which the success of school development would ultimately
be judged would be national test results. As the chair of the governing body
told us:

*It is important that we’re up there. You’re judged on your success, and the only
way that we’re going to get more pupils into the school – and I know falling
numbers with the birth rate and everything are an issue, so the best will survive …
is to get these [national test] results up. (Southfields 8, 10.11.2000)*

The second contextual influence of which we have become aware is that
provided by the culture and practices of the LEA. Unlike some others, the LEA
where our schools were located had not articulated an explicit definition of
inclusion or developed a formal inclusion policy as such. This may partly
explain why, when invited to address the issue through this project, schools in
Southfields approached the challenge somewhat cautiously, and, initially at
least, most took action which appeared to be narrowly conceived.

However, in the 1970s and 1980s, the LEA had been involved in
pioneering work in the integration of children with special educational needs
into mainstream schools and it retained to some extent a broad, liberal view of
education which was not entirely dominated by the standards agenda. We
noted, moreover, that LEA advisers in Southfields were held in some respect,
and this seemed to be a result of supportive relationships that had been built
up with schools over time, based on practical guidance that was of immediate
relevance to schools. A good example of the way these relationships operated
was provided by the work of the LEA’s ‘Quality in the Classroom’ project
coordinator, whose influence we have alluded to in the accounts of the
initiatives in Everingham and Oliver Street. The key feature of the support she
offered seemed to be the ‘hands-on’ modelling of successful approaches to
teaching and learning. One of the LEA steering group described the origins of her project:

That project was the brainchild of [Director of Education at the time the project began], because he had the foresight to see, ‘Well you can have all these working groups and you can have a national literacy strategy and goodness knows what, and be ticking all of those off, but you need somebody working with teachers in the classroom to effect some change’. (Southfields LEA 1, 4.1.2001)

The particular interest of the ‘Quality in the Classroom’ coordinator was the implementation of thinking skills strategies and she had a track record of enlisting schools in this endeavour. It is hardly surprising, then, that schools in the project, including Oliver Street and Everingham, eagerly took up the chance to work with her, and a number used the introduction of thinking skills approaches as their chosen mechanism for developing inclusive practices.

Another key element of the tradition of school development in Southfields was the LEA’s promotion of ‘action research’, focusing on teaching and learning in the classroom. Indeed, the most senior member of the steering group when the project began, the Assistant Director of Education, had herself coordinated a set of ‘action research’ projects in primary schools, with the ultimate aim of setting up a database of good classroom practice within the LEA. The same member of the steering group told us that:

when the university approached us to be part of the project, she could see that ... it could be the icing on the cake for that particular work. (Southfields LEA 1, 4.1.2001)

The LEA also had an established relationship with members of the university team based on projects undertaken with schools in relation to pupils identified as having special educational needs. The experience of these projects helped to generate a creative research culture in the LEA:

[Two university researchers] in particular supported them [teachers] with the philosophy and the methodology, but most of the hard graft was done by the teachers in the school, where they identified the focus, thought about, ‘Well, what evidence do I need? How am I going to interrogate this evidence, and what do I do next?’ So that the heads could see that as a result of their investigation there was something very, very positive, which they then transferred into whole school development. (Southfields LEA 1, 4.1.2001)

This history meant that schools in Southfields were receptive to the evaluation methodology that we promoted as the means of investigating the ways in which inclusive practices might be developed.

Dissonance

The situation for schools in the project, therefore, was that, on the one hand, they had to pay heed to the dominant national standards agenda and were located within an LEA which had not formally articulated any powerful
alternative to this agenda. On the other hand, the LEA had traditionally had a
liberal approach to education and had a culture of supporting rather than
directing schools in their attempts to develop their practice. In these
circumstances, our findings suggest, there was still room for practitioners to
exercise some degree of control over their work, and in so doing to
experiment with practices that were not part of the current orthodoxy of
approaches to teaching and learning.

The two cases above provide some illustration of the way that schools in
the project did this. Everingham, for example, attempted to move away from
grouping strictly by attainment and to experiment with more flexible
arrangements. For their part, teachers in Oliver Street did not base their action
to improve writing on official guidance about ways of delivering the literacy
curriculum, but instead chose to explore a new pedagogical approach that
might have been regarded in the climate of the time as something of a risk.
Indeed, a third school, which wanted to improve writing by introducing
thinking skills approaches and increasing its reliance on experiential learning,
described its work as a 'leap of faith' (Southfields 1, 12.10.2000).

In seeking an explanation for schools' motivation to act independently,
we are drawn to reports from teachers that existing practices at the time the
project began were neither sufficient to engage all the pupils in their schools
nor to deliver the results demanded by targets. A number of teachers spoke
about reaching or nearing a plateau in the standards their schools could
achieve. One headteacher told us about the amount of time already spent on
developing 'basic teaching strategies' and her feeling that there was not much
more the school could do to improve them or the results that could be
achieved by using these strategies. In the first year of the project, teachers at
Everingham discovered that simply 'raising the profile' of non-fiction writing,
for example, by increasing the amount of time devoted to it in lessons,
brought about only a marginal change in levels of participation and learning.

It would appear, therefore, that in attempting to achieve 'excellence for
all' and to comply with national expectations of 'good practice', schools
experienced significant tensions. By trying to reconcile the 'standards agenda'
and inclusion they did indeed experience something of the 'dissonance' which
Thomas & Loxley (2001) identify in the current context of education. A
teacher in one of the schools in the project provided a nice description of the
operation of 'dissonance' when he spoke of the challenges created by non-
responsive children:

> My father-in-law can't understand why we can't just go in there and teach. Just
> make them learn. He's in business and he's used to dealing with people who want
> to be there and who behave exactly as they should, and everyone's easy and nice.
> (Southfields 1, 12.5.2001)

However, the difficulty schools experienced in marrying together the demands
of the 'standards agenda' with the reality of the pupils they had to teach was
not entirely destructive in its effects. Rather, it was this that provided the

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stimulus for schools in the project to try alternative solutions to what were variously described as problems of underachievement, lack of motivation or disengagement in their populations.

Dissonance was manifested in various forms in the schools involved in our research. In some, the delivery of the ‘standards agenda’ was largely unproblematic for the majority of pupils, and it was only in the cases of small groups of individuals that schools were presented with any difficulties. In other schools, the mismatch between the ambitions of the ‘standards agenda’ and the receptivity of their whole population to that agenda was much greater. As the extent of dissonance varied, so too did the scope of the action taken by schools in response. Some schools pursued relatively narrow paths, whilst others took much more wide-ranging courses of action. Thus, we have the example of one school that adopted what might be described as a classic ‘remedial’ approach to the problem of the perceived underachievement of an identified group of children, withdrawing individuals from lessons for extra support when their attainment in writing lagged significantly behind their attainment in reading. Other schools engaged in wholesale reviews of their approaches to teaching and learning, so that at Oliver Street, for example, the aim was to try to address the needs of all pupils at some level. In the headteacher’s words:

I think it was actually all to do with trying to give our children something that was going to make them more equal with children from the leafy suburbs – because they’re not equal. They should be, but their opportunities are not equal, and we’re trying to make them more equal. (Southfields 2, 15.1.2001)

Responses such as these were full of ambiguities. Certainly, they took the ‘standards agenda’ for granted and saw the principal task of the school as being to raise children’s attainments in areas that were narrowly defined by national priorities. Certainly, too, they relied on methods and practices which, in some cases, were likely to have exclusive implications. For example, a number of schools focused on an ‘underachieving’ group of students, whose attainments were at the borderline of national targets, and in so doing particularly promoted their learning rather than that of others. However, these responses were also clearly shot through with concerns for equity in terms of participation in learning and of achievement. They rejected the possibility that some children could be disregarded in the push for standards, or that the disadvantages which those children were perceived as bringing with them into their schooling should simply be accepted as ‘facts of nature’. To that extent at least, they were inclusive in their intent. Effectively, therefore, the dissonance that these schools experienced opened up space which was occupied by (relatively) inclusive values and approaches. That space was not outside or alternative to the ‘standards agenda’. It operated within that agenda but had the effect of making it less heavily determining than it might otherwise have been.
Opening up Spaces

Whilst the operation of dissonance provided a dynamic for school action, and influenced its scope, our findings suggest that there were other critical factors that impacted on where space opened up, how substantial it was and what outcomes resulted. Not surprisingly, the way actions were carried through and the impact they had was partly dependent on a range of factors whose importance to organisational development has been widely noted in research literature, including the nature of school culture and, particularly, of leadership within the school (see, for example, Deering, 1996; Dyson & Millward, 2000; Hunt et al, 2000; Kugelmass, 2001). Where leadership was effective, it was a combination of qualities in the headteacher that seemed to be crucial to the development of new approaches, including an openness to problematic issues and a willingness to explore them, a preparedness to take risks, and competence at implementing new initiatives. In some schools, this style of leadership was complemented by a staff culture in which joint problem-solving, mutual support and mentoring were the norm, ensuring that there was a whole-school commitment to carrying through project initiatives to fruition. In other schools, actual or anticipated staff resistance acted as a major determinant of what the headteacher was prepared to attempt.

Important, also, was the access schools had to alternative perspectives on their work. The most obvious of these was the ‘critical friendship’ provided by the university research team, structured around schools’ own data collection and supplemented by our own ‘semi-independent’ investigations. Our aim was to encourage school teams to consider different explanations of the evidence provided by this data and to problematise their actions in the light of this. Another source of external perspectives was contact with schools in the local network and in the other areas involved in the project. Some of these contacts had a significant impact. For example, schools set up a programme of visits to each other, during which teachers undertook specific tasks, such as classroom observations, to provide feedback to the host schools about their work for the project. Oliver Street invited visitors to observe one of the lessons in which teachers were employing new questioning techniques and to discuss their observations afterwards. One of the host teachers commented:

The talking through the lesson afterwards with visitors has helped us to develop a more complex way of analysing the questions used. (Southfields 2, 4.7. 2002)

For her part, the visitor to the lesson from Everingham said:

Because we have begun working on thinking skills, the visit was really, really useful, particularly analysing the questions. (Southfields 3, 4.7.2002)

The third external perspective was that of the advisory teachers – the Literacy Consultant and the ‘Quality in the Classroom’ coordinator. The latter, in particular, had a dramatic impact. She was a charismatic trainer who related easily to teachers and children and was universally popular, but the crucial aspect of her approach seemed to be the ‘hands-on’ nature of her work.
Teachers could see new techniques being used with their own classes, producing responses which they would not have believed possible:

You see it's all right her giving us the book of alternative forms of recording, but like a lot of teachers, if she'd just given me it and I hadn’t had knowledge of what she meant, I might have thought 'oh yes very good', and pushed it in a drawer and never picked it up again. I think you actually need to see her doing it with the children. (Southfields 3, 17.1.2002)

In this respect, her work had something in common with the school visits, in that teachers saw with their own eyes practices that they did not commonly use themselves and, indeed, that they might have considered impossible. It seems, therefore, to have been the tangibility and practicality which made the difference.

External support and resources, particularly from the LEA, also played a part in maximising opportunities for development and inquiry in schools. For instance, the LEA made available significant funding which provided teachers with time to carry out their school investigations and to take part in a programme of support and development meetings. In addition to providing advice to individual schools, advisers coordinated the regular meetings at which schools were able to discuss progress and share findings and were largely responsible for the organisation of some of the national project conferences.

Finally, there is an identifiable theme in our data concerning the enthusiasm that teachers expressed about being involved in a project that was not related to the implementation of yet another new government initiative. Teachers spoke of the extent to which in recent years they had lost a degree of autonomy as a result of the necessity to deliver the 'standards agenda' and felt unable to explore all the possible pedagogical solutions to the problems they were facing. Supported in these specific ways by the LEA and the research team, the project seems to have allowed them to rediscover some of their 'professional wisdom' and trust their judgements in taking action that they perceive to be in the 'best interests' of pupils. One of the LEA team described the reaction from some headteachers when they were invited to take part in the project:

What emerged when we approached several of the heads about the project, they were sort of fired up with the idea because it was right for them, as head teachers – 'I really need something like this for my professional development'. And of course the other thing they have said is, 'It's been wonderful to get involved in something which we haven't got to get involved in'. (Southfields LEA 1, 4.1.2001)

Implications

The crucial issue, which we raised at the start of this article, is whether it is possible for schools to reconcile the standards-based reforms which dominate national policy in England and elsewhere with the development of more
inclusive approaches. We have argued elsewhere (Dyson, 2001), that writers tend to have adopted one of two broad stances with regard to this possibility. One stance is based on a somewhat deterministic, even pessimistic, view of the relationship between inclusive developments in schools and the wider policy and social context within which such developments are set. This ‘critical’ view tends to support the pursuit of inclusion, but suggests that its realisation is always undermined by powerful and determining forces which cause the system to continuously reproduce existing patterns in new forms (see, for instance, Slee, 1996; Booth et al, 1997). The best that can be advocated in terms of the pursuit of inclusion is an ongoing political ‘struggle’ for the principle (Vlachou, 1997). The task of those who wish to promote inclusive approaches, therefore, is not so much to devise a set of practices which will ‘deliver’ inclusion, but to maintain a constant state of vigilance, unmasking exclusion wherever it may appear (Corbett & Slee, 2000).

A second stance is more optimistic, suggesting that it is indeed possible for schools to become inclusive as part of a general movement of educational progress. However, frequently, writers within this tradition see the move to inclusion as requiring a process of transformation which is itself dependent on the coming together of particular sets of ‘organisational conditions’ (Ainscow, 1999) and/or on the presence of especially enlightened teachers and school leaders (see, for instance, Skrtic, 1991; Rouse & Florian, 1996; Ballard & MacDonald, 1998; Kugelmass, 2001). On this latter view, even within a hostile policy environment, we should expect to find at least some exceptional schools, with an outstanding commitment to inclusion, which are able to find ways of dismissing, overcoming or subverting the ‘standards agenda’ in favour of more inclusive approaches. On the former view, however, even such apparently atypical schools will find their efforts brought to nought by wider policy and social factors. It is, perhaps, worth adding that, whichever of these views is adopted, the implications for the development of inclusion are rather depressing. Taking a pessimistic view, it makes little difference what schools attempt to do; action is doomed to failure. Even taking an optimistic view, however, good-enough schools have to become exceptional before inclusion can become a reality.

Our findings seem to suggest that neither of these stances is entirely appropriate. The way in which project schools’ work was shaped by external policy agendas confirms to some extent the pessimistic view of the prospects for inclusion. It may indeed be the case that, given the right combination of circumstances and commitment, individual schools may be fundamentally transformed. However, we were not working with exceptional schools in exceptional circumstances. The tentativeness of developments in these schools, the ambiguity of their outcomes and, above all, perhaps, the way in which teachers and headteachers had internalised the standards agenda suggests that the widespread transformation of schools across the education system as a whole is highly unlikely to materialise.
On the other hand, our work does suggest that even otherwise unremarkable schools may possess the capacity to develop in a more inclusive direction. They are, it would seem, likely to experience dissonance between the imperatives of dominant agendas and the realities with which they are confronted. This is a dissonance which does not necessarily lead to a revolt against those agendas and, indeed, is by no means guaranteed to produce more inclusive outcomes. However, by the same token, it is a dissonance which is widely experienced and which can generate responses that are within the compass of many schools. What is needed in order to maximise the impact of this dissonance is not some heroic break-out, but some good-enough school leadership, some thoughtful external support and the encouragement of a limited and responsible kind of teacher professionalism.

It is, we suggest, highly unlikely that governments will entirely abandon the standards-based reforms to which they have committed themselves in recent years – even if such an outcome were desirable. It is probable, therefore, that the development of more inclusive practices will have to be undertaken within a somewhat hostile policy environment for the foreseeable future. However, the optimistic message of our study is that this does not necessarily mean that inclusion is doomed from the start. Schools can and do open up spaces in the standards agenda. Those spaces can be and are maintained by supportive factors which are widely distributed throughout the system. It would, we suggest, take only a small moderation of standards-based policies and a limited strengthening of the supportive factors for some real differences to become apparent, not just in exceptional schools, but across the system as a whole.

If this is not a dramatically inspiring picture of how inclusive education might develop, neither is it one which is based on the deterministic pessimism of some arms of the inclusion literature. It offers a view of change which is hesitant, complex and fraught with ambiguities. It is, nonetheless, a view of change that is possible.

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