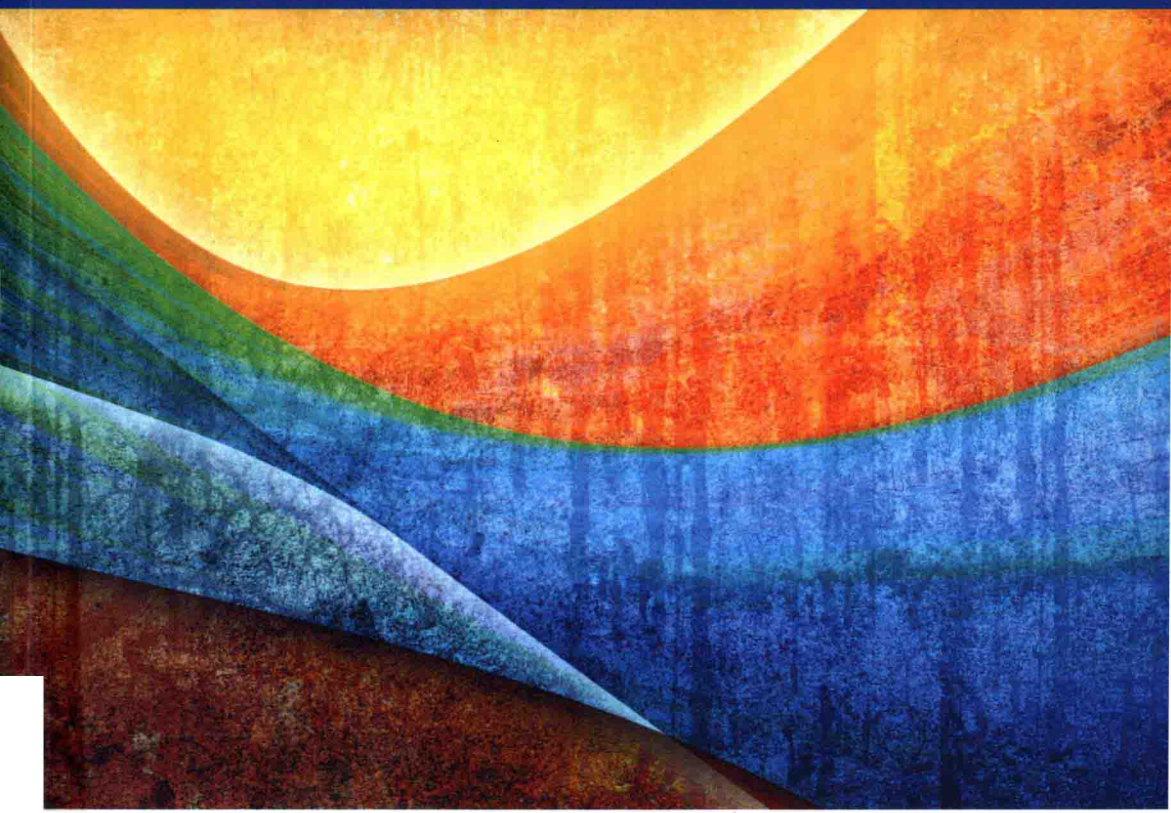
RECONSIDERING INCLUSION

Sustaining and building inclusive practices in schools



Alison Ekins

ROUTLEDGE

Informed by research undertaken on the reality of developing inclusive practices in schools, and years of practitioner experience in the field of education, *Reconsidering Inclusion* shows how staff's social and emotional relationships can sustain and build inclusive practices. Providing engaging discussion of key findings and themes central to the practitioner, encouraging them to critically engage in developing inclusive practices in their schools, readers will find reflective questions about their practice and examples of key competing perspectives to enhance deeper understanding. Ekins presents authentic accounts and discussions of the reality of developing inclusive practices, as experienced and explained by teachers faced with the responsibility of enacting those practices. The book concludes with a discussion on achievable implications for practice both at a personal and professional level.

Reconsidering Inclusion is suitable for all those interested in inclusive practice and provides a much needed critical insight into inclusive practices in schools.

Alison Ekins is Course Director for the National Award for SEN Coordination, Canterbury Christ Church University, UK and also leads the development of SEN and inclusive practices within an Academy Trust. She has authored *The Changing Face of Special Educational Needs*, 2nd edition, published by Routledge in 2015.

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Routledge titles are available as eBook editions in a range of digital formats

ISBN 978-1-138-68151-4

9 781138 681514

Cover image

RECONSIDERING INCLUSION

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常州大学图书馆
藏书章

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2017
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Names: Ekins, Alison.
Title: Reconsidering Inclusion: Sustaining and building inclusive practices in schools / Alison Ekins.
Description: New York : Routledge, 2017. | Includes bibliographical references.
Identifiers: LCCN 2016013490 | ISBN 9781138681491 (hardback) | ISBN 9781138681514 (pbk.) | ISBN 9781315563183 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Educational equalization–Great Britain. | Discrimination in education–Great Britain. | Inclusive education–Great Britain.
Classification: LCC LC213.3.G7 E45 2017 | DDC 371.9/0460941–dc23LC record available at http://lccn.loc.gov/2016013490

ISBN: 978-1-138-68149-1 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-138-68151-4 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-56318-3 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo
by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the tremendous amount of support given to me through the process of completing research and this book from my family, friends and colleagues. In particular, my husband, Andy; children, Joseph, Jacob, Charlotte, Samuel; and my parents, Ann and Chris. I hope that the process of researching inclusive practices and writing the book, which my young family has witnessed at home, will inspire my own children in their studies as I watch them grow into mature and reflective learners. I am passionate about inclusive education and I am incredibly proud of the caring, inclusive individuals that my children are growing up to be.

Finally, but most importantly, my thanks and appreciation must go to the headteachers and staff in my two case study schools, who kindly gave up their time to work with me over the period of the research. They provided me with an invaluable opportunity and insight into an area of education and schooling that I have been working in for many years, giving me the chance to reconsider it through fresh eyes. Their openness and helpfulness throughout amazed me, as did the emotional intensity with which they worked, often in challenging circumstances, which I was privileged to witness. My very best wishes go to the staff and pupils at both schools as they continue to reflect upon and develop their own inclusive practices to meet the ever-changing needs of their pupils.

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1

INTRODUCTION

Exposing the critical issues and critical questions

This chapter considers

- Developing inclusive practices and the purposes of education.
- 'Making the familiar unfamiliar' (Delamont and Atkinson, 1995).
- The definition of inclusion that underpins this book.
- The structure of the book.

Understanding the development of inclusive practices in schools is a complex issue, involving consideration of inclusion, equity and school development, all of which are contested, contextual and interpretable constructs. Having worked as a teacher, SENCO (Special Educational Needs Coordinator), SEN Advisor/Consultant and university lecturer in SEN and Inclusion in England for 20 years, I decided to find a way, through research, to re-examine and reconsider these often taken-for-granted constructs through the reality and experience of practice. This book documents the journey that was taken, with the discussions about key themes that arose centrally grounded in the unique data and understandings that I uncovered.

From the outset, I must be clear: this is not a book with simplistic 'recipes' or strategies for success. Rather, the purpose, initially of the research, and now for this book, is to present authentic accounts and discussions of the reality of developing inclusive practices, as experienced and explained by teachers faced with the responsibility of enacting those practices. As Chapter 2 will set out, rather than striving for large-scale replicable data sets, the research focused on a principled approach to gathering rich data and stories or accounts of the experience of practice through which to illuminate understandings and reconsiderations of the issues.

Developing inclusive practices and the purpose of education

For some time, the importance of understanding and developing inclusive practice within educational systems has been understood as a global agenda (Pijl *et al.*, 1997; Artilles *et al.*, 2011; Goransson *et al.*, 2013). It is seen as an essential catalyst in the movement for wholescale school transformation (Savolainen *et al.*, 2012), with 'Inclusion and equity in education' being identified as the '"best long-term instrument we have in order to secure economic progress, as well as democracy and social stability" Norwegian Minister of Education, Oslo, 2009' (Precey and Mazurkiewicz, 2013: 105). Yet, the journey towards developing and embedding inclusive education is still seen as a 'continuous struggle' (Waitoller and Kozleski, 2013: 35).

Thus, 'despite the impressive growth in interest and enthusiasm around inclusive education throughout the world, how it is defined and implemented, and for whose benefit, remains at best incompletely understood' (Kozleski *et al.*, 2011: 2). This is significant and will clearly have an impact upon how inclusive education is understood by practitioners, researchers and policy makers across the world. Rather than understanding inclusion as an accepted and agreed construct, we therefore need to be constantly aware that approaches to inclusive education are mediated by a number of different factors including the

1. Official and implicit purposes and goals of public education;
2. Access to intellectual, human and material resources;
3. Collective understandings and educational responses to socio-cultural differences.

(Kozleski et al., *2011: 2)*

Indeed, this first factor, around the purposes and goals of education, is a particularly important consideration. Considerations of inclusion and inclusive education cannot be simple technical discussions of specific strategies or interventions, but instead must draw practitioners, researchers and policy makers into fundamental discussions about the purpose of education more broadly. Fundamentally, the aim of inclusive education is to eliminate all forms of social exclusion (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010). In this, education is seen as a basic human right.

Yet, exclusionary practices and processes continue to be perpetuated through society and through education, with 'many exclusionary factors embedded in systems, structures and practice [which lead] directly to the marginalization, non-recognition and "othering" of certain "groups" of students in schools' (Ruairc, 2013: 15). Thus, we need to fundamentally question and examine how, and in which ways, schools and education systems may simply 'reproduce' (Ottesen, 2013) or breed inequality. Indeed, if education is seen as a basic human right, then we need to step back and critically reconsider who actually benefits from existing education systems, and who it is that remains marginalised within the systems that we currently use to promote diversity and inclusion (ibid.). Chapter 4 therefore considers the concept of who the socially marginalised actually are in different political and cultural contexts.

Whilst taking a critical look at the purpose of education and schools is central, we do, however, also need to critically reflect upon the impact and implications of schools' positioning in society today. Ruairc (2013), for example, suggests that the current notion that schools are solely responsible for the delivery of inclusive education, and that schools can do it all alone and solve all of society's problems, is contestable. So, although more may need to be done across educational policy contexts and structures to prioritise inclusive principles and practices, we also need to recognise the challenge of only using education systems which 'both mirro[r] and shap[e] society' (Precey and Mazurkiewicz, 2013: 108) to lead the development of inclusive practices. We therefore need to seek creative solutions to understanding and addressing the principles of inclusion across society as a whole rather than only from an educational perspective.

To do this, inclusion and inclusive education need to be seen as 'more than a set of strategies to merely place students in ordinary classrooms and schools' (Artilles *et al.*, 2011: 4). Inclusion, therefore, is not just a structural issue, but an ethical concept to do with the *purpose* of education (Reindal, 2010), needing to be understood as a principled approach to a number of central constructs, including equity, equality, democracy, social justice, values, vision and emotion. In this way, inclusion can be seen more as a philosophy and a philosophical undertaking than the mechanical implementation of a narrow strategy or educational approach (Grenier, 2010).

This book seeks to support readers to understand more deeply the issues and implications of what simple terms such as inclusion or inclusive education actually mean, in order to better understand and be positioned to respond to the continuous struggle that such an endeavour encompasses. Tinkering around the edges of existing systems is not enough; the global priority around inclusion requires fundamental rather than incremental change (Avissar, 2012: 47). This book, and the research shared within it, provides one perspective through which this philosophical issue can be re-examined and understood in different ways.

Critical issues and questions embedded in discussions about inclusion

To be able to better understand and evaluate discussions relating to inclusive practices and inclusion as a concept, we need to consider a number of broad critical questions. Indeed, as we shall explore throughout the book as a whole, it is only by stopping and asking critical questions about taken-for-granted concepts and practices that we will be able to develop effective approaches to meet the needs of all within changing education systems and societies. In each chapter, critical questions relating to the chapter theme are therefore posed. As a starting point, a few broad questions have been suggested here. These can be used to start a process of critical thinking and reflection and can be added to reflect differing political, cultural, educational and social contexts:

- What is meant by the term inclusion?
- What is understood by the phrase *developing inclusive practices*?

- How, and in what ways, do definitions of inclusion vary?
- Do political and cultural contexts impact upon the definition and practice of inclusive education?
- Is inclusion a technical or a philosophical endeavour?
- What is an inclusive culture?
- How can an inclusive culture be created and sustained?
- Is inclusion a state of being or a process?
- Is there a relationship between inclusive cultures and leadership approaches?
- Is there such a thing as inclusive leadership?
- What might this look like?
- How do relationships impact on the development and experience of inclusive practices?

'Making the familiar unfamiliar' (Delamont and Atkinson, 1995)

To be able to really engage with these critical issues and questions, there is a need to find ways to look again at the taken-for-granted assumptions and structures embedded within our current experiences of inclusive education and school settings. We need to recognise that currently, there is an inherent

> failure of proponents to acknowledge and address the historical sediments of oppression that are layered within institutions. And because of the cultural perspectives and understandings of how ethnicity, race, gender, language, citizenship and other markers of difference are conflated with ability, examining these power questions is laced with the blindness and unconsciousness of familiarity.
>
> *(Artilles* et al., *2011: 5)*

It is this 'blindness and unconsciousness of familiarity' which therefore needs to be perpetually challenged. Unfortunately, many education systems are now so pressurised and challenging, with increased external accountability and inspection regimes, that time and space to reflect on the critical issues and questions guiding education have been lost. In England, where the research shared in this book is set, national directives and policies increasingly took over control of decisions about teaching and learning, with the period 1997–2010 marked by intense prescription from the government. This impacted upon the ability and potential for professionals to really question existing and emerging practices. With schools sometimes becoming so focused on the act of 'doing', precious time and space for thinking and reflection was increasingly lost or reduced. The implications of this are to an extent still being felt. Finding simple strategies to 'make the familiar unfamiliar' (Delamont and Atkinson, 1995) and provide principled interruptions to practice, in order to raise, question and reflect upon critical issues, including the perpetuation of taken-for-granted terminology and practices, are therefore essential.

The research that I undertook and am sharing in this book was my way, as a practitioner deeply entrenched within a particular system of education operating

within South East England, to find ways to 'make the familiar unfamiliar' (Delamont and Atkinson, 1995). This is a concept that I have borrowed from Delamont and Atkinson (1995) to define the important process of finding new ways to look again at familiar practices in order to understand them in different ways, exposing underlying assumptions and ways that they can impact upon the development of fully inclusive practices.

As researcher, by going into two different schools over a prolonged period and engaging in reflective discussions with practitioners actually experiencing the reality of developing inclusive practices, with all of the challenges and rewards that come with this, I was provided with a unique opportunity to look again at my own taken-for-granted understandings of what inclusion is, who it includes and how it is enacted in practice.

Interestingly, what I had expected to find – that the journey towards the development of inclusive practices in each school was different as a result of various practical approaches and strategies that were implemented at different times – was not the key finding. Rather than any focus on key actions and processes that the schools undertook, the most important finding was the strong emphasis on broader principles which fundamentally underpin any approach to developing inclusive practices. In the chapters that follow, therefore, you will find key discussions about inclusive school cultures, leadership and teamwork, relationships, professional identity and emotions rather than discussion of specific techniques and approaches to inclusion.

The definition of inclusion underpinning this book

Whilst Chapter 3 provides a more detailed critical examination of the complex concept of inclusion, from the start it is important to set out the understandings and approach to inclusion that underpins the research and the discussions throughout this book.

For me, any definition of inclusion will always be problematic, dependent upon cultural and contextual interpretations to provide its situated meaning. Acknowledging the problematic nature of the concept of inclusion and inclusive education, there is however a need to specify the situated and individual meaning ascribed to the concept within the context of the research and discussions in this book, in order to ensure shared understanding and meaning making with the reader. It must be noted that this is not meant as a blueprint definition for others to use, but instead as an individual reflection upon the key issues which are of central significance in relation to the notion of developing inclusive practices for me. This draws upon a range of personal experiences, not only in teaching, researcher and advisory capacities, but also as a parent with aspirations and principles for my own children within current educational systems, and also upon my interpretation of a range of policy, research and literature sources. The discussion that I present is also not offered as my definitive account of the meaning of inclusion. Instead, it must be emphasised that my own philosophical, professional and academic understandings of the concept of inclusion are ever changing to reflect the differing tensions and contradictions that arise

between inbuilt value systems, imposed government policies and the practical reality of implementing inclusive practices within current educational systems.

For now, however, the understanding of inclusion that underpins this book is built upon the following key principles:

Inclusive education for all

The development of an inclusive and equitable education for all means moving away from a narrow definition of inclusion relating only to pupils with special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities. A simplistic focus on pupils with SEN, and also upon reductionist and stereotyped categories of vulnerable groups, is therefore purposefully avoided, as is explored in more detail in Chapter 3.

An ongoing, dynamic process

Inclusion is an ongoing process, a 'project of becoming, rather than a state of being' (Artilles *et al.*, 2011: 52). In this, it is dynamically linked with the overall process of school development. For both processes, it is understood that it involves a 'journey of hope based on shared beliefs and values and real commitment' (Wrigley, 2003: 45).

Inclusion as complex

The issue of inclusion and developing inclusive practices is complex, and requires an approach which highlights this complexity, emphasising 'changing realities ... and redefinition of cultures' (Rassool, 2009: 134), rather than perpetuating an approach based upon:

> a world in which policy makers often seek the comforts of magic bullets that solve educational problems with one simple solution, and where commercial companies seek to solve the pressure on teachers' time with off the shelf curricula and school improvement packages.
>
> *(Daniels* et al., *2009: 1)*

The research presented in this book is concerned with providing an account of the individual processes that two schools went through over a period of 2 years in order to develop their own unique inclusive practices. The underlying assumption within the research is that inclusive practices must be unique and individual to different schools, and that whilst general over-arching principles may support the development of understanding around inclusive values and practices, the adherence to models which advocate application and transferability of simplistic checklists or standards for inclusive practice simply undermines the possibility for fully inclusive practices to evolve in any meaningful way. The development of inclusive practices is therefore dependent upon a complex and unique interplay between the developing school culture and the interactions, relationships and emotions of staff

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