Engaged teachers, engaged pupils? Learning from cross-case analysis of secondary school action research work on inclusion

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Abstract
Meaningful inclusion is a particularly challenging aim in secondary schools. There are many secondary school pupils who see much of their schooling as irrelevant, and feel themselves to be inadequate at school. The concept of inclusion as used in this paper involves groups of teachers working on how their subjects and lessons are organised in relation to this issue. The project reported on, one of the TLRP Welsh extension projects, is part of a broader inclusion project, where inclusion involves:

- asking questions about how schools adapt to and work effectively with the diversity of their student populations;
- valuing differences rather than seeking to diminish them;
- paying more attention to the understandings that young people have of school, rather than only seeking to enlist more young people in the schooling project.

Teachers’ active engagement is seen to be central to achieving greater inclusion; without such participation the dominance of standards-oriented approaches mitigates against the possibilities of inclusive schooling at every turn. But that engagement takes many forms, and aligns in various ways with individual teachers’ particular and personal sense of priorities.

How do teachers develop? The literature reveals a great diversity of approaches to professional development by teachers and schools. We are interested in processes that can bring about change in the school as a whole, centred on teacher development, involving teachers more fully than is the case in top-down initiatives. We describe in this paper the consequences of taking one element of inclusion – pupil engagement with learning – and inviting teachers to identify an issue facing them relating to this concept, and to make that the focus of their action research. The concept of engagement is chosen as one that has meaning to teachers, inviting them to consider the classroom directly, rather than leaving the classroom out of the picture (which has been the ironic consequence of many inclusion projects).

Our adoption of action research is based on our understanding of the centrality of three features of change that enable shifts in teachers deeply-held assumptions about pupils, their colleagues and themselves:

- **Ownership** - teacher identification and ownership of an issue is necessary if teachers are to engage in an open-ended way, and to do so in the face of obvious and rational professional risks.
- **Collaboration** between teachers is necessary if they are to tackle that issue in the context of their working life in school, making use of the resources they have available, and become more fully engaged in working on pupil engagement
- **Empirical attention** - systematic attention to consequences of actions is necessary if teachers are to refine and develop their interpretive repertoires

We regard our theory of change as falsifiable and set out to put it in harm’s way in the project, in order to test it. We do so in a range of schools, in two different national systems, and twice in each school – and we look to learn from and understand cases where teachers do not get engaged, just as much as where they do. Within the cases, we use a range of measures including repeated pupil questionnaires about their perspective on inclusion and participation in particular lessons, alongside observation and interviews with a range of pupils and staff. Activity theory is used as a way of making sense of the cases and themes that arise – it raises important questions about the relationship between individual and shared goals, cultures and working practices of communities (such as groups of teachers), and most importantly the significance of mediating tools in a change process.
Introduction
All teachers are engaged in complex, socio-culturally mediated activity (Roth and Lee 2007). Many of those teachers are committed social actors, who work hard to achieve the best for their students and their school, according to local and national standards and evaluative frameworks (Paris and Combs 2006). In the ongoing process of learning and take up new practices as part of that activity, they develop new cognitive resources, new perspectives, and new forms of participation and engagement. These changes present opportunities and challenges for other colleagues and aspects of organisation within the school. But sometimes the challenges overwhelm the changes, which fizzle out. So what is it that leads teachers to a commitment to principled change in their classrooms, and in particular, what would facilitate more teachers in becoming committed to a more inclusive approach? What resources could be used to set up processes of change in schools that would significantly shift more teachers onto trajectories as inclusive practitioners?

Teaching is a complex activity, socio-culturally mediated activity. Consider two 14-year old pupils in a secondary school, discussing their engagement in lessons. They are unenthusiastic about a reward system, recently introduced:

Researcher: What makes you work?
Male pupil: What interests me, basically.
Researcher: Can a teacher turn you around, and capture your interest?
Male pupil: Yeah, some can make it more interesting. Some just bore you, but with some you do stuff.
Female pupil: For me it’s mostly my parents. They’ve always given that message, that they want me to do well, I’d better not fail, and all that.

These pupils do not depend on rewards to influence their engagement. The first evaluates his teachers, according to the extent to which they can interest him in, for example, ‘doing stuff’. The second comes from her home with a strong self-evaluative framework; again, classroom rewards are relatively irrelevant. In a further discussion at another school, pupils talk about reading out loud during a language lesson:

Researcher: Are you ok with that, reading to him? Do you find it embarrassing?
Pupil1: I find it embarrassing because if you’re stuck on a word and you can’t say it then…
Pupil2: It’s even more embarrassing for me because I don’t have a clue.
Pupil3: Yeah but when I put my hand up everybody calls me a swot. And I say “how can I be if I’m in like one of the bottom sets”. But it still doesn’t do anything about it.
Researcher: Do they call you a swot because you put your hand up all the time because you don’t understand?
Pupil3: Yeah.
Interviewer 1: Is that right?
Pupil 3: Yeah but I’m putting my hand up for “sir, how do you…” And they call me a swot just because I’ve got my hand up. I don’t get it though.
Researcher: Do you know what, you’re probably asking what everybody else is thinking but nobody will put their hand up. Do you know what I mean?
Pupils1+3: Yeah.

Between them, these two discussions provide an indication of three important factors that influence pupil engagement in lessons: their interest in the activity, their relationships with peers, and the perceived consequences, for example at home, of success or failure in school. According to the principles of inclusion, translated somewhat half-heartedly (Armstrong 2003) into a controversial policy in many countries (Booth and Ainscow 1998), the teacher’s role is to create learning situations whereby all children and young people are engaged in learning. But in secondary schools in particular, as in the school which these students attend, inclusion is widely regarded as a major challenge. There are many secondary school pupils who regard much of their schooling as irrelevant, or feel themselves to be inadequate at school. Many authors (Armstrong and Moore 2004; Ainscow, Booth et al. 2006) see inclusion in socially diverse and culturally heterogeneous contexts as involving teachers in a critical process of, eg. asking questions about how schools adapt to and work effectively with the diversity of their student populations; valuing differences rather than seeking to diminish them; paying more attention to the understandings that young people have of school, rather than only seeking to enlist more young people in the schooling project as it is currently organised.

However, these are elements of a form of activity in schooling which are very rarely realised. Although the principle of inclusion gains wide rhetorical support, many secondary school teachers remain unconvinced by the workability of these
practices of inclusion given the number and diversity of pupils that they work with (Dyson, Howes et al. 2002). Yet teachers’ active engagement is seen to be central to achieving greater inclusion; without such participation the dominance of standards-oriented approaches mitigates against the possibilities of inclusive schooling at every turn. Inclusion is not a quick fix that can be bolted on, but requires ongoing dialogue between teachers and learners. It requires teachers’ active engagement, because inclusion and exclusion are processes that happen minute by minute and lesson by lesson (Benjamin et al, 2003). In this sense, more effective inclusion is dependent on a substantial shift in the activity of many teachers.

What seems to be missing in most descriptions of the development of inclusion is any sense of a process through which teachers can be drawn into and experiment with different forms of activity along these lines. This paper reports on a study of how, and how far, the activity of collaborative action research can play such a role in engaging teachers further into the challenge of engaging their pupils in learning.

1. A brief literature review on teacher development

Teachers, pupils and schooling are not accidental elements in our society – their form and role in contemporary society is the product of a dynamic and ongoing socio-historical process:

‘Because human labor inevitably entails collective efforts of people acting together, its development gives rise to increasingly complex social exchanges among people, and to individual mechanisms allowing for these exchanges to be carried out…the social relations among people become institutionalized in relatively stable forms ranging from the rules of conduct and cognition, such as rituals and morale, to collective forms of life such as state, religion, schooling, and family, that is, the society itself’ (Stetsenko 2005), p.73).

The ongoing development of schools and of the role of teachers and pupils is, in this view, not a matter merely of technical or professional change, but one of many processes that is influenced by (and equally, can influence) the collective development of human activity. The principle of inclusion, from such a perspective, is about finding ways to ameliorate the injustices associated with the differential valuing of people differently positioned in this activity, for whatever reasons. It has implications for the formation of a more just society, which is why it is viewed by many as a human rights issue (UNESCO 1994). More positively, it is about influencing human activity ….

The literature reveals a great diversity of approaches to professional development by teachers and schools (Hextall, Gewirtz et al. 2007). Elliott (1994) places a high value on teachers’ construction of practical knowledge constructed through enquiry and discourse. Osborn (2006) reviewing changing teacher roles in various European countries over the past ten years notes a shift in the UK towards a ‘contractual performance model’ with associated change in the concept of teacher professionalism. We have added a sketch of the associated shift in the notion of teacher development.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘Professional covenant model’</th>
<th>‘Contractual performance model’</th>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher professionalism</td>
<td>Professional covenant based on trust, and commitment to education as a form of personal development. Confidence, sense of fulfilment and spontaneity in teaching.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher development</td>
<td>Professionalism as the fulfilment of a contract to deliver education, which is seen as a commodity for individuals and a national necessity for economic growth. Less confidence, fulfilment and spontaneity in teaching.</td>
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Growth of understanding, role, and judgement; an emergent and expansive learning process. (Furlong 2000) Meeting progressively more challenging standards through the demonstration of competence, across a range of pre-specified themes.

Adapted from Osborn (2006).

We are interested in processes that can bring about change in the school as a whole, centred on teacher development, involving teachers more fully than is the case in top-down initiatives. What conditions make teachers more willing to engage in inclusive practice? There is some evidence that teachers themselves value processes of development which they can see as impacting directly on their work in the classroom; they reject processes which they see as failing to relate to their classroom work in any meaningful way (Yamagata-Lynch and Haudenschild 2006). We describe in this paper the consequences of taking one element of inclusion – pupil engagement with learning – and inviting teachers to identify an issue facing them relating to this concept, and to make that the focus of an action research process. The
concept of engagement is chosen as one that has meaning to teachers, inviting them to consider the classroom directly, rather than leaving the classroom out of the picture (which has been the ironic consequence of many inclusion projects). The methodological choice of action research is explained in the next section.

Section 2: Stating and explaining our theory of change

In our Teaching and Learning Research Programme Project ‘Prosiect Dysgu Cydradd’ (Facilitating Teacher Engagement in More Inclusive Practice), we worked with seven secondary comprehensive schools (five in Wales and two in England) on the development of inclusive practice using action research. In each school, a group of teachers (usually an existing group, such as a department or year group) worked together to develop a piece of action research to enhance pupils’ attitude to and engagement with learning. Educational psychologists (EPs) facilitated the process by regular meetings with the teacher group. We as researchers followed what the teachers, school leaders and EPs did in order to understand the challenges of the process in each school. To do this we generated evidence in a number of different ways. Questionnaires were developed to investigate teacher, pupil and EP opinions before and after the process; focus group discussions were held with teachers and pupils to further develop an understanding of their perspectives; head teachers were interviewed at the beginning and the end of the project; and EPs contributed their views about the development of the process in regular project meetings.

The project took place in two successive phases (June 2005-March 2006 and June 2006-March 2007) so that in Phase II we could explore ways of responding to challenges identified in Phase I. Different groups of teachers were involved in Phase II.

Our adoption of action research is based on our understanding of the centrality of three features of change that facilitate shifts in teachers’ deeply-held assumptions about pupils, their colleagues and themselves:

- **Ownership** - teacher identification and ownership of an issue is necessary if teachers are to engage in an open-ended way, and to do so in the face of obvious and rational professional risks.
- **Collaboration** between teachers is hugely valuable because it provides mutual support and sharing of intellectual and material resources as well as providing a powerful social milieu for the testing and implementing of new ideas and practices
- **Empirical attention and reflection** - systematic attention to, and reflections about, the consequences of actions is necessary if teachers are to refine and develop their interpretive repertoires

The development of an action research project can usefully be seen as the development of a new form of collaborative activity involving teachers, educational psychologists, university staff and pupils. In this paper, we use the activity theory framework to explore our theory of change. Activity theory is used as a way of making sense of the cases and themes that arise in this process – it raises important questions about the relationship between individual and shared goals, cultures and working practices of communities (such as groups of teachers), and most importantly the significance of mediating tools in a change process. (Engestrom 1993) outlines the key elements of socially-mediated learning activity that derive from Vygotsky:

> ... subject refers to the individual or subgroup whose agency is chosen as the point of view. ... the object refers to the "raw material" or problem space at which the activity is directed and which is molded or transformed into outcomes with the help of physical and symbolic, external and internal tools (mediating instruments and signs). (ibid. p.67)

Here we focus on teachers as the subject, the agent of activity. The object of the activity, or ‘the problem space’ as Engestrom refers to it, was specified in broad terms by the project as ‘pupil engagement in learning’. A more detailed definition of the object was the business of the teachers in dialogue with the educational psychologist. For example early in the process teacher focus groups were encouraged to:

> ‘Begin by thinking of a pupil or group of pupils that you teach, who you consider to be relatively disengaged from learning.

Staff responded to this in various ways, but were often able to articulate in quite a detailed way the behaviours that caused them concern. This example is from one teacher:
"They [the pupils] would just like to be, when you turn your back, they would like to be doing something else or would like to be seen to be doing something else... But not in any drastically overt negative way, but consistent. Another group would be... would slouch like that on the chair and really the body language would be so 'I don't want to do this', I am, you know, your maybe making me do this, but I'm not going to participate. So that's their behaviour... Then there's a couple that I've thought were fine, but when I've got the results of the questionnaires, one in particular, I was quite surprised because he presents motivated, engaged, and wanting to do things. But, he didn't actually think he could pass and he, that was a surprise to me."

This work by the group of co-constructing a shared object of activity can be seen as critical to the development of ownership. This means that the extent to which the process of engaging in action research became part of the larger project of engaging in more inclusive practice can be partially assessed in terms of the way in which the object of activity changed, and with it the subject position of the teachers, through the action research process. The transformation of the object can indicate a more inclusive orientation to teachers' practice; as where one group of teachers originally defined the object of their activity as underachieving girls (a definition inflected with deficit models of those girls' subculture and home background), and subsequently redefined the object in terms of failing effectively to engage a group of girls in learning.

Whilst teachers (with the involvement of the school's educational psychologist) were deciding on an issue on which to focus, they were also constructing and shaping the collaboration central to the process. As we mentioned, the collaborative group was in nearly all cases based on a department or other existing group, but in only a couple of cases were all the staff in that department eventually included in the activity. Socio-cultural theory is a useful conceptual framework in which to understand the nature of collaboration in object-oriented activity, particularly through the notion of the dialectical relationship between the collaborating individual and the group. As an individual teacher engages (or does not engage) in thinking or questioning in and for the group, for example, so the relationships between that teacher and others shift in respect of the object of the activity.

The main tools available to teachers in this action research process gave material substance to the notion of empirical attention and reflection, and in particular, attending to and reflecting on the consequences for pupils of developments in classroom activity. Tools which help staff to know about their pupils are seen to be very significant. So for example, teachers used instruments such as pupil questionnaires, transcripts of pupil focus groups and other sources of empirical evidence to focus their critical conversations. At this stage in most projects, pupils were seen less as co-subjects of the activity, and more as potential beneficiaries of the outcomes of that activity. This positioning of pupils is another potential indicator of change within the project, as we shall see later.

In summary then, we see how the mediation of a subject or subject's activity, by the use of social tools to achieve a learning outcome are key constructs that can help us understand better the development of ownership, collaboration, empirical attention and reflection.

![Figure 1: The mediation of activity in action research](image)

Engestrom (1993) in extending Vygotsky's model to explain the learning of social groups, identifies a number of additional elements that underpin what he now calls an 'activity system':

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The community comprises multiple individuals and/or subgroups who share the same general object. The division of labor refers to both the horizontal division of tasks between the members of the community and to the vertical division of power and status... the rules refer to the explicit and implicit regulations, norms and conventions that constrain actions and interactions within the activity system. (Engestrom 1993, p. 67)

These elements – community, rules and division of labour - and how they are interpreted in practice also impact on the realisation of the three central features that we have identified.

**Figure 2: Action research activity triangle.**

The social learning that we have studied in the project took place in the socially complex environment of a collaborative group, which in turn nested within the successive social-cultural layers of school, local education authority and national education context. Understanding the way the social / collaborative learning environment - community, rules and division of labour – acts for or against this type of project is a first step to promoting the conditions for success in terms of ownership, collaboration and empirical attention. In the next three sections we enlarge on and develop this understanding by interrogating case study examples in the light of activity theory.

**Critical processes1: The collaborative construction of ‘ownership’**

Ownership of a process can be characterised by in an individual by feelings of identification with the process (determined by the relevance and importance for the teacher), of personal effectiveness, power and control over the process, and responsibility for the process. In a group activity, activity can be limited to the individual commitments of group members. However, shared collective ownership is likely to be much more powerful in achieving the group’s goals. Shared ownership strengthens perceptions of relevance through peer validation, and gives support through shared responsibility; it increases the significance of the object of that particular activity among the many others that claim the attention of individuals. But collective agency also involves relinquishing some control to others, which may reduce feelings of ownership. A case study illustrates some of these tensions:
Teacher A was part of a large group of seven language teachers. Teacher engagement varied greatly within the group, but Teacher A was enthusiastic and came up with many of the ideas that the group discussed. As time went on the group, although it talked around a lot of issues, it did not seem to be narrowing its focus towards a joint project that they could all take forward. In desperation the facilitator seized on a suggestion for action, that Teacher A had suggested and which seemed to have the support of the group.

Teacher A, although not the designated group leader took the initiative in taking this forward, including developing the evaluation tools for the group. One or two of the other group members helped to develop ideas for how to develop the new teaching approach. Other group members were much more passive, and got actively involved only when it came to implementation.

As time went on Teacher A's enthusiasm reduced, at least in part it was observed because others were not sharing the ownership and responsibility. All the group went on to use the new approach and found it relevant and useful. Teacher A however became a much less active and engaged member of the group as time went on.

This tension, between individual power and group power is inherent in collective enterprises but if collective activity is co-owned from the outset then the synthesis can be a powerful vehicle for collaborative teacher activity. The essence of shared ownership is a co-construction of the object of teacher activity. For ‘the project’ the process involved the sharing of interpretations of a problem, and consideration of how that problem might be addressed. We gave teachers a steer towards a general class of object, ‘improving pupils’ engagement in learning’. It was for those teachers to decide what that would mean in their project. In the data we can see whether and how that general object related to the object that the teachers actually worked on, and how different teachers’ individual goals related to that object. As teachers defined their goal, so they defined themselves in relation to that goal. The following is an extract from another teacher focus group:

Teacher C: Teacher B made the point let’s target a group who actually aren’t being targeted through any of the systems or innovations that we’ve got in the school…
EP: So the group being then…?
Teacher C: Disaffected year 8 girls
Teacher B: it’s not an option year in the school it’s not the first year in the school…. lethargy sets in
Teacher D: it’s that in between echoes in the background about lethargy
EP: what sort of things are they doing?
Teacher B: They don’t do anything (she repeats) They don’t do anything really
Teacher D: Our data now informs us quite well where they should fall … for them we can identify their potential and their predicted grades….simply not attaining… not working hard… that data collection … try hard to identify….maybe more obvious behaviours
Teacher C: There into peer pressure a lot of falling in and out of friendship groups name calling and outside influences, falling out with each other. Relationships with other girls in the class is all being
Teacher B: I think looking back on it that the girls we’ve actually chosen they seem to have levelled out their ability amongst themselves. There are four of them in each class and they generally tend to sit together. They have similar behaviour, attention and everything. Obviously they are going to be differentiated in their learning, they are going to have different abilities and be different to each other, but they don’t; they all do the same level of work, they just all do the same, they all basically go to the baseline of who is the weakest in the group a lot. They don’t try, they don’t push themselves to the limit, they’ll do the minimum they need to and therefore they are dragged down to the baseline of the group of girls. There’s also the element of I don’t want to be better than her I don’t want to show off. There’s a bit of that isn’t there? its embarrassing to do well. Isn’t that true?
Teacher C: yeah yeah they don’t like being seen by the others to have achieved in anything do they (No , (All basically go for baseline standard – they don’t try – mustn’t do better than each other. They level No)
Teacher B: There’s probably a few of them could do a lot better than they are but they don’t out and ‘all do the same’ – this is attributed to their need to not be seen as better anybody as anyone else. Embarrassing.)
EP: Is it more a thing for them than other kids?
Teacher C: Yes, yes – because I think gifted girls get a lot of attention from gifted and talented thing they go on summer school between year 7 and 8 between 6s and 7 they have the opportunity to go to …. And they’re doing the same peer pressure thing but they obviously turn it on its head so it becomes a competitive thing… and they have less of an interest for boys I think…
Teacher B: And these girls as well are less enthusiastic, they’re not inclined to want to do their very best, they want to see what they can get away with.
This is an example of the start of what was an effective co-construction of the object by the collaborating group. It could be analysed linguistically to highlight the level of cohesion, whereby each teacher references and builds on what his or her colleagues have said. It is also clear that the EP is playing a supportive role in this process, by asking the questions which allow the teachers to continue to elaborate their object together. Understanding the EP role in this way is a helpful development to the notion of the ‘critical friend’ for example.

Beginning the process of a collaborative project by developing a shared objective establishes the experience of collective agency from the outset. Having agency, and perceiving ones-self as having agency is an essential aspect of ownership. However, the conditions for such development are not always met. The early experiences of the project in many schools created conflicted feelings for many teachers about who should, or did, have control of the group and its activities. These feeling may have resulted, at least in some part, from more traditional experiences of ‘expert led’ training events. There were some feelings of discomfort and an expectation that the group facilitator (the educational psychologist) would direct the group’s activities:

**Teacher:** We would have liked our educational psychologist to have given more guidance and leadership… and suggested new ideas for us to implement instead of us having to come up with the ideas.

This can be contrasted with the view of the educational psychologist, who was seeking to develop to develop a facilitating role:

**Educational Psychologist:** I felt that my role was to talk about the process, what action research is, to be encouraging to staff, and to be a sounding board when needed.

Therefore it is important that there is a clear understanding of roles (division of labour) between the group members at the outset. The horizontal division of tasks between co-workers which is typical of collaborative action research, may be a less familiar experience for teachers whose professional lives seem to be increasingly managed by ‘top–down’ directives which could be described as a vertical division of power. We found resolving these issues by clearly demonstrating guidance by facilitation, rather than taking control, was fundamental to the development of collaborative ownership.

A prevailing school culture that tends to view teachers as fulfilling a technical contract (Osborn, 2006) can lead to a loss of professional confidence and initiative. This is evident in the management of many schools, creating teachers who feel disempowered and de-professionalised. These anxieties were evident in the views of some teachers participating in the project. In this climate teachers can find it challenging to take control and ownership of a process of change, even in their own classroom. One of the headteachers reflected on what she had learnt from the project in the following terms:

“We’re very used in education, aren’t we, to telling people “If you’ve got a problem, or if this is a classroom issue, or how can you improve your results”. Then there are lots of people out there who will tell you “Do this, do that”. I think that this new way of thinking is that we have got to come up with the answers for ourselves. It’s a bit like a coaching model, isn’t it? In that you’re empowering the teachers to be self-reflective and to actually come up with the answers for their own pupils and our own teaching…..

I feel it’s important to be ready to take on new approaches, and the element of experiment - of not quite knowing where it is going, or what will come out of it, is a good, valid experience in itself. I have become aware that the process is very important, that it is quite complex, but if you allow it, if you trust in it, then you will actually see that there will be a difference, and perhaps a difference in approach, that will be longer lasting than some ‘quick-fix Inset’ that you think might answer some of your issues”.

Ownership is a necessary feature of the process if teachers are to engage in challenging their own thinking and practices. In a collaborative group, discussion of an issue or problem can lead to the co-construction of an object which is meaningful and relevant and which all members can ‘own’. Care must be taken to divide labour in a way that does not disempower participants; in addition, the rules governing behaviour in some schools can prevent teachers feeling that they can be effective change agents. These influences are illustrated in Figure 3.
Figure 3: Key elements contributing to the development of ‘ownership’ of the process

Critical processes 2: The object-related development of ‘collaboration’

Another way of looking at the process is through a focus on collaboration, conceptualised in terms of the activity system as the dialectical relationship between individual teachers and the group of teachers involved, as they work on the object of their activity. Collaboration is not only about the social process of working together – it is also about the shared process of conceptualising how to address the object of their activity. So collaboration and ownership are intensely intertwined – studying collaboration is another way of looking at the process already described in terms of ownership of an issue.

What is useful is to track collaboration as a process of negotiation between participating individuals and the group. Into this relationship come many existing assumptions and interpretations of others, respect or lack of it for their professional judgement and experience, and the distribution of power, loyalties, friendship, and shared experience which link and/or separate them. Here we track the ebb and flow of ideas, and how that happens in the social process (Barab, Hay et al. 2001; Yamagata-Lynch and Haudenschild 2006).

In Hightown School, for example, there had been an initial in-depth discussion in the teacher focus group about behaviour, standards and pupil motivation for learning and considerable enthusiasm was expressed for the project. However, the group failed to agree on a focus. With the head of science acting as coordinator and group leader, it proved impossible for the EP to move the group forward, to his considerable frustration. Key to understanding why the project failed to ‘get off the ground’ at the start lies more in exploring the different meanings of the project for different individuals. The head of science located the problem of falling standards with the problem of the students’ behaviour, which he felt should be improved through better systems – but which was disconnected to processes of teaching and learning. His theory of change might be elaborated as follows:
Head of science: I suppose that’s the question really, what this inclusion is as regards ourselves isn’t it? I mean if it’s a case of keeping someone, like A..., who we were speaking to today, in the classroom, I suppose that can be constituted as inclusion in terms of behaviour which at times gets him put out of a lesson.’

For other teachers in the project group, and for one (Teacher B) in particular, problems of behaviour in lessons were seen as connected to student attitudes to learning, which in turn could be improved by looking to changing teachers’ practice.

Teacher B (interview pre-intervention): “B2 seem to be very unsettled right through the hour. We’re thinking if we can get order and sense to the first 15 minutes, that’s better than having an hour of not very constructive science...if that can bleed its way into the rest of the lesson, if you like, you can eventually get. 45 minutes of constructive science... if we can just give them something to settle them quickly, and a routine that they know about, then that might get them switched on”.

This situation remained stuck for several months, until the leadership of the project was delegated by the Head of Science to Teacher B, the (much more junior) Head of Biology, who clearly had ideas for how to move the department forward but who had felt powerless to do much about it. As the EP observed:

“At the start of the project, Teacher B was feeling ineffective, seeing lots of problems, unable to act without being disloyal to the established departmental head who had little sense of strategy and many competing priorities…”

The project would have failed to start, were it not for the persistence of the EP throughout this process that decisions be made about an object of group activity. In addition, the headteacher’s intention to use the project to address perceived problems in a the department meant that Teacher B felt fully supported after this transition, and that as the project got going, it quickly gained status within the school.

As this process shows, collaboration is not always a pleasant and easy process. It involves negotiation of roles i.e. division of labour, which may involve adjustments to existing positions, which takes time and energy. In addition, the development of meaningful collaboration takes place in (in our examples) departmental and school communities that vary in the value placed on collaboration. At a mundane level, this is reflected in, for example, the way time is allocated. The flexibility or rigidity of rules by which schools operate on a day to day basis, for example in regard to timetabling, can be pivotal in facilitating or constraining opportunities for teachers, to meet and share and build up a collaborative relationship.

Developing collaboration also entails significant work by some individuals, as they think through the implications of changes, planning how to transform the object of activity, which entails changing relationships, without alienating colleagues. The notion of individuals with different theories of change provided a useful vocabulary for discussing these changes without requiring everyone involved to invest in the initially strange language and concepts of activity theory. From our perspective, contradictory theories of change closely match the notions of contradictory objects of activity. These contradictions were only useful to the extent that they were identified and addressed; while they were left implicit and unexplored, they held up progress in the group. Part of the skill of the facilitator and group working together was in the ability to identify and work with these contradictions.
Figure 4 summarises the impact of key features of the activity system on the development of collaboration:

Critical processes 3: Development of ‘empirical attention and reflection’.

Giving systematic attention to the effects of changes in practice, and then thinking about the implications, is not something that all teachers are familiar with, or consider worthwhile. Action appears to be more valued than reflection in the school system – which may again reflect the model of teacher role and development (Osborne, 2003).

For the teachers in the project, empirical attention meant engaging initially with questions like: What changes can we make in our teaching that will make a difference to pupil engagement with learning? What changes can we expect as a result in the short/medium/long term? How will we know that what we are doing is making a difference? How can we evaluate these differences? Then as the process developed, other questions became important: what has actually happened? Is that what we expected? If not, how can we explain it? This engagement with thinking about and evaluating teaching and learning fed into processes of negotiating collaboration and ownership. Teacher C is discussing pupil focus group data which had been fed back to the teachers in Hightown School:

Teacher E: There was a lot of…. Well you get lots of contradiction in what the kids were saying. It’s really interesting to see…
Researcher: Between them you mean?
Teacher E: Yeah. But it’s also interesting to see how they perceive the lessons as well. You can tell that they were truthful in what they were saying and what they said, so that was good. So you got their perspectives and so you got actually were aware of what they were saying and thinking about the lessons and that’s good.
Researcher: Did that make for some useful discussion between you then?
Teacher E: That’s where it… that’s where it started from really. Since we got that, what is it that…
Researcher: … ‘What can we do about it’?”
Teacher E: What is it that they’re saying really. It was looking at the same, I can’t really remember, what did they say, it’s like they weren’t really learning. Learning seemed to be a big thing for them. We’re trying
to get them into, in the frame of mind to learn. So that’s when we decided… the next thing we came up with these starter plans. It was getting them to start thinking about learning, even if it was just the start of it.

From Teacher E’s perspective, consideration of the pupil data led to further definition of the object of activity in the project. Then as can be seen in what follows, this also led to a new form of collaboration.

Researcher: So how’s it worked for you? What bits of it have made a difference to you?
Teacher E: Well, the best part of it was sitting down and talking with other members of staff and deciding what we’re going to do. And like, each..
Researcher: Are you saying that’s the best bit because you haven’t done that before?
Teacher E: Yeah (laughs). We didn’t really have any formal time… but we actually sat down every so often for an hour and we were talking about actually what we were doing as our practice and then suddenly that was good ‘cos you were getting a lot of feedback off everybody else. And you could put your penny in as well. So that was really good. So I think I’ve learned a lot from all the discussions about how everybody else is doing. And I just found out that everybody else is as just as bad as you, or … It’s reassuring to know everybody’s the same, but… and then you get good ideas off everyone else, so that was… I learnt a lot from just doing it. Being able to talk. It gave us the space. Since then we’ve decided to carry that on like, in Science meetings, we’re making sure we have a time when we just talk about

From this teacher’s point of view, the activity of this project was clearly creating a more teaching-and-learning focused community and leading to change in himself as a subject within that community, able to reveal his difficulties and to share creative ideas.

Many teachers, despite their familiarity with assessment of students, found the challenge of evaluating changes as a result of their teaching to be novel and stimulating. For example, Ysgol a Neuadd found nearly as many questions as answers when trying to develop an observation schedule for pupil engagement – did gazing out of the window or fiddling with a pencil or talking to a neighbour necessarily mean that a pupil was not thinking about a task in hand? This resulted in a lot of thinking and discussion and the eventual usage of the observation tool led to further discussion and thought… One of the teachers later commented:

“Well I’ve found many questions have reared their heads that I was not expecting... so we need more research into learning”.

So the process of developing tools to mediate the changes they intended was central to the activity of professional development through action research. Figure 5 summarises the relationship between the development of empirical attention and reflection, and other key features of the activity system.
Figure 5: Key elements contributing to the development of empirical attention and reflection

A summary of the analysis up to this point
Changing practice as designated by the relatively easy term ‘inclusion’ actually always entails rather deep change in teachers – and that is impossible except in and through the social group of teachers. It is impossible because the assumptions, ways of talking and embedded, implicit ideas of teachers are located mostly within that group. Consequently, changing how teachers conceptualise problems in practice, for example, entails working in that group – and it is no surprise that this kind of change is quite difficult.

What we are talking about is the alignment and transformation of objects held communally in the group; theories of change about pupils which are distributed and understood in taken-for-granted ways, in that group. Change then requires significant opportunities for collaboration; but learning to collaborate in this forward-moving, productive way is in itself a challenge, because collaboration already entails working together on the object and with a shared definition of the issue. So, facilitation and accompaniment in that process by somebody from outside becomes increasingly critical, in terms of framing the possibilities and maintaining the overall direction, in terms of identifying the contradictions which have to be worked through, and in terms of noticing the changes which have to be made more permanent tools in the new form of activity.

The shift in activity with pupils adopted by the teachers was always mediated by a tool of some kind. These tools included individual whiteboards; group targets made visible on large card; large, collaborative classroom artefacts to mediate maths; dictionaries available on tables. In one project one tool was a game show format, adapted from TV, involving the use of a large inflatable rubber mallet, which became well-known within the project group as “Mallet’s Mallet”. In order to understand the effects of these tools, we will need to shift attention to another activity system involving the pupils, noting that a feature of this activity system was that it was often isolated from the action research system that we have been discussing in this paper. Two sets of questions follow: one set is about how the introduction of these tools influenced the relationship between the teacher and pupils, and the engagement of pupils in the ‘main activity’ of the classroom. The second set of questions is about how far the isolation of the two activity systems was bridged in the action research process, as pupils moved from being subjects of learning in the classroom to being subjects along with teachers in the development of more inclusive practice.
There is insufficient space to thoroughly address these questions in this paper. However, it is possible to make some initial comments, to build on the analysis made so far in this paper.

![Activity System Diagram](image)

**Fig. 2: The activity system of the classroom**

Our knowledge of that second activity system is based on some classroom observation, but mainly on interviews with teachers and pupils about changes in the activity and relationships in those classrooms. In continuing analysis, we intend to employ activity theory, looking at how, for example, in many classrooms the object is not obvious, because tools are being employed for different purposes, sometimes simultaneously. As Edwards reminds us, after Leont’ev’s work on the object-related activity:

‘The object is what is being worked on, i.e. it is not the objective. Rather, it is what is being shaped or transformed by the tool’ (Edwards, 2005 p.52).

In the following example, starter routines are described by Year 10 students in which the sharing of objectives is central.

Researcher: Right. What do you do when you go into a lesson? What happens first?
Male 2: You…
Researcher: Say in Biology first. What do you do when you come into the room?
Male 2: Get your books out and then write the objectives… what’s going to happen in the…
Researcher: Right. So you copy down, is that you copy them down?
Male 2: Yeah. The teacher writes them on the board.
Researcher: Right.
Male 2: Copy them down.
Researcher: And you do that every lesson?
Male 2: Yeah.
Researcher: Chemistry and Physics as well? Anything else happen at the start of the lesson?
Male 2: Tells you the starter, what you’re going to do.
Researcher: Tells you the what?
Male 2: Tells you the starter.
Researcher: What’s a starter?
Male 2: They get you going on like…
Researcher: Like what? Can you give me an example?
Female 1: They get you going back to like, what you did last lesson. Like remembering that and going over it.
Researcher: What? A quick test or a…?
Female 1: Yeah.
Researcher: So like a little sheet of what …
Female 1: Yeah, just reviewing what you did last lesson.
Researcher: A-ha.
Female 1: Just questions on what you did.
Researcher: Is that useful?
Female 2: Sometimes. Sometimes it does.

Insofar as this interview signifies the result of the action research project, it could be argued that the outcome is no more significant than attention by a teacher to one of the basic elements of assessment for learning. In this case, however, the focus on these techniques has come from teacher discussion and debate. Furthermore, the AfL coordinator herself, a senior teacher, was a science teacher, and she describes the significance of the project in the following way:

Teacher F: One of the things that has happened as a consequence, because we were looking at the beginnings of lessons is we as a whole school started this term with those three principles that Jonathan’s established with us. So the whole school is meet and greet, have a starter, have your objectives up. Those three things. And, objectives.

Teacher F: But that little group is being a great source of just little ideas, just inspiration, just small snippets of ideas to just go and, you know, to go and do with a particular class.

Teacher F: I got him [the project coordinator] to come to my AFL group and the Head was at my AFL group and she asked him to go to the whole staff and school.
Researcher: That's really interesting. And how did it, how did it go down, all this stuff?
Teacher F: Very well. Very well indeed. It did him some good, give him some, you know…
Researcher: Yeah, yeah, yeah.
Teacher F: … It raised his profile within the school but also, well, it’s common sense and it’s just yeah, yeah, yeah. And so therefore objectives had become a big thing…

One view then would be that the action research group in this school has reinforced some already well-known principles of AfL. Another view is that the project has effectively led to the engagement of a group of previously unengaged teachers, some of them frustrated, experienced professionals, others relatively new to the profession; and that the result is a shift in the way in which pupils engage in learning.

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


