Imagining inclusive teachers: contesting policy assumptions in relation to the development of inclusive practice in schools

Conference Item

Imagining inclusive teachers: contesting policy assumptions in relation to the development of inclusive practice in schools

Within education theme: The Politics of Inclusion through Learning and Education

Andrew Howes University of Manchester
Peter Grimes Canterbury Christchurch University, UK
M. M. C. Shohel Open University

> '*We have learnt that you cannot watch somebody teach in another school and then take it back to your school to try and copy them. It doesn't seem to work that way…. All children are different and so are teachers and schools. If you want to be a really inclusive school, then you need to understand that.'* (headteacher, Lao PDR)

Abstract

In this paper we reflect on data from two research projects in which inclusive practice in schools is at issue, in the light of wider field experience (our own and others') of school and teacher development. We question what we understand to be relatively common, implicit policy assumptions about how teachers develop, by examining the way in which teachers are portrayed and located in these projects. The examples discussed in this paper draw on experience in Lao PDR and Bangladesh, critically exploring teachers' roles, position and agency in practice. Similarities and differences rooted in cultural, political and institutional contexts highlight in a very productive way the significance and potential dangers of policy assumptions about teachers within the process of development.

In Bangladesh, a success story is presented: the case of a group of schools in which an institutional context for learning appears to sustain teachers' commitment and motivation, with the effect of creating meaningful outcomes for young people who were previously outside the education system. These data raise questions about the significance of institutional context to teachers' practices, and questions about approaches to teacher development which omit consideration of that context by, for example, focusing inadvertently on features of individual teachers.

We then consider teachers' responses to the movement for inclusive education in a school in the Lao PDR since 2004. Inclusion here was understood to require a significant shift in teacher identity and a movement away from authoritative pedagogy towards the facilitation of a pedagogy which aimed to encourage the active participation of all students. Through a longitudinal study of teachers in one school, the conditions for such change were identified and again cast doubt on some of the assumptions behind large-scale attempts at teacher development. Reflecting on these experiences and the evidence they provide, we suggest that teacher development programmes are more likely to be effective where teachers are considered not as individuals subject to training but as agents located in an influential institutional context.

Introduction

In many countries in the world, considerable resources go into teacher development. In this paper we consider the theory of change that is operating in programmes of activity designed to facilitate that development in respect of the inclusiveness of teachers' work. Inclusion is widely understood to depend to a significant extent on teachers' assumptions and beliefs-in-action (Howes, Davies et al. 2009), and therefore on all the influences (social, cultural, political) which shape those assumptions and beliefs. Teacher learning happens at many levels, but it seems clear that assumptions and beliefs-in-action are influenced by what might be termed deep rather than shallow learning (Marton and Säljö 1976). In pursuit of a more inclusive education system therefore, the question is how to create the conditions whereby teachers are likely to engage in deep learning in regard to their educational practice.

Several questions arise from this understanding, in relation to processes of teacher development and the extent to which they lead to more inclusive practices in schools. How far do the practices and policies of teacher development projects or institutions create conditions for such a process of learning by teachers? To what extent do teachers have the space required for changing their practice? What facilitators and opportunities for inclusion are overlooked by teacher development programmes? We will explore these questions in relation to existing literature and then address them in relation to our two case studies.

To what extent does the process of teachers' learning in relation to inclusion match the assumptions embedded in the policies and practices of teacher development projects or institutions? The relationship between activities of teacher education and the teacher learning that are thereby facilitated has been studied

in several contexts. Among these, one of the most detailed is Dyer et al's (2004) ethnographically-informed analysis of the District Institutes of Education and Training (DIET) system in India, which clearly demonstrated a mismatch between the intention of trainers to generate more active engagement by teachers in classrooms, and the training activities experienced by those teachers. The way that teacher trainers and training institutions conceptualised and engaged with teachers in schools was described as having low 'ecological validity' (p.39). The researchers suggest that the problem lies with assumptions about what will lead teachers to change:

> 'Teacher development—in India as indeed elsewhere— is a vastly more complex enterprise than simply providing teachers with improved knowledge and skills. The nature of teachers' knowledge and skills, and how they are applied, are embedded in and shaped by teachers' attitudes and beliefs, and those attitudes and beliefs themselves reflect contexts in which teachers have grown up, taken their professional training, and now practise' (p.40-41).

In other words, teachers were being trained with little regard to or understanding of the context in which that training was intended to take effect. Dyer et al (2004) suggest, along with Hargreaves and Fullan (1992) that the problem for teacher training lies partly with teachers' will to change, not with their technical capacity to do so. Having the will to change is seen to require teachers with greater control over their own development:

> 'Teacher development programmes need to be able to convince teachers of their own capacity directly to effect change, and to build on and extend teachers' views of the possible. Ongoing attempts to develop teachers' skills without attending to this issue are likely to continue to meet barriers because training messages do not adequately promote teachers' confidence in their own capacity to make a difference' (Dyer et al, 2004 p.51)

This constitutes a serious and difficult challenge, to create a teacher development programme which somehow inoculates teachers' sense of agency, so that their attempts to change their practice can survive, for example, prolonged contact with a rather contagious school culture which positions them as passive deliverers of material. It is not clear that this is possible. The issues raised here concern the school or perhaps wider culture of which teachers are a part (of expectations and beliefs about children, about the nature of teaching and learning, about the role of the teacher) rather than about the technicalities of teaching (having the right materials and knowledge for the job, for example). To work contrary to such a culture would require a significant personal commitment and self-confidence, a willingness to behave in a way which might even be seen as effrontery by colleagues and managers. Such exceptional teachers exist, of course. In their paper, Dyer et al (ibid.) suggest that culture at the level of religious and social beliefs is a possibly significant explanation for the (relatively few) 'good' teachers they found who worked consistently to create conditions in which children in their care could learn, but they concur that:

> '… the capacity to instil such conducive personal philosophy lies beyond the direct remit of teacher training' (p.50).

In some school systems, beginning teachers may of course be selected on the basis of such personal philosophy, but that is a separate issue from the question of influencing the practice of the majority of teachers.

Further support for the influence of deep cultural understandings on teacher development has been identified in a Ghanaian context, as a factor in the way teachers tend to underestimate their own agency. It may well concern the continuing adverse influence of a colonising culture:

> 'I would suggest that teachers' disempowerment has deep cultural roots. It is embedded in an authoritarian system — whose colonial antecedents had the aim of discouraging critical analysis, training pupils for the lowest level of administration whilst instilling awe and obedience of their European masters — in which a transmission model of teaching is prevalent' (Pryor 1998, p.224).

There is support too on this point about the strong influence of culture resulting from the unremitting focus on the 'delivery' of centrally-mandated education policy in England and Wales. Without making the suggestion that there has been any comparable colonization at work here, this government action has, it seems, had a somewhat similar effect to the one observed by Pryor in reducing teachers' sense of efficacy and agency within their institutions. As Alexander (2000) concludes in his extensive comparison of schools in five countries:

'…the French teachers clearly felt more autonomous and more in control of their professional destinies than did their English colleagues, who… felt themselves to be directly and closely circumscribed by national government' (p.259).

In English schools, this constriction of teachers' agency was achieved through curriculum reform, but it was mediated in most schools by the development of a school culture defensive about comparison with other schools. In a recent high-profile collaborative action research project, it took substantial work alongside schools to reengage teachers' agency (Ainscow, Booth et al. 2006). This further emphasises the point: teacher development programmes which fail to take into account the influence of school culture on teachers' practice are unlikely to lead to greater inclusion.

To what extent do teachers have the space for change that is assumed in policy? To reiterate: it is well-attested that teachers' efficacy depends on an individual teacher's knowledge and skills; equally, it almost certainly also depends on deep and widely distributed cultural understanding about a teacher's role, agency and position, and this understanding may stem from, for example, systems of state power or from religious beliefs. But it is their institutional setting which, for most teachers, most influences their practice. It is evident from many studies of practice that teachers are deeply affected in their practice by the cultures, policies and practices that are normal and taken-for-granted in the setting in which they work (Booth, Ainscow et al. 2000; Howes, Davies et al. 2009). In a recent exploration of the value of collaborative action research for inclusion with secondary school teachers in England and Wales, we affirmed the significance of the institutional context in mediating the possibilities of teacher development:

> '… teacher development for inclusion should be emergent, embedding the notion of the teacher as learner, and learning as open-ended, creative, transformative of *the person in community*. It should include the teacher, so that the teacher also gains the benefit that inclusion offers pupils – to be known, understood as having a particular and special contribution to make, rather than to be narrowly judged, and judgemental' (Howes, Davies et al. 2009, p.51)

Institutional culture matters enormously. It is in their community that teachers make sense of what is expected of them, and of what they expect of themselves and their pupils. A series of day-to-day practices constitute this sense-making process. For example, teachers come to judge themselves and their practice in comparison with that of their colleagues. Groups of teachers develop typical approaches to problems and dilemmas, whether internal to the school or relating to external challenges such as making a living. Most come to adopt similar ways of thinking about pupils' abilities; they come to share assumptions about the nature of the curriculum, the purpose of the school, how to relate to parents, and their own role in all of those things. Much of this is done tacitly, rather than explicitly, in a web of understandings, routines and ways of doing things which constitutes the institutional culture. In many schools, the culture runs counter to moves towards inclusion.

Policy often embeds assumptions about institutional culture, and sometimes these are very simplistic, for example with regard to the ability of the headteacher or principal to implement a strategy; or about the interpretation which will be placed on a 'new' idea; or in terms of who is likely to benefit from a particular change. On such mistaken assumptions the policy may well founder. Effective programmes of teacher development need to take proper account of the realities of school culture.

What opportunities and facilitators of inclusion are available to teachers in a particular context which are overlooked in policy? Just as policy is bound to overlook possibly significant local constraints on teacher development, so it is almost certain that there are processes and approaches that would be unlikely to appear in Western or policy-based solutions, which become apparent during more careful study. One approach to systematically taking advantage of such possibilities is to proceed with decentralisation of teacher development, so that locally-relevant priorities could be pursued. This is one way of taking local contexts and local possibilities into account. A recent literature review which addresses teacher development calls for

> 'more school-based teacher education and professional development… There are signs that this is beginning to happen with ministries of education in Zambia, Kenya, Malawi and Ghana strengthening decentralised networks for supporting school-based teacher training (Mattson, 2006). For example, Ghana started a distance programme in 2005 that aims to give 24,000 untrained teachers the opportunity of studying a diploma in basic education' (Barrett, Ali et al. 2008).

Such programmes do not necessarily advantage locally-relevant knowledge and understanding; they may simply extend the reach of assumptions made in the ministry of education. From a policy perspective, it is important to find out how far such programmes lead to greater teacher agency.

An additional source of relevant knowledge is teacher biography. Another study in Ghana elicited elements of the autobiographies of student teachers, and the authors commented on how

> '…students wrote about [their] teachers' support and encouragement and how this enabled them overcome learning and social obstacles, leading to an expanded image of teacher role identity' (Akyeampong and Stephens 2000, p.20).

They give an example:

> 'This teacher was actually a role model in the community. He was very humane, patient and above all very approachable. In the classroom he kept his cool in the face of all provocation. I liked him so much because his life and deeds were worth emulating' (p.22).

The authors speculate, not unreasonably, that the experience of being taught by such impressive teachers really did have an effect on the way those trainee teachers thought about their own teaching. Role models can constitute an important motivation for behaviour. This clearly has messages which resonate through teacher development programmes, both in terms of content (for example, in providing teachers with opportunities for reflection on influential figures from their past) and in terms of the characteristics of teacher trainers and educators.

What decentralised approaches and an emphasis on biography have in common is that they are sources of previously-ignored knowledge and understanding for teacher development.

A case study from Bangadesh
Our first case study (by Shohel) takes up some of the themes that have been developed here, in describing and analysing an example of relatively successful inclusion in a network of schools. It concerns the under-rated significance of institutional context, even in the context of physical and logistic constraints which policy makers find hard to imagine. It exemplifies the possibility of dramatic success where few would have expected it, given favourable political connections, a clear objective, a contextually-appropriate educational strategy, and a commitment to teachers as well as young people.

Teacher learning in practice: In Bangladesh, as elsewhere, teachers are positioned in complex ways depending on local contrasts and distinctions. In a recent comparison of teaching, environment and ethos in formal and nonformal primary schools (Shohel and Howes 2008) the formal school was often seen to be a rather unfriendly institution, comparatively lacking in a sense of care and personal connection with students. Teachers, it seemed, were influenced by the character of their institution, and came to behave in ways that were typical of the majority, adopting a traditional and non-interactive pedagogical style in formal schools, while in nonformal schools they paid greater attention to the personal and to creating contexts for learning that were meaningful to children, though for example the use of games, songs and other activities. But the training of teachers typically follows policy in focusing on the characteristics and skills of the individual, and paying almost no attention to the institutional context in which teachers go on to work.

This case study demonstrates some of the features of a counter-example. Recent baseline fieldwork in Bangladesh as part of a large internationally-funded teacher development project has focused on a group of around fifty schools run by UCEP-Bangladesh, the Underprivileged Children's Educational Program (UCEPD, 2008). This program was started in 1972 from Dhaka University and now does significant work with a focus on children who are in work. Most teachers were untrained before starting with UCEP, and in all the training that they receive, the context of their work is a significant feature:

> 'We got basic teacher training when we joined UCEP. It's includes context of UCEP school as well as background of the students. Then we had subject based training and continuous professional training provided by UCEP training division' (Teacher, UCEP School).

The culture of the school is integral to the development of teachers, and is supported by a training operation which emphasizes that culture.

Space for teacher development In describing this case, it is important to note that these are not schools with enormous resources or other advantageous features, and in many senses quite the reverse. There are significant constraints on teachers in UCEP schools, but these are understood and accounted for in the policies which govern their work. Children from the age of 11 are eligible to attend if they have had no previous schooling and prepare them for technical schooling at age 14, through an accelerated primary school education program of three hours' schooling per day, completing the equivalent of two grades in a year in four core subjects. Most of the children work in or near the slum areas where they live, delivering goods, working as maids, in hotels and workshops.

In order to take account of children's home background and to build connections between parent and teacher for the child, each child who wants to enroll at a UCEP school is visited at home over a period of twelve months by their prospective teacher, who in this way establishes a relationship and is able to assess and build the child's motivation for schooling. Teachers continue home visits every three months to each of the 33 children in their class while they are at school, maintaining and building a connection with the family and ensuring that they as teachers have a detailed appreciation of the context of their children's lives, along the lines of the *Funds of Knowledge* approach (González, Moll et al. 2005). In particular teachers are clear that for most children if not all, the only place for learning is at school, and therefore space is made available for extra study outside the children's classroom hours. The only space available is the school corridor, but it is available. In addition, children can respond to the demands of their working life by attending an alternative shift at school where possible. These represent adaptations by teachers to challenging circumstances. Teachers' understanding is represented by the following teacher, speaking about her pupils:

> 'Actually they're deprived from many opportunities of life. If we can motivate them a bit, by saying that, your present situation could be change, you could go to a better position through education. I mean we've to create eagerness among them for learning' (Teacher, UCEP School).

Schools are typically very short of space, often with 700 children using the premises in three shifts over the school day. Whilst class size is small, classrooms are even smaller, and with desks in place there is little room for movement. To work in groups, children can at best turn their head, having no space to turn around on their benches. Classroom conditions are typically difficult – extremely hot, noisy, often in a building subject to traffic pollution.

In these circumstances, teachers organize pupils in three groups – slow, medium and fast learners – and seat them in a plan which mixes them up to facilitate peer tutoring. Active learning is an aspect of most lessons, and teachers are expected to make use of visual aids as part of the school policy. Particularly impressive to an observer used to formal school classrooms in Bangladesh is the relationship between pupils and teachers, which is generally one of respect and calm understanding. The overall feeling is that these children are committed to the purpose of their schooling, to learn and so to improve their position in terms of work; and that teachers are likewise committed.

Opportunities and facilitators of inclusion: What is very noticeable is that teachers in these schools demonstrate an inspiring level of dedication and commitment. They are all graduates and some have a teaching qualification, but for most of them UCEP is their first teaching post. The conditions in which they work are harsh; the demands on them heavy. They are a little better paid than teachers in government schools; and their class sizes are relatively small, as described above. But they teach three shifts of children a day, working hard and effectively with the children in their care in difficult conditions, and making regular home visits as described. Teachers average eight years' experience in UCEP schools, and so they have the right to talk of their feeling that they are doing something for the community – this is not social work done in a flush of youthful enthusiasm. It appears to be this feeling of commitment to the children they teach, coupled with the reliable and relatively generous pay, which keeps them committed to their work. In addition, school administrators maintain some social distance from the teachers (with separate rooms, for example) and actively supervise their work in class.

> 'Well, I joined UCEP because I like to work for the disadvantaged children. I personally believe that we've to do something for the underprivileged people of our society. I enjoy working here and feel good that I'm contributing to their lives' (Teacher, UCEP School).

What stands out about this case is that here is a tightly-structured educational organization tackling an endemic and challenging issue and appearing to do so with great success. Observations in five schools suggest that the features of this case are widely replicated. The organization is currently headed by a retired army officer, ensuring the strong political connections which are so necessary to the survival of institutions in Bangladesh. University staff continue to contribute as consultants; and there is a board of trustees, also politically well-connected.

It appears that this is an educational organization which manages to work to a challenging but achievable and socially-worthwhile goal, sustained by the creation of a culture of professional engagement among teachers. These schools are well-known in their local area, and respected for the work they do. Teachers learn from each other and take the best from the example that each are able to offer. Relatively good salaries enable them to stay and contribute for a long time. As a result, they make a considerable difference to the lives of many 'hard-to-reach' young people.

A case study from Lao PDR
Our second case study (by Peter Grimes) describes stages of development in the practices of a group of teachers in Lao PDR. The same framework is used to look at teacher learning in practice, the issue of space

for development in schools, and the resources overlooked in policy that contribute to development in practice.

The Lao PDR Inclusive Education Project ran from 1993 until May 2009 and was one of the longest running international projects of its kind (Grimes, Sayarath et al. 2009). Projects such as the Lao IE Project have had to undertake a journey which mirrors changes in international concepts of inclusion. Definitions of inclusion have historically tended to be associated with concepts of disability, and the initial development of the project reflected this, with a focus on enabling children with disabilities to attend mainstream schools (Holdsworth 2003). As the project developed however, the project concentrated on school development initiatives which would support the participation and achievement of all students (Grimes 2009). Ensuring that all students are fully participating and achieving in schools continues to be a significant challenge for countries such as Lao PDR. In many contexts, this has necessitated focusing on trying to change the dominant educational pedagogy from a teacher-centred to a child centred one. In trying to develop these changes in teacher practice and school organisation the IE Project has made certain assumptions about the way in which this can occur in a sustainable way.

Lao PDR is a one party state and defines itself as a democratic republic. This means that social organisation is strictly controlled with the population organised into villages, each of which are served by a Primary school. There is no parental choice in choosing a state funded school, although wealthier families living in the capital city can now choose to send their children to privately funded schools. The education system is grade based with a primary national curriculum which relies on set text books. Children begin Primary School in Grade 1, at the age of 7 and complete at the end of Grade 5, when they are 11. Approximately 10 – 15% of children attend pre-school and a similar number go on to secondary school (Ministry of Education 2008). The country currently has 867 Pre-Schools, 8,529 Primary Schools and 926 Secondary Schools. The teaching language medium in Lao is the Lao language, but because many children are from ethnic backgrounds which have a different first language, and this can be a barrier to their participation and achievement in school. Consequently, nationally, these children are less likely to attend school and, when they do attend, more likely to drop out of school. For example, in the academic year 2002-03, over 75% of primary aged Lao-Tai children attended school, compared to less than 50% of Khmer and Hmong-Iu Mien children and only 33% of Sino-Tibet children (SCN 2008).

This case study draws on data which emerged from a five-year study in Bhoung Phao Primary School. The school is a small one with approximately 136 students and 6 teachers, including the Principal. All of the children speak Laos as their first language. The school is situated in a rural area of the country but within driving distance of the capital city Vientiane. This means that there is a diverse range of families whose children attend the school. I was known to the school through my involvement as the IE Project external consultant / advisor. However, my purpose in gathering this data was for my own PhD research. I was particularly interested in the perspectives of the teachers in relation to their developing understanding of inclusive policy and practice. Because of this I adopted research methods rooted in ethnographic methodological approaches and data was gathered primarily through observation and ethnographic interviewing. It was important to explore and analyse the meanings the teachers applied to their own context (Heyl 2001). This has particular significance for the issues I wish to explore in this paper, since they are primarily concerned with culture and the way in which policy and definitions may be shaped by forces or levers (Ainscow 2005) outside the school context. Fundamental to my approach was that I visited and spent time in the school, talking to the teachers several times a year over the period of my research. My emphasis throughout this time, was that I was in the school to 'learn from them'. The theory behind this methodology was that the teachers, as participants and interviewees had an understanding of their context and developmental process which I needed to learn from and understand. Only through engagement with teachers over an extended period of time could I begin to develop insights into the ways in which they felt they had been, and could be, supported in developing their practice. In this way I wanted to develop a case study which could explore and problematise key issues (Stake 1995) related to the inclusive development of schools.

Over time my research in the school enabled me to develop a critical understanding of the limitations of western theories on the development of inclusive schools within the context a country such as Lao PDR.

Teacher learning in practice: According to the Ministry of Education in Lao PDR, the development of inclusive practice, in schools within the IE Project, was driven by a policy framework which had evolved as the project grew. Its two original aims were to support the inclusion in mainstream schools of
- Children with disabilities including those with mild and moderate disabilities
- Children failing in school whether because of learning problems or because of
  other factors (Holdsworth 2003)

It was acknowledged after the initial pilot phase of the IE Project that training was not necessarily the answer to developing teachers practice. There was clear evidence from the first two years that:

> '... inexperienced teachers had been asked to do things that were too difficult for them at that time and with their current level of skill. They needed less theory and 'training' and more 'support' in a situation where the difficulty they faced was controlled and would not overwhelm them.' (Holdsworth, 2003)

In response to this realisation, a support structure was developed with local advisors trained to work with schools. My research in Bhoung Phao Primary school began in 2004, when they had already been in the IE Project for 8 years. Between 1996 and 2009, there was only one change in staff, a new younger teacher who joined the school in 2005. Implicit in the policy framework being developed by the IE Project during this period was that, in order to develop more inclusive practice, there was a need for teachers to undergo a pedagogical shift – away from teacher centred practices, seen as old-fashioned and traditional, and towards child centred practices, identified as inclusive and child friendly. The training to support this shift in pedagogy was initially based around a five day course which was attended by all the teachers in Bhoung Phao Primary. The school would then be supported by 2 – 4 visits a year from the local advisor, also trained in the same way as the teachers but with more emphasis on 'management' of the IE Project in their district.

My initial observations of practice in the school in 2004, confirmed by interviews with the teachers, led me to realise that the teachers were still struggling to change their pedagogy. They were able to identify the changes in practice related to their training, such as use of resources and simple questioning techniques to check children's understanding. However, they were aware that more was expected from them than they were able to deliver. One example was in terms of group work, encouraged by the Ministry of Education in terms of discussion and engagement with lesson content. Advisors had been trained accordingly and were passing this new approach on to schools. The teachers in Bhoung Phao explained:

> 'We know it's a new idea and seems like it could be helpful because the children can talk to each other. But we don't really understand it properly'

When asked how the local pedagogical advisor was supporting them and what kind of advice they were receiving, the teachers said that they had simply been told to put the children into groups for 20 minutes in the middle of each lesson. Their impression was that the local advisor didn't really understand the principles of the approach either. This was confirmed when I later interviewed the local advisors.

Space for teacher development   Several years of field work in Lao enabled me to develop a deeper understanding of the cultural factors which impact upon the enactment of policy into practice. A key aspect of our argument in this paper is that teachers may not have the 'cultural space' that policy takes for granted, in which to develop their practice. Based on Stephens work (2007, p203 – 212) and my field experiences, I developed a mind map of the interlinking cultural factors and constraints / possible facilitators affecting teacher development, see figure 1. The factors which I identified as constraining the development of reflective practitioners included political, social and religious factors. So, for example, Buddhism in Lao PDR encourages believers to attain a state of no self, where the issues of day to life become irrelevant to the spiritual development of the individual. This may conflict with the development of a professional dialogue which aims to encourage an awareness of the 'self' in a school and social context. Additionally, Lao PDR has a social structure, headed by a one party government which is essentially centralist, authoritarian and hierarchical. This reflects both the communist political ideology of the government and deep rooted Confucian influences on Lao society (Stuart-Fox, 1997). The outcome of these factors is often deference to authority and also any forms of 'support' being interpreted as a covert form of monitoring and control.

Such constraints appeared to affect the development of reflective dialogue, with or between teachers. As a researcher, my initial experience of working with the teachers at Bhoung Phao Primary School was that whilst they were very welcoming of me and appeared enthusiastic about engaging with my research, I had to be wary about the reliability of their responses. For example, I gave all the teachers an initial exploratory questionnaire before I began researching in the school. My aim was to encourage the teachers to think about their own views of the school, what it was trying to achieve and how this related to the notion of being an 'Inclusive School'. I met with the teachers and talked through the questionnaire, explaining that I would like them to fill the questions in on their own – not to work together so that they could say what they really thought. I had discussed this with the Principal beforehand and she carefully re-enforced the message that the teachers needed to be honest and explain their own opinions. She also emphasised that they were not being judged but that I would use their questionnaires to help me in interviews with them about the school.

The outcome of this was a series of 5 identical questionnaires, with the same answers, word for word. Although I did not challenge the teachers on this, I did ask them if they had worked together or if they had been in the same room when they filled it in. 'No, we all filled it in at home, like you told us to' was the group response. An important lesson had been learnt and one which also provides a window through which to begin understanding the complexities involved in expecting teachers to think and speak more openly.
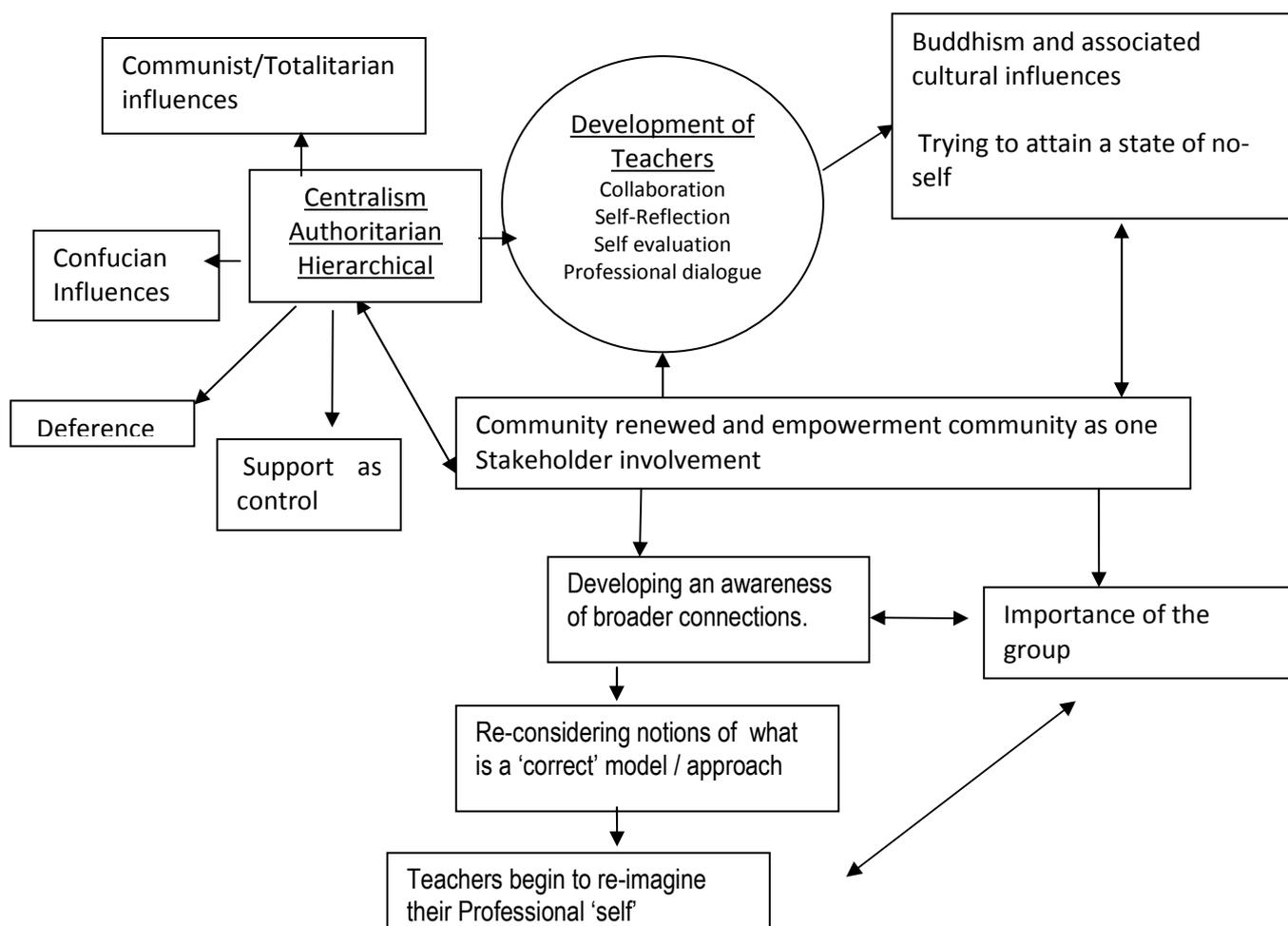
Figure 1 – Lao PDR: Communal   Individual : Constraints and Opportunities for the Professional Development of Teachers, after Stephens (2007, p.203-212)

I found, over time, that space for the development of professional dialogue was created, often because of unexpected factors. One such factor was collaboration with other schools through the 'Improving Quality Schools for All Project (IQSA)' aimed at developing more inclusive practice in the school, based on self evaluation processes and driven by a set of inclusive values in the form of indicators (Booth and Ainscow 2002; Grimes, Sayarath et al. 2007). Teachers appeared to be learning in this context because they were driving the agenda for change and development. Schools were supported by a team of advisors who were learning about the process in collaboration with the teachers. There was a sense of ownership among the teachers, and the concept of 'active learning' which they had been trying to develop in classrooms was being enacted in their workshop sessions and in their work in school. Self-evaluation and other mechanisms of accountability are part of a global agenda which has been pushed by external multilateral agencies , and so it is questionable how much ownership a country such as Lao PDR takes in such initiatives (King, 2007, p.377). However, my data indicates that such initiatives have *locally* created a greater space for teachers to question existing structures and systems. Through an increased emphasis on stakeholder / school community involvement, the teachers at Bhoung Phao were enabled to make broader connections between different educational initiatives. For example, in the IQSA Project they had to work in equal partnership with teachers from other schools, local and national advisors. In this process, the teachers began to experience a range of different viewpoints about what constituted an effective or inclusive school. My observations of them during this period suggested that these collaborative practices supported the development of their reflective practice. They started to ask critical questions about so called 'correct' or 'expected' models of policy and practice. In addition, they were working in partnership with advisors who were experiencing a

similar process. Practice could now be explored more safely and teachers' professional identity was increasingly in question, as they began to ask, for example, 'What do I believe about this?' What is my role in school?' and, perhaps of fundamental importance, 'How do I think my students learn best?'

Opportunities and facilitators of inclusion: Through the above mentioned IQSA Project, the teachers at Bhoung Phao became involved in visits to other schools where they could share and observe other teachers who were trying out new ideas. These could then be adapted and then 'tried out' back in school. As part of this project, schools visited each other locally and across the country. Learning during the visits was facilitated by national advisors and NGO project staff, who helped teachers to observe and discuss specific areas of pedagogy. Integral to this approach was a set of values which encouraged the teachers to be 'non judgemental'. Comparative education which focuses on good or bad practice is not necessarily the most useful in supporting teachers to change their own practice. Rather teachers need to be encouraged to focus on 'pedagogy as ideas which enable teaching in the classroom, formalise it as policy and locate it in culture (Alexander 2009)'. The teachers in Bhoung Phao identified an intensive week long trip to a Primary School in Bangkok, Thailand as being particularly influential in developing practice. This trip was facilitated by myself in the role of a critical friend with an aim of encouraging and supporting critical 'learning conversations' where the teachers could spend time on classrooms observing new approaches to pedagogy and then discuss and share their impressions with the rest of the staff afterwards. These conversations continued back in the school in Laos.

A significant piece of learning for me as a researcher trying to understand the way in which they were developing inclusive practices in this context was related to my insider-outsider role as a researcher. The role of the 'other', the sensitive outsider who can support and challenge as a critical friend, is well documented in 'western' literature on the development of inclusive schools (Booth and Ainscow 2002; MacBeath 2006; Howes, Davies et al. 2009). It has also been noted that in research projects of this kind, where a western outsider enters a culturally different context, it is often challenging for the researcher to 'access' the research problem and that 'insider credibility' can help to overcome this (Chawla-Duggan 2007). The teachers at Bhoung Phao identify the significance of their learning conversations with other teachers and myself as their critical friend as being crucial to their changes in practice. My approach built on Hanko's work in asking teachers a series of 'answerable questions' (Hanko; 1999) which focused them on different areas of practice, encouraging professional reflection and analysis without providing negative or positive judgements. As researcher I began to identify through my longitudinal involvement with the school the importance of my 'insider role' – I was able to explore issues at a deeper level the longer I worked with them because I came to be trusted, increasingly culturally sensitive over time and was also familiar professionally with their learning journey through my involvement as a consultant in the major projects which had impacted on the school. My approach to interviewing and also my work as a researcher / consultant with the teachers has been rooted in a methodology based on 'ethnographic interviewing', and in person-centred approaches to individual development (Rodgers 1969, 1983), acknowledging that individuals have different learning needs and pathways to follow.

Agents located in an influential institutional context

Peter's work in Bhoung Phao is an example of how a person in a training capacity can put into practice an approach which leads teachers to see themselves as agents, within the specific constraints and opportunities of their institutional context. There is evidence in the account of teachers shifting their position from that of recipient of training towards active participation in a partnership of exploration, focusing increasingly not on 'being trained' but on taking opportunities to work together on key questions such as 'how do I think my students learn best?'. The processes that contribute to that change include the opportunity to meet and compare ideas and contexts with other teachers, and facilitated opportunities to reflect with someone with extensive experience of inclusion but no experience of teaching in the conditions in which they themselves worked. Both processes emphasised the possibility of possibilities – the sense that things did not have to stay the same but that they themselves could take ownership of elements of their context, with an ever clearer purpose of engaging children more effectively as learners.

Shohel's study demonstrates that teachers' ownership and commitment to a group of young people, when situated in an institutional context which supports and encourages such commitment, can make a difference at a system-wide level to the life chances and outcomes for young people. 'Training' here is largely subsumed into participation in an institutional culture which deliberately looks for and recognises possibilities for education even in a very constrained context. Among the apparently remarkable features of this case is the sense of reinforcement between individual teachers' agency, the espoused goals of the NGO and the culture of the institutions involved.

Dewey's (1938/1997) concept of an educational experience is one that leads the learner to engage in further learning. Agency – taken as the sense of being able to affect what goes on in a particular context – is very akin to the product of this simple but powerful idea. Training is often far from educational, on that basis – it traps teachers into feeling inadequate or unable to change anything, given the challenges of their context, or disinterested in what to them remain irrelevant and only partially understood ideas.

The cases studied here, and the literature with which we engaged, suggest that we need to continue to be cautious about the training of teachers, in relation to inclusion. Of course, even forms of engagement in which context should be fundamental, such as action research, can be turned into context-free training, without such caution. Aiming for characteristics of ownership, collaboration and attention to empirical evidence in action research can serve to mitigate this possibility (Howes, Davies et al. 2009).

- Forms of training engagement in which teachers gain confidence and a sense of agency in context should be promoted and encouraged
- Policy relating to teacher development should be evaluated in terms of how far it will facilitate teachers to become effective agents in their institutional contexts

Comments and suggestions on this paper are welcome and should be addressed to Andy Howes at andrew.howes@manchester.ac.uk

References

Ainscow, M. (2005). "Developing inclusive education systems: what are the levers for change?" Journal of Educational Change **6**(2): 109-124.

Ainscow, M., T. Booth, A. Dyson, A. Howes, F. Gallannaugh, R. Smith, P. Farrell and J. Frankham (2006). Improving Schools, Developing Inclusion. London, Routledge.

Akyeampong, K. and D. Stephens (2000). "On the Threshold": the Identity of Student Teachers in Ghana. Brighton, Centre for International Education, University of Sussex Institute of Education.

Alexander, R. (2000). Culture and Pedagogy: International Comparisons in Primary Education. Oxford Blackwell.

Alexander, R. (2009). Pedagogy, culture and the power of comparison. Educational Theories, Cultures and Learning. A critical perspective. H. Daniels, H. Lauder and J. Porter. Abingdon, Routledge**:** 10-27.

Barrett, A. M., S. Ali, J. Clegg, J. E. Hinostroza, J. Lowe, J. Nikel, M. Novelli, G. Oduro, M. Pillay, L. Tikly and G. Yu (2008). Working Paper No. 5: Initiatives to Improve the Quality of Teaching and Learning: a review of recent literature. Background Paper for the Global Monitoring Report 2008. Bristol, EdQual RPC, University of Bristol.

Booth, T. and M. Ainscow (2002). Index For Inclusion, Centre for Studies in Inclusive Education.

Booth, T. and M. Ainscow (2002). Index for Inclusion: Developing learning and participation in schools. Bristol, Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education.

Booth, T., M. Ainscow, K. Black-Hawkind, M. Vaughan and L. Shaw (2000). Index for Inclusion: Developing learning and participation in schools. Bristol, Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education.

Chawla-Duggan, R. (2007). "Breaking out, breaking through: accessing knowledge in a non-western overseas educational setting - methodological issues for an outsider." Compare **37**(2): 185-200.

Dewey, J. (1938/1997). Experience and education. London, Macmillan.

Dyer, C., A. Choksi, V. Awasty, U. Iyer, R. Moyade, N. Nigam, N. Purohit, S. Shah and S. Sheth (2004). "Knowledge for teacher development in India: the importance of [`]local knowledge' for in-service education." International Journal of Educational Development **24**(1): 39-52.

González, N., L. C. Moll and C. Amanti (2005). Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Households, Communities, and Classrooms, Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc Inc.

Grimes, P. (2009). A Quality Education For All: The History of the Lao PDR Inclusive Education Project 1993 – 2009. Vientiane, Save the Children

Grimes, P., K. Sayarath and S. Outhaithany (2007). The Development of the Lao PDR School Self Evaluation Tool. International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement, Portoroz, Slovakia, ICSEI.

Grimes, P., K. Sayarath and S. Outhaithany (2009). Improving the Quality of Schools for All: Researching the Impact of The Lao PDR Inclusive Education Project 1993 – 2008. International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement Vancouver, Canada, ICSEI.

Hanko;, G. (1999). Increasing Competence through Collaborative Problem Solving. London, David Fulton Publishers.

Hargreaves, A. and M. Fullan (1992). Understanding Teacher Development. . New York, Cassell.

Heyl, B. (2001). Ethnographic Interviewing. Handbook of Ethnography. P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont and J. Lofland. London, Sage**:** 368-83.

Holdsworth, J. (2003). Seeking A Fine Balance: Lessons from Inclusive Education in Lao PDR. Vientiane, Save the Children UK.

Howes, A., S. Davies and S. Fox (2009). Improving the context for Inclusion through collaborative action research. London, Routledge.

Howes, A. J., S. M. B. Davies and S. Fox (2009). Improving the Context for Inclusion: Personalising teacher development through collaborative action research. London, Routledge.

MacBeath, J. (2006). School Inspection and Self-evaluation: working with the New Relationship London, RoutledgeFalmer.

Marton, F. and R. Säljö (1976). "On Qualitative Differences in Learning - 2: Outcome as a function of the learner's conception of the task." British Journal of Educational Psychology **46**: 115-27

Ministry of Education (2008). Education For All Mid Decade Assessment. Lao PDR**:** 166.

Pryor, J. (1998). "Action research in West African schools: problems and prospects." International Journal of Educational Development **18**(3): 219-228.

Rodgers, C. (1969, 1983). Freedom to Learn. Columbus, Ohio, Merrill Publishing Co.

SCN, (2008). Save the Children Norway in Lao PDR Diary 2009. Vientiane, Save the Children Norway in Lao PDR.

Shohel, M. M. C. and A. Howes (2008). "Informality of teaching and learning in nonformal schools: sociocultural processes as mesosystems of student development." Education 3-13 **36**(3): 293-309.

Stake, R. E. (1995). The Art of Case Study Research. London, Sage.

Stephens, D. (2007). Culture in Education and Development. Oxford, Symposium Books.

Stuart-Fox, M. (1997). A History of Laos. Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press.

UCEPD. (2008). "Underprivileged Children's Educational Programs Bangladesh: Transforming Underprivileged Children into Productive Human Resource." Retrieved August 2009, 2009.