Q & A with Mel Ainscow

The 2018 AERA theme is The Dreams, Possibilities, and Necessity of Public Education. What can be the promise of public schools and how does—or should—educational change bring us closer to such schooling?

Attending AERA provides a splendid opportunity to step back from the things I am doing in order to reflect on where I want to go next. Having previously worked as a school teacher, principal, and local authority education adviser, just over 20 years ago, I moved into universities. I brought into my new career questions from my earlier work that I wanted to address through research. This also led me to define myself as a researcher who would work alongside those within education systems to find ways of fostering change in relation to these concerns.

For me, then, the dreams, possibilities and necessities are about focusing on all learners, regardless of their circumstances and personal characteristics. They are therefore about inclusion, which means overcoming barriers that limit the presence, participation, and achievement of students; and equity, which is about ensuring that there is a concern with fairness, such that the education of all students is seen as being of equal importance.

So, the central message is simple: every learner matters and matters equally. The complexity arises, however, when we attempt to put this principle into practice. This is likely to require changes in thinking and practice at every level of an education system—from teachers in classrooms, through to those responsible for national policy.

Recently, I have worked with a team of international experts on behalf of UNESCO, the United Nations’ specialized agency for education, in exploring how this principle can inform the reform of education systems. This has led...
to a guide that is now being used in many countries to promote change (see: http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002482/248254e.pdf). The focus of the guide is on finding ways of including all learners and ensuring that each individual has an equal opportunity for educational progress.

Drawing on the work of scholars who have contributed to this ‘Lead the Change Series,’ the guide takes account of the following ideas about educational change:

• Clarity of purpose is essential in order to mobilize widespread support—progress requires a shared understanding of the rationale and purposes of the changes that are being introduced.

• Policy is made at all levels of a national education system, not least at the classroom level—this means that strategies for change must seek to influence as many stakeholders as possible.

• Educational change is technically simple but politically and socially complex—therefore, efforts have to be made to convince stakeholders of the value of proposed changes.

• Evidence is the catalyst for successful change—in particular, the knowledge of stakeholders about the current situation must inform planning processes.

The UNESCO guide is built around a review and development framework that can be used to: assess existing policies within a country in order to determine the changes that are needed; create and implement an action plan; and monitor its implementation. I encourage readers to consider using it in their work.

You are well known for your work on the development of inclusive schools. You have described effort to create inclusive schools as, a “never-ending search to find better ways of responding to diversity.” Looking back, what do you see to be some of these ways of responding to diversity and what would be some important contribution of this work to the field of educational change?

In some countries, inclusion is still thought of as an approach to serving children with disabilities within general education settings. Internationally, however, it is increasingly seen more broadly as a reform that responds to diversity amongst all learners. This is my own perspective. It presumes that the aim of inclusive school development is to eliminate exclusionary processes that are a consequence of attitudes and responses to diversity in relation to race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender, and perceived abilities.

Evidence from our research carried out over the last twenty years or so suggests that ‘schools know more than they use’ (see Ainscow, 2015). This means that the starting point for strengthening the capacity of a school to respond to learner diversity should be with the sharing of existing practices through collaboration amongst staff and through joint practice development. Our research also shows that this can be stimulated through an engagement with the views of different
stakeholders—bringing together the expertise of practitioners, the insights of students and families, and the knowledge of academic researchers in ways that challenge taken-for-granted assumptions, not least in respect to those learners who are seen to be vulnerable. This can stimulate new thinking and encourage experimentation with alternative ways of working.

The evidence needed to create this stimulation can take many forms. What is common is the way it creates ‘interruptions’ in the busy day of teachers that lead to the sharing of practices and the generation of new ways of working. Much of my work involves working with schools using forms of collaborative inquiry to learn more about how to make joint practice development work within current policy contexts.

The obvious starting point is with the statistical information available in schools regarding attendance, behavior, and student progress. In recent years, the extent and sophistication of such data have improved, so much so that the progress of groups and individuals can now be tracked in considerable detail, giving a much greater sense of the value that a school is adding to its students. However, statistical information alone tells us very little. What brings such data to life is when ‘insiders’ start to scrutinize and ask questions together as to their significance, bringing their detailed experiences and knowledge to bear on the process of interpretation.

The introduction of such approaches can be challenging of the status quo within a school. This points to the importance of leadership that encourages an organizational culture within which colleagues can challenge one another’s assumptions about the capabilities of particular students.

Some schools are characterized by an inclusive culture. Within such schools, there is a degree of consensus amongst 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 does not necessarily remove all tensions or contradictions in practice. On the other hand, there is likely to be a high level of staff collaboration and joint problem solving, and similar values and commitments may extend into the student body, and amongst parent and other community stakeholders.

Given your focus on inclusion as value-based endeavour that depends on the restructuring of cultures, policies, and practices, what would be the lessons we can learn from local and global trends that are driven by successful changes in inclusion?

In trying to make sense of the complex processes involved in changing education systems, my colleagues and I find it useful to see them in relation to an ‘ecology of equity’ (Ainscow, 2012; Ainscow et al., 2012). By this we mean that the extent to which students’ experiences and outcomes are equitable is not dependent only on the educational practices of their schools. Rather, it depends on a whole range of interacting processes that reach into the school from outside. These include the demographics of the areas served by schools,
the histories and cultures of the populations who send (or fail to send) their children to the school, and the economic realities faced by those populations.

This means that it is necessary to address three interlinked sets of factors. These are: *within-school factors* to do with existing policies and practices; *between-school factors* that arise from the characteristics of local school systems; and *beyond-schools factors*, including the demographics, economics, cultures, and histories of local areas.

**Within-school factors.** Our research has shown how the use of evidence to study teaching within a school can help foster the development of inclusive practices. Specifically, it can create space for rethinking by interrupting existing discourses. Particularly powerful techniques in this respect involve the use of mutual lesson observation, sometimes through video recordings, and evidence collected from students about teaching and learning arrangements. Under certain conditions, such approaches help to make the familiar unfamiliar in ways that stimulate self-questioning, creativity, and action. In so doing they can sometimes lead to a reframing of perceived problems, which, in turn, draws teachers’ attention to overlooked possibilities for addressing barriers to participation and learning.

**Between-school factors.** Moving beyond what happens within individual schools, our research suggests that collaboration between differently performing schools can reduce polarization within education systems, to the particular benefit of learners who are performing relatively poorly. It does this by both transferring existing knowledge and, more importantly, generating context-specific new knowledge. The most convincing evidence we have about the power of this approach comes from our involvement in the Greater Manchester Challenge, a three-year improvement project which involved over 1,100 schools in ten English local authorities (see: [https://www.seed.manchester.ac.uk/education/research/impact/schools-rise-to-challenge/](https://www.seed.manchester.ac.uk/education/research/impact/schools-rise-to-challenge/)). An independent evaluation of the initiative concluded that a factor contributing to its success was teachers learning from practice in other schools within an ethos of trust, support, and encouragement (Hutchings et al., 2012).

**Beyond-school factors:** Our research also leads me to conclude that closing the gap in outcomes between those from more and less advantaged backgrounds will only happen when what happens to children outside, as well as inside schools, changes. In this respect I have seen encouraging examples of what can happen when what schools do is aligned in a coherent strategy with the efforts of other local players—families, employers, community groups, universities, and public services. This does not necessarily mean schools doing more, but it does imply partnerships beyond the school, where partners multiply the impacts of each other’s efforts.
Young people are the focus of educational change for improvement. What are the key needs of young people at this time and what might the field of educational change prioritize in order to meet these needs?

We need radical thinking regarding this issue. Put simply, we must place much more emphasis on involving young people as active partners in promoting more inclusive ways of organizing schools. Too often, they are hidden voices, whose views are overlooked.

As I mentioned earlier, we have found that the use of collaborative inquiry to study teaching within a school can help in fostering the development of practices that are more effective in reaching those learners who are seen as ‘hard to reach.’ An effective approach for introducing collaborative inquiry to study teaching is lesson study, a systematic procedure for the development of teaching that is well established in Japan and some other Asian countries.

The goal of lesson study is to improve the effectiveness of the experiences that teachers provide for their students. The focus is on ‘research lessons,’ which are used to examine the responsiveness of students to the planned activities. Trios of teachers work together to design the lesson plan, which is then implemented by each colleague in turn. Observations and post-lesson meetings are arranged to facilitate the improvement of the research lesson between each trial.

In using this approach, we have taken a further step forward by incorporating the views of students. Our research suggests that it is this factor, more than anything else, that makes the difference as far as responding to learner diversity is concerned (Ainscow & Messiou, 2017). In particular, it is engaging with the views of learners that brings a critical edge to the process that has the potential to challenge teachers to go beyond the sharing of existing practices in order to invent new possibilities for engaging students in their lessons. In this way, students’ views add a distinctive perspective for developing changes in learning and teaching that go well beyond traditional views of effective practice.

Within a recent study, which took place in secondary schools in three European countries, such an approach sometimes led teachers to reconsider their ideas regarding learner diversity, particularly in respect to the ways in which differences are formulated and described. So, for example, one trio of teachers involved seven students, each from a different ethnic background, in decision making about how to assign working group members in a drama activity, and what roles individual students should be asked to take. In these ways, sitting with their students to plan the lesson, the teachers moved to a more authentic form of collaboration and an immediate way of acting upon what students were suggesting in terms of responding to differences. There was evidence, too, that these experiences made students feel more engaged and that teachers reconsidered their own assumptions about specific students.

In terms of promoting inclusion and equity within education systems, these
experiences offer reasons for optimism as far as the idea of engaging with the views of students is concerned. This is particularly significant in the sense that the main resources that they draw on are there in every classroom, in every school in the world.

What do you think are the most important issues in educational change today? What excites you about the educational change?

Somebody asked me, why is it that when education professors retire they are often asking the same questions as when they started their careers? In my own case, the agenda has certainly remained broadly the same throughout my professional life: it is that of finding ways of including all children and young people, and ensuring that they are all treated fairly.

In responding to this challenge, there is growing interest internationally in the use of strategies that place an emphasis on the power of market forces to improve educational standards. In particular, a number of national education policies are encouraging schools to become autonomous; for example, the academies in England, charter schools in the USA, and free schools in Sweden.

Such developments have the potential to open up possibilities to inject new energy into the improvement of education systems. On the other hand, there is growing evidence that they are tending to lead to increased segregation that further disadvantage some learners, particularly those from economically poorer and minority backgrounds.

We saw a striking example of this in an academy serving a disadvantaged urban community in England. Tracking developments over more than ten years, we saw how this new school—which replaced one that was seen to be failing—achieved remarkable improvements. This was reflected in massive progress in examination results and was recognized by inspectors, who determined that the school was ‘outstanding.’ Gradually, however, the performance of the school slipped back, such that it eventually became a cause for concern.

In a recent book, we analyze the factors that led to this school’s early success and those that led to its subsequent decline (Salokangas & Ainscow, 2017). We show how the imposition of standardized procedures stimulated rapid improvements, both in terms of school climate and student outcomes. However, this also led to the erosion of teacher autonomy, a factor which, we concluded, contributed to its eventual regression.

Our account throws light on how a narrow, standards-driven culture and highly regulated policies limited teachers’ pedagogical decision-making. Within this context, a fear of failure in examinations was seen to make teachers reluctant to become involved in any form of risk-taking, even though there was evidence of considerable collaboration amongst the staff.

Despite worrying accounts such as this, greater autonomy for schools still makes
sense, particularly if it provides space for teachers to innovate in order to make their practices more inclusive. The problem is that policies based on the idea of education as a market place often leads to a search for one-size-fits-all strategies for improving test scores that can be imposed on teachers.

The implication is that policies must provide the space for greater collaboration amongst practitioners in order to develop strategies that respond to learner diversity. In other words, teaching must be given back to teachers. And the responsibility of the research community must be to work in ways that contribute to this crucial agenda for change. It is this that excites me as I travel to New York for AERA 2018.

References


MEL AINSCOW

Mel Ainscow is Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Manchester, UK. A long-term consultant to UNESCO, he is currently working on international efforts to promote inclusion and equity globally.

A distinctive feature of his approach is the emphasis he places on carrying out research with schools and education systems to promote improvements. Between 2007-2011, Mel led the Greater Manchester Challenge—a project that involved a partnership between national government, ten local authorities, and 1,150 schools—with a government investment of around £50 million. Then, between 2014 and 2017, he headed up Schools Challenge Cymru, the Welsh Government’s flagship program to accelerate improvement across the country’s schools, focusing in particular on the progress of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In the Queen’s 2012 New Year Honors list, Mel was made a Commander of the British Empire for his services to education.

Mel Ainscow can be reached at mel.ainscow@manchester.ac.uk