RAISING THE ACHIEVEMENT OF ALL LEARNERS IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Project conceptual framework and terminology

CONTENTS

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

This paper, recognising the need for conceptual clarity, sets out some definitions of key terms and concepts which were used during the [Raising the Achievement of All Learners in Inclusive Education project](#) (2014–2017). This paper was considered a working document and was amended throughout the project to reflect the discussions between project participants.

Project aims

The Raising the Achievement of All Learners in Inclusive Education (RA) project targets decision-makers at both local and national levels, but also involves a full range of stakeholders in local learning communities (LCs). The project aims to provide evidence of effective practice in raising achievement and building LCs' capacity to include and support all learners.

The project looks at challenging issues, such as raising the achievement of vulnerable groups. It focuses on the structures and processes linked to raising achievement.

The project's key questions are:

- What pedagogical strategies and teaching approaches (e.g. using information and communication technology, focus on key competences) best support learning and are effective in raising the achievement of all learners?

- How can school leaders best support:

    o the development, implementation and monitoring of inputs and processes for raising achievement?

    o the participation of learners, parents/carers in the learning process?

    o the 'measurement' of all forms of achievement and analysis of outcomes to inform further development?

The project considers these questions in the context of the national/local policy and how it supports LCs to undertake organisational development and enable school leaders to raise the achievement of all learners – particularly through collaborative approaches.

Key issues of the learning communities

The project LCs initially identified the following key issues:

- Supporting leaders to sustain development and manage 'overload' caused by on-going changes (Leadership roles and approaches)

- Increasing the workforce's capacity/capability through professional development to ensure that they feel confident in supporting all learners (Support systems)

- Developing a curriculum and pedagogical approaches that motivate and engage all learners, develop their strengths and talents and enable them to become independent learners (Pedagogy for all learners/Curriculum)

- Focusing on assessment for learning and using counselling and coaching to support engagement with learning and decision-making (Assessment/Learner support and well-being)

- Working with parents and the local community to ensure an effective response to all learners' needs and support for increasing their independence (Partnerships and collaborative working)

These issues were further discussed and refined during the first project visits to form the specific questions for LCs to address during the school-based activity.

Figure 1 illustrates how the main RA project themes were linked with the LC specific issues identified and the thematic areas of the self-review:

'What works' in raising the achievement of all learners?	
Inclusive pedagogy	Leadership & collaboration

Key issues for LCs				
Assessment & Pedagogy for all	Increasing LC capability	Curriculum adaptation	Working with parents/ community	Leading sustainable development

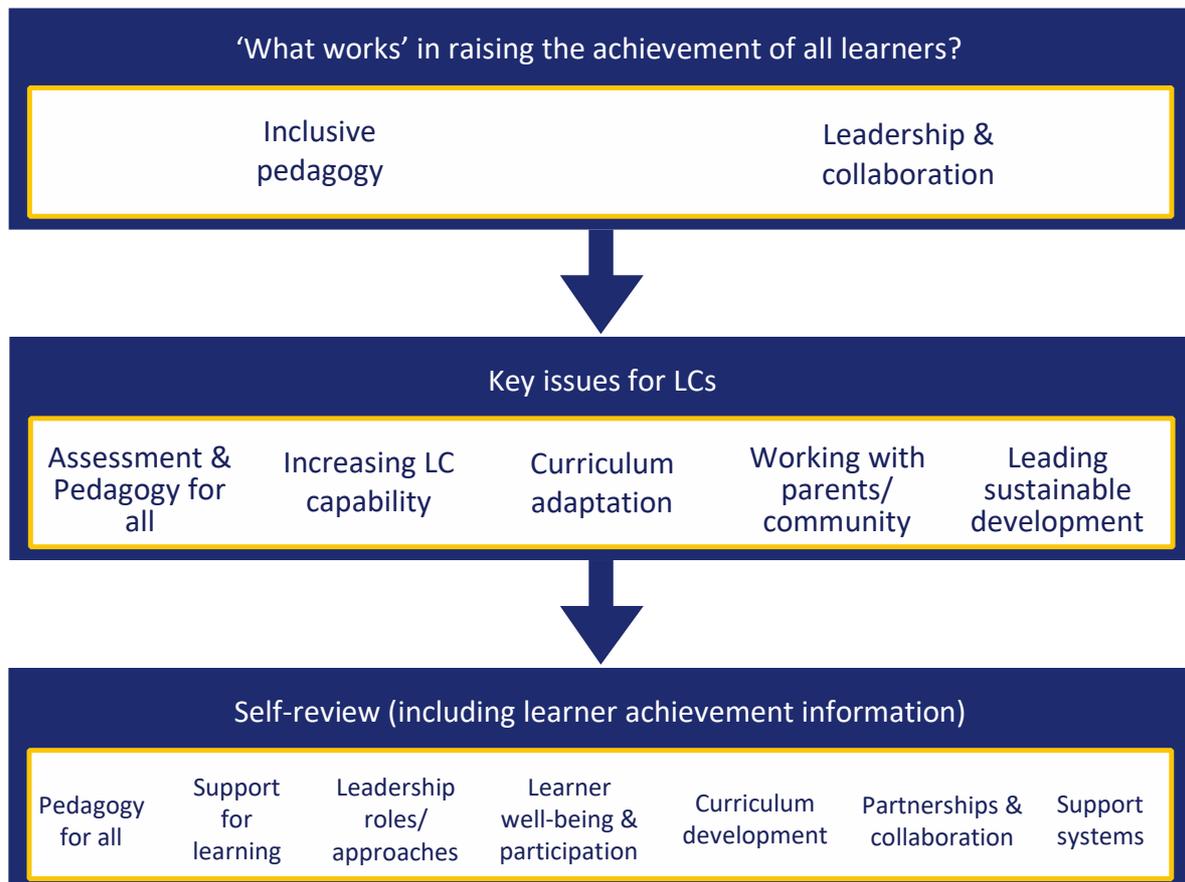| Self-review (including learner achievement information)						
Pedagogy for all	Support for learning	Leadership roles/ approaches	Learner well-being & participation	Curriculum development	Partnerships & collaboration	Support systems

Figure 1. Raising Achievement project links

Conceptual framework

The RA project conceptual framework recognises that a move towards a human-rights approach requires a change of culture and a fundamentally different pedagogical approach. Rather than looking at individual support (i.e. based on medical diagnoses), support systems should aim to increase schools' capability to meet the requirements of all learners.

This necessitates a change in thinking: from a 'needs-based' model of disability, which locates the problem within the learner, to a 'social model' that goes beyond an emphasis on social policy or charity to identify institutional barriers at all levels. This new thinking does not ignore individual needs, but regards diversity as a 'pedagogical asset' that is at the heart of personalised approaches to raise the achievement of all learners.

Inclusive systems should not focus on remediation and compensatory approaches that do not increase the capacity or capability of schools and education systems. Instead, they must develop forms of teaching and learning that enable all learners to participate fully in the learning process and prevent them from dropping out of school.

The RA project focused on 'what works' (i.e. pedagogical strategies, leadership and organisational approaches) in raising the achievement of all learners in inclusive settings.

It has to be noted that the project focuses on ALL learners. Any idea that education is not for everyone and that some learners will always be destined to fail must be challenged. While categorisation is sometimes seen as necessary to ensure access to services and to monitor outcomes, different data/information is needed to ensure quality for all learners.

The RA project seeks to move away from a focus on different groups of learners, to a position that sees all learners as equally valued, listened to and provided with opportunities for full participation in all learning and social opportunities.

TERMINOLOGY

This section provides short explanations of some key terms that were used in the project.

Inclusive education

To date, the Agency has used the definition of inclusive education set out at the 48th Session of the International Conference on Education (2008):

> … inclusive education is an ongoing process aimed at offering quality education for all while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectations of the students and communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination (UNESCO-IBE, 2009, p. 18).

Inclusive education is a normative issue associated with principles of social justice, democracy and participation and the need to ensure both equity and excellence.

According to the Agency position on inclusive education systems:

> The ultimate vision for inclusive education systems is to ensure that all learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers (European Agency, 2015, p. 1).

With regard to the RA project's two key questions, inclusion relates to:

- the ability of class teams to take responsibility for all learners and to collaborate to **see and understand what is required to support their learning**, together with the **skills to adapt the curriculum, teaching and support**;

- the ability of those responsible for the school (head teachers, leadership teams) to **organise and lead the school personnel** constructively and pro-actively and **support the development of their competences** and, through this, to raise the achievement of learners.

The RA work has emphasised inclusion as an organising principle or 'mega strategy' for raising the achievement of all learners through effective pedagogy, strong leadership and collaborative working across LCs, with a focus on learning for all stakeholders.

Learning community

There is no universal definition of a learning community (LC). However, there appears to be a broad international consensus that it suggests a group of people sharing and critically reflecting on practice in an on-going process that promotes further learning.

The RA project acknowledges that while they may not be termed 'professionals', parents and other stakeholders in the wider community play an important role in the learning and support network around schools.

The reference to schools/groups of schools as 'learning communities' also reflects the development of the collaborative practice that sets them apart from 'organisations'.

Such communities demonstrate some or all of the following features:

- Shared values and vision
- Collective responsibility for and focus on the learning and personal growth of young learners and all stakeholders
- Respectful relationships that involve mutual trust and support
- 'Shared' authority
- Effective collaboration with internal/external partners.

This differs from organisations that may be hierarchical, competitive and rule-bound, with low levels of trust.

While learning communities are more complex and call for stakeholders to deal with a higher level of 'uncertainty', they play a key role in developing the 'social capital' of the community beyond the school.

Therefore, the RA project used the term 'learning community' to refer to:

Collaborations of stakeholders around clusters of schools involving both school and community personnel, together with researchers, local area leaders and policy-makers.

School-based activity

Schools/teachers across Europe increasingly enquire into their own practice in response to research evidence on effective practice and professional development approaches. They assess the effectiveness of different approaches and the reasons for success (or lack of success) through a creative yet systematic process, underpinned by rigour. The outcomes of this exercise are then used to plan for improvement as an integral part of on-going teaching.

Such an approach can empower schools and teachers. While findings may not be absolute, they add to practical knowledge and introduce new forms of understanding with principles that can be shared with the whole school community.

This project uses the term 'school-based activity' to refer to the type of practice outlined above, that is:

Teachers collaborating with others at school/classroom level to investigate the impact of innovative approaches that will increase their knowledge and understanding and will improve their teaching practice with an impact on learner achievement.

Figure 2 presents the model for the school-based activity. It sets out the process from the initial baseline information (i.e. information from the LC self-review and learner attainment/achievement information), to the analysis at the end of the practical activity.
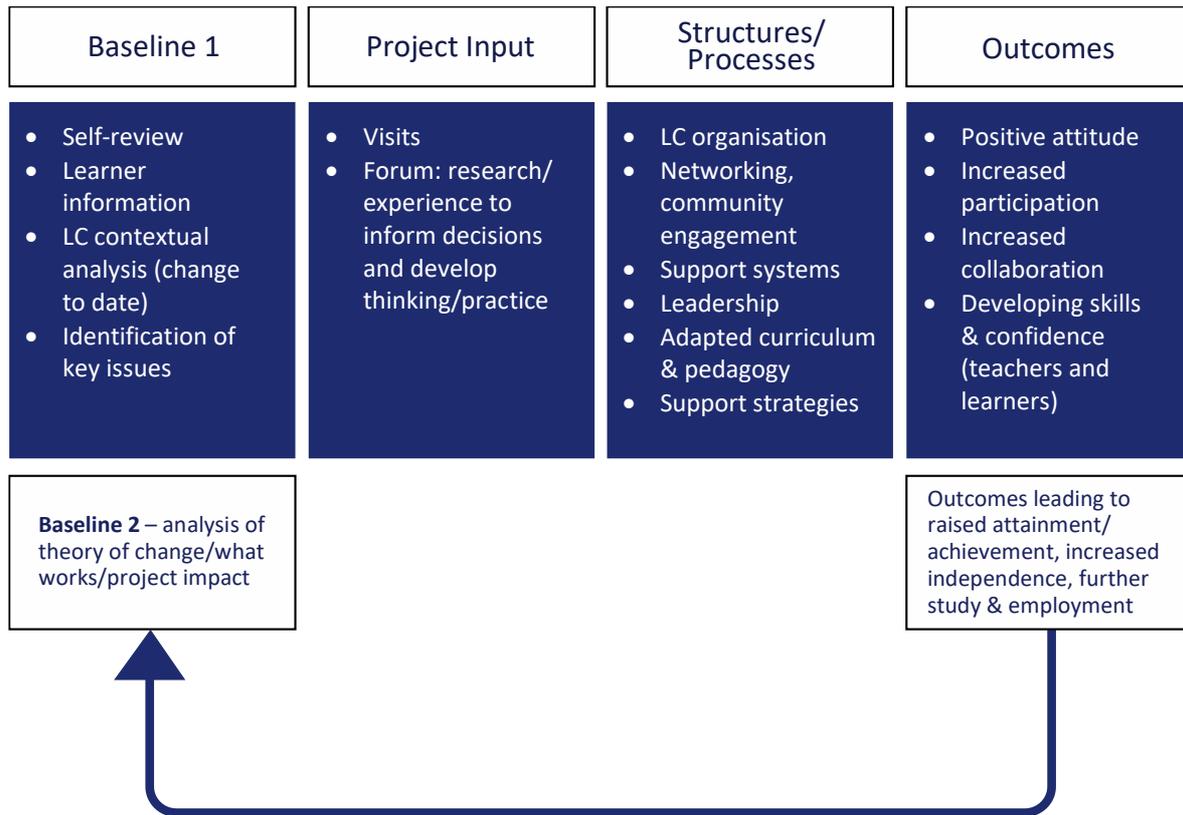
Baseline 1	Project Input	Structures/Processes	Outcomes
• Self-review • Learner information • LC contextual analysis (change to date) • Identification of key issues	• Visits • Forum: research/ experience to inform decisions and develop thinking/practice	• LC organisation • Networking, community engagement • Support systems • Leadership • Adapted curriculum & pedagogy • Support strategies	• Positive attitude • Increased participation • Increased collaboration • Developing skills & confidence (teachers and learners)
Baseline 2 – analysis of theory of change/what works/project impact			Outcomes leading to raised attainment/ achievement, increased independence, further study & employment

Figure 2. Raising Achievement school-based activity

- At the start of the project activities, each LC provided a contextual analysis of their current position, the developments that have taken place and the 'theory of change' that has helped them to arrive at their current position and to identify the key issues on which they would focus during the project.

- The project input consisted of staff and participant input during visits and via the project forum. This provided research evidence and 'experiential' learning from a range of contexts that could support the LCs to develop their thinking and make decisions about their practice in order to address the identified issues (linked to the project questions).

- The LCs planned activities that would affect several structures and processes related to raising achievement (e.g. forms of school organisation, networking, community engagement, leadership approaches, assessment, curriculum, pedagogy and support strategies).

- The outcomes following the school-based work included areas relating to the self-review, i.e. Pedagogy for all learners; Curriculum; Assessment; Learner well-being and participation; Leadership; Partnerships and collaborative working; Support systems.

The RA project focused on ways to strengthen the relationship between research and practice, supporting participants to:

- use relevant research to pose questions;

- collect evidence;

- critically appraise this evidence;
- analyse different variables/factors that affect processes and outcomes.

Evidence gathered through observations, interviews and dialogue with the full range of stakeholders shows **why** something worked and supports informed decisions, based on knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches. In this way, teachers can become 'critical consumers' of research and are able to generate new questions in an on-going process of reflection and development.

Self-review

A self-review tool was designed to be used at school/local community level to assess areas considered important in both inclusive practice and raising achievement. The tool is [available online](#) as an open educational resource.

At the beginning of the project, the LCs undertook the self-review to gather the views of a range of stakeholders on issues likely to affect learner achievement. This was repeated with the same stakeholders following the school-based activities.

The following variables (inputs/processes) that affect attainment and achievement are included in the self-review:

- Pedagogy for all learners
- Support for learning
- Leadership roles and approaches
- Learner well-being and participation
- Curriculum development
- Partnerships and collaborative working
- Support systems.

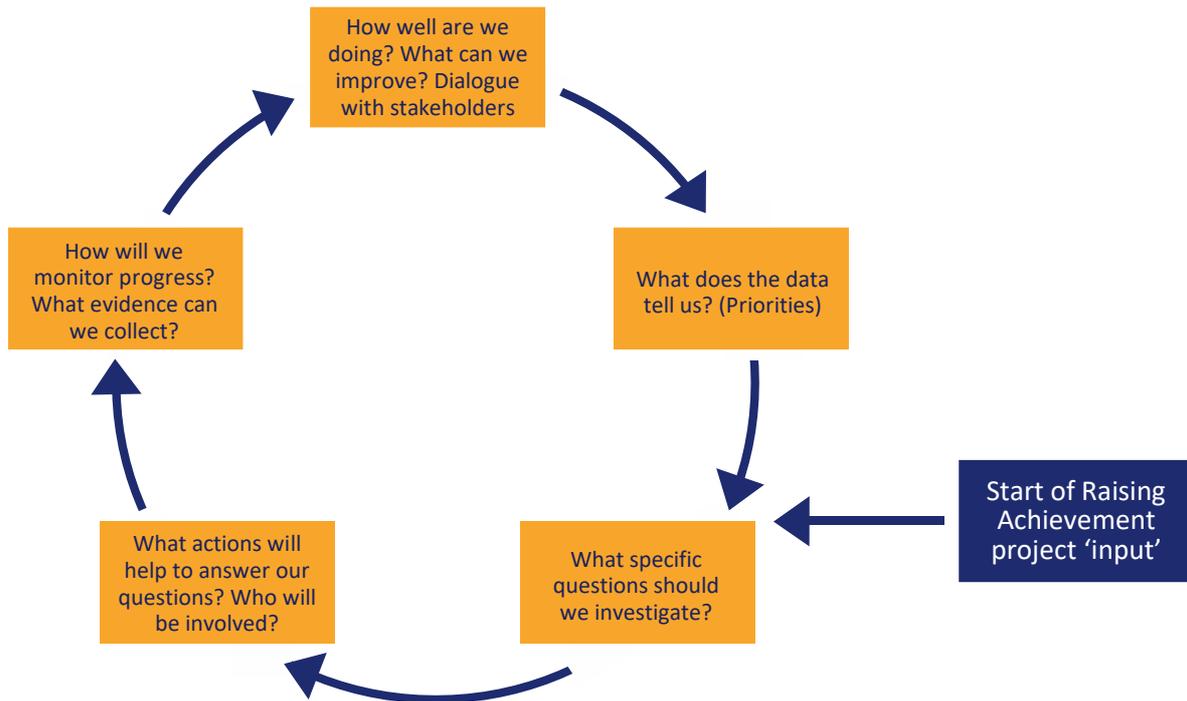Figure 3 shows the stages of the self-review process.

Figure 3. Self-review process

Pedagogy

In the RA project, pedagogy is seen to encompass teachers' attitudes, beliefs and ideas, as well as their knowledge and understanding of the teaching and learning process and the diversity of learners – all of which impact on their practice in the classroom. This includes for example:

- communication and social interaction (with and between learners);
- visual methods to support learning;
- organising tasks to engage learners;
- monitoring and using feedback for further planning;
- formative and summative assessment of learners (involving learners themselves).

The project definition of pedagogy therefore acknowledges the importance of relationships. It sees teachers working 'alongside' learners with concern for their holistic development and well-being.

Attainment and achievement

The RA project takes a wide view of achievement. In addition to academic attainment and other wider learning (e.g. personal, social), achievement may be shown through increasing confidence, using a wider range of learning strategies, more active participation, increased social skills, wider competences, access to further study and employment, etc.

According to the Agency position on inclusive education systems:

> … *raised achievement for learners encompasses all forms of personal, social and academic attainments that will be relevant for the individual learner in the short term, while enhancing their life chances in the long term* (European Agency, 2015, p. 2)*.*

During the project, learner levels of attainment were measured through each country's examination and/or school assessment system. Wider achievement was 'measured' through teacher judgements and school assessments, as well as learner and other stakeholder perceptions.

High expectations and high standards are crucial to raise the achievement of all learners. However, closing the gap may require a range of responses to underachievement. Such responses were a key focus of the project.

Leadership

Building on the work of the [Organisation of Provision project](#), the term 'constructive leadership' describes school leaders' capability to raise learner achievement by:

- analysing school information to inform further development to raise learner achievement;

- inspiring and leading through personal commitment to inclusive approaches to diversity;

- developing positive attitudes in all stakeholders based on positive psychology (seeking each individual's unique talents);

- building and sustaining 'trustful collaboration' between all stakeholders;

- increasing teacher confidence to meet the challenges and uncertainties presented by diversity through partnership working, sensitive recognition of learners as individuals and the development of skills to adapt the curriculum and pedagogy;

- enabling learner participation in the life of the school and community and in their learning (independently, co-operatively with others and leading others);

- organising resources according to reliable evidence from research and practice.

Assessment and evaluation

The RA project adopts the relevant definitions developed by a previous Agency project, entitled [Assessment in Inclusive Settings](#). It provided a general description of assessment, referring to the ways that teachers and other stakeholders involved in a learner's education 'systematically collect and then use information about that pupil's level of achievement and/or development in different areas of their educational experience' (Watkins, 2007, p. 14).

The project report stresses that assessment information is also concerned with the learning environment/home environment. It makes a distinction between assessment and

the broader concept of educational evaluation. The latter refers to teachers or other professionals reflecting upon a 'range of factors involved in the teaching and learning process in order to make decisions about next steps in their work' (ibid., p. 15). Factors may include programme content, resources and success of implementation strategies.

School/learning community development

To support gains in the achievement of all learners, the RA project used the self-review as a baseline measure. It repeated this process following a period of school-based work in the three selected LCs.

The areas below show some examples of LC developments that the project participants reported throughout the project. These developments, although hard to measure, included a 'shift' from:

- reactive leadership, to constructive leadership and pro-active support;
- negative/deficit attitude, to a 'growth mindset' approach;
- distrust, to trusting relationships and closer collaboration within the LC and with parents/community;
- fear of the unknown, to increasing teacher confidence;
- passive learners, to increasingly active participation;
- reliance on summative assessment, to on-going assessment for learning that involves and informs teachers and learners;
- a rigid curriculum, to greater flexibility to increase relevance and meet diverse needs;
- 'standard' pedagogy and methods of support, to adapted teaching approaches and support strategies;
- a focus on formal/accredited outcomes, to authentic 'real-life' competences.

Learner progress

A personalised approach to teaching and learning is key to raise learner achievement. Schools need to develop ways to understand the current situation of all learners and support their progress by using information to plan future steps.

This process also requires:

- capability to meet learner needs and increase curriculum relevance, helping learners to gain competences for their future life, studies and employment;
- flexibility to adapt pedagogical strategies and provide support – the LC's capability to increase access to appropriate learning opportunities and to develop all learners' knowledge and competence.

Schools should be clear about what progress might look like for all learners, particularly when it does not lead to traditional recognition, for example through examinations.

Progress may be shown – for example by learners with more complex support needs – by increased responses, improved communication and social skills, reduced need for support, less reliance on routines, reduction in challenging behaviour, transfer of learning between different situations or increased self-advocacy.

Networks

Although the term 'network' can be used in many different contexts, in the RA project it was used as part of the LCs' collaborative activity. This involved sharing knowledge and experience across professional and organisational boundaries, in order to challenge thinking and connect to research, policy and practice.

This term was applied to the connections and learning opportunities within the learning communities (level 1), between the learning communities (level 2) and between all project participants and learning communities (level 3).

For the purposes of the RA project, the definition of 'active partnership networking' was as follows:

> *The school's capability to build sustainable relations with a range of actors in the wider community, drawing on resources provided by social capital to help improve the school's systems and processes that raise learner achievement.*

Networking and collaborative practice was the focus of further work during the project and in the analysis of project outcomes.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has outlined the thinking behind the project and the key terms that were used during the RA work. Due to the complexity of the issues involved, both thinking and terminology were further developed during the life of the project and this paper was updated accordingly.

Knowledge sharing at all system levels, through partnership and collaboration between all key stakeholders, greatly contributed to the project focus – how best to support all learners to raise their levels of achievement.

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