

# Leadership for inclusion: what you can do?

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## Introduction

This course will help you to develop your understanding of how to promote and support learning for all, within classrooms with a diverse student and staff population. It will encourage you to embrace your own capacity to lead at any level of an organisation. You will explore the tensions around collective responses and individualised challenges, consider these alongside the need to embrace risk and recognise the opportunities that arise from everyday uncertainty. By engaging with these inclusive principles, you will be invited to seek out ways in which you can support others and so enhance collective learning opportunities.

If you haven't already, you might want to consider exploring the related OpenLearn course [Leadership for inclusion: thinking it through](#). You might also be interested in the Open University [Inclusive Practice Leadership and Management Masters](#) pathways.

# Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand a range of perspectives on the nature of educational leadership
- engage more positively with collective learning opportunities and individualised challenges
- reflect upon the unfinished nature of inclusion
- recognise how anyone can effect change within an educational institution.

# 1 Who are leaders?

***Do I have  
to be in  
charge?***

This course is premised on the view that if we want to achieve an inclusive school we cannot rely upon bureaucratic processes or the school leadership team or others in the system to deliver it. Inclusive practice has to be situated in our day-to-day relationships and the trust we build amongst ourselves. In many ways we will only achieve inclusion *despite* our systems and what they throw at us. To achieve our inclusive goals we have to lead the change, accepting that we are part of ‘a society which organises itself without authority, is always in existence, like a seed beneath the snow’ (Ward, 1966). As Osiname (2018) recognised in their 5-school study, sharing leadership responsibilities helps schools become more inclusive and self-reflective. This is because of the exchange of information and ideas alongside a cross-community involvement in decision making. Their study supported the notion that leadership is a social process, one that is shared among all members of a group and not restricted to a particular person, position or role.

## Activity 1: A model leader?

 20 minutes

Explore two notions which are frequently mentioned when talking about how to encourage inclusionary change without simply relying upon top-down processes; in particular:

- distributed leadership
- middle leadership

Watch these two videos:

View at: [youtube:DnYIXZ-gATQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DnYIXZ-gATQ)



Video 1: Distributed leadership – Education Scotland (The Open University is not responsible for external content.)

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 2: Middle Leadership – National Academy for Educational Leadership Wales



As you watch make notes about:

- The roles of people and context in these models.
- The relationship between these leadership approaches and top-down leadership goals.
- Ideas and language that suggest barriers or support for inclusion and suggest leadership emerging from a 'seed beneath the snow?'

Provide your answer...

Both of these videos are saying that the nature of the model varies according to the priorities of the senior leadership and overall context of the setting. They suggest an association between formal roles within the school and delivering the priorities of the institution. When thinking about ideas and language that might have a bearing on inclusion:

- In the distributed leadership film you might have noted several supportive terms: 'leadership for all', everybody having a key piece of work to lead, the mention of learning together and collective responsibility,
- In the middle leadership film the focus had the potential to be less inclusive: what leaders were willing to share, that middle leaders were important in their own right and could know what was happening in the class but that the school was a hierarchy and becoming a senior leader was about personal progress.

These comments, particularly those associated with distributed leadership, can be seen to link to notions of a flexible, collaborative community. However, both videos talked about people having this space because they played a key role or were leading a pre-determined area of work. What was far less evident was the idea that we are all leading in our day-to-day practice.

The videos recall the idea that leaders can neither fully lead nor can individuals be fully led (Hammersley-Fletcher & Strain, 2011). The ability to shape the circumstances in which we live, our agency, requires us to engage in collective activity. To be a 'seed in the snow', whatever leadership model is being adopted,

your agency as a leader needs to overlap with the agency of others. Being a leader therefore requires taking a risk, requiring you to offer your leadership and for others to risk accepting it. Leadership in whatever form requires you to seek a point of agreement (probably unspoken) to serve as collective motivation.

An alternative model to describe the everyday leadership which is part of inclusive school practice is grassroots leadership. Davidson and Hughes (2021) suggest three characteristics of grassroots leaders. These leaders see conflict and injustice as a springboard for change and improvement; they recognise the need to earn and maintain trust to exert an influence; they understand that leadership does not arise from formal authority but can arise from any individual or group within any given context.

Read the following extract from Davidson, F. D., & Hughes, T. R. (2021) [Grassroots Leadership Models: A Conceptual History of Thought and Practice](#).

As you read, make notes about and consider:

- What ideas associated with grassroots leadership are also evident in other leadership models?
- In what ways do you think that practitioners can act as grassroots leaders within a school context?

*Provide your answer...*

The following ideas that arise within a model of grassroots leadership are also associated with other models; particularly authentic leadership, servant leadership, transformational leadership, distributive leadership and moral leadership:

- the importance of civic responsibility and community engagement,
- building capacity in others,
- being attentive to the needs of others in ways that mean they follow,
- offering creative, hopeful, open responses that envision alternative social circumstances,
- recognising that there is wisdom within the collective and that authority needs to be shared,
- prioritising of issues of equity and social justice.

In considering the second question and how practitioners can act as grassroots leaders, we recalled a model developed from a wide body of literature by Ehrich & English (2012), which represents grassroots leader's goals for change, their actions and strategies. This model positions these leaders as being consensual or conflictual, who aim for change that is reforming or refining (see Table 1).

**Table 1: A model of change goals and grassroots leadership actions and strategies (based on Ehrich & English, 2012)**

Approaches to change		
Categories of change	<i>Conflictual</i>	<i>Consensual</i>




<b>Reforming</b>	<b>Tactics of confrontation</b> Requires conflict to build group solidarity and provoke the enemy's response and possible overreaction.	<b>Collaborative/democratic distributive</b> Tries and constructs a common 'win-win' agenda with the opponent on a common vision. Generates reciprocal relationships.
<b>Refining</b>	<b>Conflict Avoidance</b> Selects one's fights, avoids some but focuses on those deemed essential to maintain solidarity and which have a good chance of succeeding.	<b>Collaborative/democratic distributive</b> Regards change as so small that it is not significant.

## 1.1 Is it just a small thing?

Within the school context it may seem highly unlikely that reforming and conflictual approaches (see [Table 1](#) in Activity 1 discussion) are going to gain much traction, while the consensual refining approaches are far more likely to garner support. However, it is not uncommon for profoundly divisive grassroots issues to arise within a school context over the oddest of things (for example: the author of this course recalls the disruption caused when school managers introduced new rules around the use of the school main entrance). Out of unexpected opportunities or challenges, significant change can emerge; while planned changes emerging from refined and consensual processes can simply lead nowhere. Ehrich & English (2012) believe that grassroots leadership strategies can lead to practical actions, informed by theory, that attempt to change social conditions. Bottom-up leadership of this kind can encourage ongoing enquiry and activity, so schools do things differently because people are thinking differently about them.

### Activity 2: Is it just a small thing?

 20 minutes

Consider the everyday space that practitioners can play an 'informal' leadership role. Watch the following video.

View at: [youtube:L2LNK2MW\\_xQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L2LNK2MW_xQ)



Video 3: Why You Should Thank A Teacher Today (The Open University is not responsible for external content.)

As you watch make notes about:

- The examples of leadership that you note within this school context.

- Thoughts you have on possible ways practitioners in a context you know could lead change and the nature of that change.
- In what ways do the models of leadership help you to consider the examples you have identified?

*Provide your answer...*

On watching this light-hearted video you could consider examples such as dressing up or supporting an upset child or sitting with a lonely child as moments of leadership. Being proactive is a central aspect of effective classroom practice; through such actions practitioners can serve as role models for the young people they are working with and for the colleagues around them. The act of being alert to a student's situation, responding to that situation and engaging others in that process, is involving many of the attributes identified by Davidson & Hughes in the last reading. It is about a sense of equity, responsibility and engagement, while being attentive and creative, with the hope that you will build capacity in others.

An important shift in such activity would be recognising the influence upon others in these 'small' ways. If you wish to lead others towards ways that you recognise as enabling equity and social justice, you can reflect upon how your actions build trust, motivate people and practices. You could also consider how they encourage collaborative responses to opportunities and challenges. For example, a practitioner who knowingly builds upon extensive research into teachers and their classroom interactions might lead by example when they:

- maximise instructional time through their preparation of lessons
- clearly communicate expectations that all students will be engaged in learning to a high standard
- instruct individuals and small groups for large parts of the teaching time
- work with all pupils
- engage in interactions intended to foster student understanding and development of thinking skills
- engage in prolonged interactions with pupils identified with additional support needs
- offer learners the opportunity to problem-solve, to discuss and describe their ideas
- encourage learners to make connections with their own experiences and prior understandings (Jordan et al 2001; 2010).

They may embed this practice within the wider school culture by encouraging colleagues who work alongside them to work in these ways and seek to build processes that enable it to happen more widely.

Another example is the way leadership can arise by showing respect for other people's perspectives. In another course within this series (see [Leadership for Inclusion: thinking it through](#)) the importance of story is explored. This is a very effective way to engage people by connecting them with needs other people commonly feel or perceive. Grassroots leaders recognise the value of narratives that create ruptures in people's understanding, forming different viewpoints to amplify a message. By creating opportunities to share counter-stories we can lead in the development of new understandings and so influence people's expectations of others, opening new possibilities for practice. Telling stories and

encouraging people to share their tales does not require a formal managerial role; it is just something everyone can do as part of their everyday lives.

Another consideration is the value of the models introduced in this course to accurately represent the kinds of bottom up everyday process being described. Perhaps it is more useful to not think about our leadership as being about a particular role or function within the hierarchy or following one type of model. Perhaps it is better to recognise it as distributed across the context (and situation) in which it takes place. Leadership can be seen as emerging through interaction with other people and the environment (Hartley, 2009). This means there is an ongoing interaction between our thinking, behaviour, and their situation. If we go back to our ideas about agency and the relational nature of its enactment, we can suggest that being seen as a leader is not what is important; the significance is the activity or practice we are engaged in, and the way that moves people towards greater inclusion. In this context leadership is about supporting others in the moment; it is about our capacity to enable people's participation in the collaborative space which schools utilise for learning.



MRS JORDAN WONDERED  
IF HER STANDARDS WERE  
HIGH ENOUGH.

## 2 In this together



***What do you  
mean we  
don't agree?***


A key element of effective inclusive provision is that the teacher community collaborate around:

- a shared model of how children learn
- a shared philosophy of respecting everyone in the class
- a focus on everyone's learning, including that of the adults (Rix et al, 2009).

Sharing values is never certain, however, and neither is collaboration. Perhaps it is not surprising that there is much confusion over what the term 'collaboration' means as well as little robust research into its impact and effective delivery. What research there is suggests that its implementation is inconsistent (Kennedy & Stewart 2011) or limited (Salter et al, 2017).

Developing the capacity to relate to each other is not a simple matter. There is no unified agreement about what it involves. For example, in a study examining how collaboration was framed by special education programmes for US teachers (Brownell, Ross, Colón, & McCallum, 2005), half took a traditional, special education style, competency-based approach and the rest sought a collective examination of multiple knowledge bases. In another US study of teacher education programmes, they concluded that many of the problems related to collaboration were evident and exacerbated by the relationship between special and general education training. This study recognised that the differences and limitations in training meant many would see collaboration as merely an adjustment to practice rather than as a more profound shift in shared values and ways of working (McKenzie, 2009). It is also important to consider collaboration with a wider community too. In nearly every country there is a need for schools to work with people from health, social care, youth services and so forth. This is set against widespread evidence of deeply entrenched professional boundaries and the need to manage different professional languages across communities (Rix et al, 2013).

### Activity 3: Is it just us?

 20 minutes

Consider how people understand the process of working together. Watch this video that presents a model of collaboration in the classroom, one they call Co-Teaching. As you watch consider:

- How are the practitioners labelled?
- What knowledge does it suggest the practitioners need?
- Is the film saying some children are not suited to co-teaching? What are your views on this?
- What views of learning do you recognise in the film?
- What opportunities for leadership do you think are evident in this kind of model of co-teaching?
- Is this your understanding of collaboration in the class room? How do you envisage working and leading in a collaborative class?

View at: [youtube:Xurgvdq3J8s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xurgvdq3J8s)

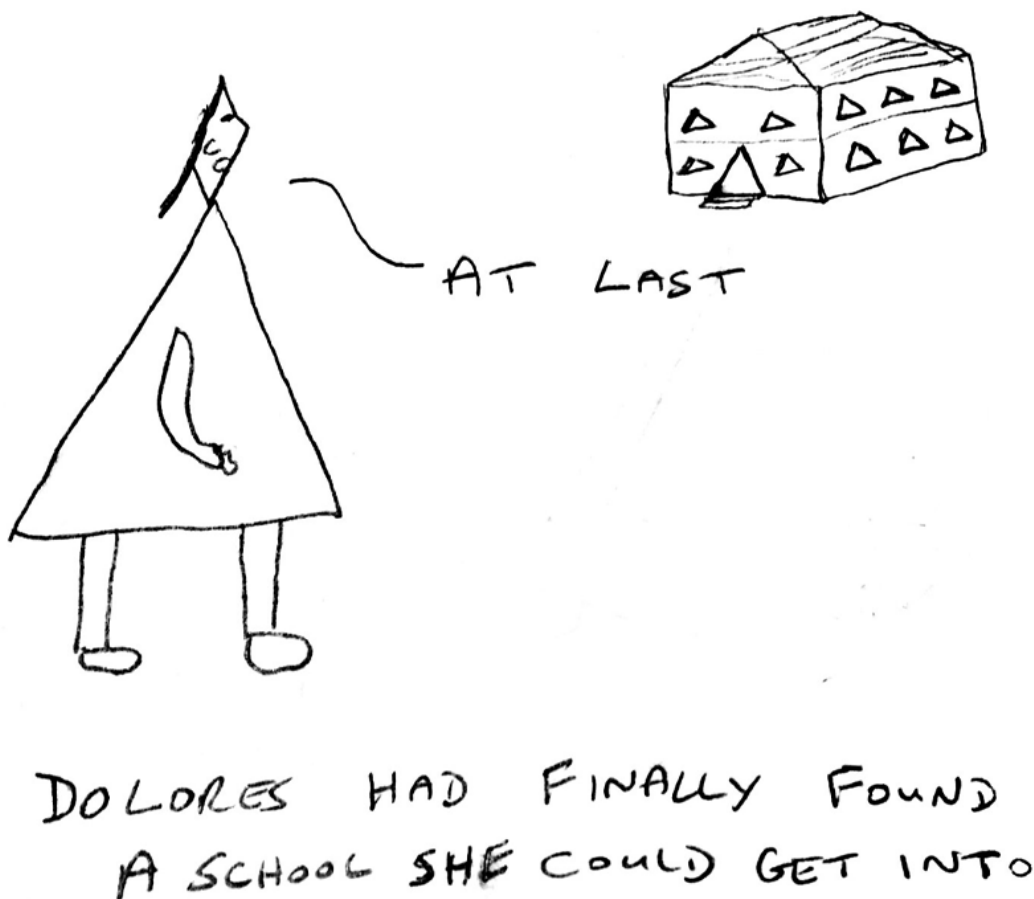


Video 4: [A model of collaboration in the classroom](#) (The Open University is not responsible for external content.)

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The system required practitioners to be licensed, and there was a suggestion that staff will either come with subject expertise or expertise in relation to special education. This seems to support the divide between 'types' of teachers.


Experience from other countries would suggest that this mindset will work against collaboration. You might have been surprised to learn co-teaching is deemed to be for some children only, but this seemed to be explained by a belief that you can slot children into a continuum and that support is based upon an individualised notion of need. In many ways, co-teaching is presented here as a collaborative way of delivering traditional knowledge, which is ironic since co-teaching is widely regarded as a flexible approach which is responsive to the diversity of pupils and the learning context. The aims of the whole system represented in the video also seemed to constrain what was possible. There was a focus upon results, academic skills and career goals, for example, while the clear definition of roles reinforced hierarchical relationships even though the video talked about the sharing of expertise.



## 2.1 Do traditional classrooms constrain collaboration?

So let's consider further how the structure and traditional organisation of classrooms can act to constrain collaboration.

## Activity 4: Here I am

 30 minutes

Read the following quotes taken from a study by Teresa Lehane (2016).

As you read consider what the 8 experienced secondary school teaching assistants say about their work. Consider how they talk about planning, communication and their relationships with teachers. Consider too how this equates to your understanding of collaboration and what opportunities you see for them to play a leadership role.

[Quotes taken from Lehane, \(2016\)](#)

*Provide your answer...*

The teaching assistants (often abbreviated to TAs) felt that they knew the students well and were sensitive to their needs as well as their desire for privacy. Generally, they recognised that collaboration and communication depended upon their relationship with each teacher in each class. However, they had little or no sight of lesson plans, experienced communication 'on the hoof' and felt that they had to initiate discussions with the teachers. Reflecting the limited differentiation by teachers, and a sense that the TA's standard of inclusive practice was not being met by teachers, TAs had a sense of being a go-between, echoing a general separation between the Mainstream space and the additional support space. This did not describe a collaborative practice. Rather it was a hierarchical relationship, based on convenience. It was a role in which people did not feel managed or organised, where they felt aware of being undervalued by the system, powerless and not fully prepared. This echoes findings by Salter et al., (2017) who looked at the learning experiences of Deaf students in mainstream secondary classrooms, from teaching assistants' perspectives. They concluded that a lack of collaboration (particularly teacher engagement with teaching assistants, specialist teachers and students) meant that teachers had incorrect expectations of Deaf learners. They also had misplaced understandings of the challenges they face and of the opportunities to resolve those challenges.

If the aim is to lead the development of a collective response to collective learning challenges, then it makes sense to do so within a collaborative framework.

However, it would seem to be more complicated than just wanting to do things together or having structures and processes in place to allow this to happen. In Italy, for example there are class councils, plans for the class and time for collaboration within the contracts of teachers. There are also simple, formal agreements between services, yet in the study undertaken by the author of this course (Rix et al., 2013b) one head teacher still stated that only 20 to 30 per cent of teachers plan and teach in the appropriately collaborative manner. Another head said that 50 to 60 per cent struggle with collaboration. Consequently, even though the organisation of special educational training is very different between Italy and England, both countries evidence the practices suggested by the TAs in Lehane's study. In both countries support is frequently provided in isolation, without collaboration with the class teacher. Consequently, the practitioners experience unclear and inequitable status in the class and in the organisation of the school (Devecchi et al., 2012). In both countries, the role of this additional adult reinforced the class teacher's view that certain children require specialist knowledge which they did not have access to. Consequently, the additional adult is not an equal collaborator but the deliverer of an individualised or small group support package separated from the collective

learning context. In such a situation, it is very hard for both parties to play a leading role since a key potential collaborator does not recognise the value of the other.

## 2.2 What is the cost?

In addition to the constraints of traditional roles and attitude, another barrier to an increase in co-teaching is cost. Generally, people are the greatest cost within the education system. If you double up the number of paid adults within the class or provide them with planning time you invariably increase the cost. However, there are administrations using contracts to define collaborative roles and to require some collaborative working.

### Activity 5: There are others doing it too

 30 minutes

There are also models of practice undertaken around the globe which encourage collaboration and involve relatively simple reorganisation of staff and teaching groupings, without great cost increases. For example, the author of this course has seen examples of:

- three or four teachers to two classes
- interconnected classrooms so staff and students can move between them
- a support teacher linked to a subject teacher
- support teachers allocated to a class regardless of identified support needs
- a flexible mix of teaching, support staff and students working across several classes depending upon curriculum and learning needs.

Collaborative practice can also take place beyond the classroom, for example through shared lesson planning which builds upon teachers personal, professional and practical resources. It is also possible to engage in these processes in informal ways, which is probably something that teachers have been doing down the ages.

**Watch these two videos** and as you do so consider the table which lays out challenges and strategies identified in a study of teacher collaboration in joint lesson planning (Yuan & Zhang, 2016).

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 5: Teacher Collaboration- Spreading Best Practices School-Wide





View at: [youtube:TIq3hLIYfCg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TIq3hLIYfCg)



Video 6: Collaborative working - Kingussie High School & Aviemore Community Sport Hub (The Open University is not responsible for external content.)

**Table 2: Challenges and strategies for teacher collaboration in joint lesson planning (based on Yuan & Zhang, 2016).**

Challenges	Coping strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Busy work schedule.</li> <li>• Too many 'assignments' from the district office.</li> <li>• A lack of collaborative awareness.</li> <li>• A lack of in-depth discussion.</li> <li>• Reluctance to critique others.</li> <li>• Teacher conformity in terms of thinking modes and teaching approaches.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rearranging teaching schedule to provide common meeting time.</li> <li>• Reducing and integrating 'assignments'.</li> <li>• The reform of teacher appraisal system to focus on group performance.</li> <li>• Guidance from a think tank.</li> <li>• Transforming teachers' attitude towards giving comments from passiveness to positivity.</li> <li>• Inviting a teaching-research officer to provide guidance.</li> </ul>

Now consider these two questions:

- To what degree do you feel there is a need to have a commitment from school leaders to provide support to enable and motivate collaboration?

- What opportunities can you see within these two videos which can be led in a bottom-up way?

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These videos recalled the personal nature of working with others. You might have thought about how frustrating it can feel when someone seems to be focused on something else or seems to be missing the point. You might have recognised the importance of understanding other people's priorities and how anyone can easily be preoccupied. The need to understand each other seems so obvious but it is not always clear when or if people are misunderstanding each other, and it is easy to just let such misunderstandings pass by unchallenged. The comment in the table about conformity of thinking was particularly interesting, given the earlier suggestion about the need to share values. Go back to the Yuan and Zhang paper and read this quote from a teacher:


We have been working together for so long. I think the high level of interdependence among us became an impediment to our collaborative learning because our ways of thinking and teaching were quite alike.

This made a great deal of sense. Collaboration is not of itself a panacea if it just means replicating old exclusionary ways. Part of leading is challenging ourselves. This was clearly what had happened in the class in the video.

Mel Ainscow (2016), an academic who has spent many years advocating and supporting collaborative practice to enhance school effectiveness and inclusion, talks about it being relatively easy to maintain cooperation until those moments when hard decisions must be made. The challenges people face emerge within their teaching and leadership practices alongside their relationships with the broad range of external and internal partners with whom they work (other schools, parents, support staff, teachers, community groups, universities, employers and public services). Ainscow notes that the most likely point of breakdown regards the setting of priorities and the allocation of resources. These moments can of course arise at all levels of the system and in relation to all the partners involved in the potential collaboration. It was clear in the videos that the participants needed to feel they had available workload and not too much to do. This seemed to be a systemic issue. The points in the table about a shift to a collective appraisal system was also systemic.

It was clear that practitioners are supported to work together if the leadership of the organisation recognise this as a priority. However, if we recognise leadership as a moment of agency within a particular context, then collaboration seems likely to present more opportunities for such moments to emerge. For example, the engagement with the wider community both in the strategies and the community sport hub opened up many interesting ideas and possibilities for leading new practices and relationships within and beyond the school setting. These could be supported by top-down management processes too but could build upon personal interests and understandings. Part of this process seemed a willingness to take a risk. This issue of risk taking seemed fundamental to the collaboration on view. This encourages thinking about the notion of risk that is central to participatory practices, where developing new ways of working not only involves taking risks in relation to the nature and quality of what you are producing but also in terms of the relationships between participants (Rix, 2020).

## 3 Embracing uncertainty



***Are you sure  
you are sure?***

There are two overarching ways to frame how we respond to the challenges of inclusion; one is based on a *model of certainty* and the other on a *model of uncertainty* (Rix, 2020). The former model is governed by the drive to divide things up into manageable parts (Toulmin, 2001); this is associated with traditional methods and special education where processes and structures seek and construct relative certainties for their systems to function; the latter is associated with inclusive approaches, which embrace ideas of doubt and accept that any position we take is momentary and shifting. The former model builds upon the grammars of schooling, those regular structures and rules that have traditionally organised the work of instruction, such as single teachers, subjects, classes, lessons, age-grades and testing (Tyack & Tobin, 1994); while in contrast the latter model represents an active, continuously incomplete and ongoing process (for example Flem & Keller, 2000; UNESCO IBE, 2008). As it appears in the literature, inclusive education reflects an ontological position which views practice as fundamentally uncertain and knowledge as being emergent and situated (Rix, 2020). From this perspective, understanding is always incomplete, there is no single correct way to support the learning of any child, and our thinking and conclusions must be questioned (Hart, 1996). It can be seen as a commitment to proactively eliminate barriers, to respond flexibly and to create change in the policies, practices and cultures of 'regular' schools (CRPD, 2016). It involves a change in the 'behaviour' of adults (Ainscow & Sandhill, 2010), adopting a pedagogy underpinned by a principle of transformability (Hart, 2010), evolving and changing continually (Hausstätter, 2014). Individual needs should not be ignored but addressed 'within a larger framework of 'we' as a class' (Bannink et al, 2019 p. 15). Inclusion can be regarded as a matter of how we define good education, with a beautiful risk at its heart (Biesta, 2010, 2015). This recognition of the uncertain fits with the notion of leadership as distributed across the context (and situation) in which it takes place; it fits with a notion of leadership emerging through interaction with other people and the environment, as a moment of agency which is supported within the context.

### Activity 6: In support of doubt?

 40 minutes

Read the following extract from:

Kraft, M. A., Papay, J. P., Johnson, S. M., Charner-Laird, M., Ng, M., & Reinhorn, S. (2015) ‘

[Educating amid uncertainty: The organizational supports teachers need to serve students in high-poverty, urban schools'](#) (Read pp. 9–14 from Findings – stop at the reference Johnson et al., 2014).

As you read consider these questions:

- What is the nature of the uncertainty recognised in the study? What other areas of uncertainty do you think might be relevant in schools of which you have experience?
- Do you feel that there can be greater certainty in some settings? Why or why not?
- In what way can more challenging circumstances open a wider variety of opportunities to take the lead?
- How should an understanding and recognition of uncertainty effect our practice? Spend some time thinking about how you could use uncertainty and doubt as a frame for resolving a school-based challenge.
- For example: How would you approach a problem?
  - How would you resolve a problem?
  - How would you view people involved within that situation?

In this paper the uncertainty is situated very much in the lives of the students and their communities, however it is also something which arises for numerous other reasons. Everyday relationships in the classroom are affected by all kinds of inter and intrapersonal factors as well as by issues arising from the physical space. There are also a great many institutional opportunities for uncertainty. An interesting example arises from the profoundly contradictory messages underpinning formal requirement for responding to a diverse classroom. Practitioners for example, have to deal with policy makers, teacher trainers and organisations like UNESCO (2020) saying they need to use methods for planning based on individual educational needs while at the same time calling for them to focus on all children. Allan (2008) identified a range of similar irresolvable contradiction that teachers face around: competencies, ways of working, the classroom focus, understandings about learners and how to support learning. All of these create the space for uncertainty and require teachers to accept that any semblance of certainty is either a mirage or will be short-lived. The teachers in the Kraft paper seemed to feel that there was less challenge in working in better resourced environments; another implication being that these spaces provided greater certainty. This notion of certainty however is not one which equates neatly to the uncertainty at the heart of inclusive practice or the beautiful risk which Biesta refers to.

Drawing on the model of uncertainty outlined by Rix (2020):

- Approaches associated with inclusion often begin with a presumption of uncertainty; perhaps accepting it or recognising it for what it is; perhaps seeking to confront it or thinking through it. This means you arrive wanting to question preconceptions about the situation and the context in which it has arisen. You acknowledge a situation's uncertain relational nature and the interdependence of people within it. In seeking to explore or confront difficulties, challenges and opportunities you try to critically engage and reflect on the situation. This involves thinking in hypothetical ways, seeing the dilemmas which surround you or seeking pragmatic, proactive, reactive or radical pathways. One can recognise difficulties within a system as an experience for all involved. As Florian (2015) suggests an experience can be individualised but it will be primarily socially-situated.

- To move beyond doubt you need to find possibilities. These possibilities can only arise from the situation in which you are. This requires developing an understanding of the context, accepting its relational nature – both in terms of personal and cultural relationships. This is perhaps why Allan (2008) talks of the unpredictability of learning, the search for something undecidable taking place within an ethically rich drama. It is perhaps why she calls for teachers to create openings for inclusion.
- To enable the creation of these openings, we benefit from the perspectives of others who have an insight into the experience. This develops a collective view of the experience, and it involves us in asking questions of the people and the systems. This is perhaps why approaches associated with inclusion call for collaborative models of teaching and learning, though this comes in many forms (Solis et al, 2012). It is also perhaps why educators and learners need to move from being ‘participants within’ to ‘contributors to’ educational spaces (Veck, 2009).
- Out of this collective focus, a possible way forward will emerge, one that is not defined in a fixed way, but has expectations and recognises the uncertainty of any solution and the need to continue questioning. Conclusions which we may come to will be recognised as momentary positions (Benjamin et al., 2003). Things will not fit neatly. They will be positioned amongst opportunities and risks. Responses will need to be flexible within the possible disorder. We will be dealing with shifting positions with porous boundaries.

It is hopefully clear, why at the heart of such an approach is a constant engagement with risk. ‘Valid’ participation is not situated in a singular or neatly defined space. It is based on continual negotiation, with participants needing to move to where others are. To lead in this situation requires a willingness to embrace the risk inherent in being open to the power of participants, in how one conceives of and delivers support, and in how one recognises the voice of all those within that learning context (Rix, 2021).

The Kraft article also concludes that individual teachers could not single-handedly manage the challenges they faced, but that organisational responses varied greatly. This meant that in some schools teachers’ ideas and expertise was drawn upon to develop solutions, while in others there was a top-down, instrumental approach to their contributions and they had to follow practices identified by senior management. This variability seemed to be another example of uncertainty in practice. You will explore this issue of context a little more.


### 3.1 Institutional and personal spaces

Everyone involved in a school situation will be inhabiting a different institutional and personal space. A key component in any taking-a-lead will involve negotiating a place within such institutional and personal spaces. The production of these spaces is achieved through human practices, through representation, regulation and organisation, as well as through social, cultural, political, and economic practices and their associated meanings (Lefebvre, 1991).

A valuable tool for exploring spaces is the notion of ‘boundaries’. This is partly because we come to understand who we are by comparing ourselves to others and other groupings, but also because boundaries are the spaces in which different practices,

values, knowledge and resources come together. It is at boundaries that we bring together different interpretations of multi-faceted tasks and can gain insights into the ways of others so as to enable collaboration (Edwards, 2011).

### Activity 7: And the same to you?

 40 minutes

Let's consider an example of how these different world views can influence our practices and our capacity to collaborate.

Read the following pdf which is an extract taken from Waitoller, F. R., & Kozleski, E. B. (2013) 'Working in boundary practices: Identity development and learning in partnerships for inclusive education', *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 31, pp. 25–45. ([Sections 3.3–3.6 – pp. 19–29.](#))

In this paper there are two acronyms:

- UITE – This stands for Urban Initiative for Teacher Education, a project involving 3 schools and a University in the United States.
- CHAT – This stands for Cultural Historical Activity Theory, an approach that explores the socio-cultural, historical, and political contexts of partnerships; allowing researchers to focus on rules, divisions of labour, and the tools that orient participants towards objects or outcomes.

As you are reading consider the following questions. Make notes about your thoughts.

- What aspects of the boundary (or boundaries) does this paper draw attention to?
- What is the importance of consensus around boundary objects for co-operation?
- Can you think examples of these aspects of boundaries that you have experienced in your own life?
- Why do you think it is useful (or not useful) in finding ways to lead, to think of boundaries as socially created?

.....

The authors of this paper focus upon four aspects of the boundary: practices, brokers, identities and objects. The coming together of services to provide support is an excellent example of boundary practices with overlapping activity systems; while the practitioners can be seen as boundary brokers who are trying to deal with the ambiguities of their different systems. Another example occurred around identities, and how the process of studying a course such as this one, serves to enable people to reform themselves around cultural tools that come from other arenas. In this latter context, the paper you have just read is serving as a boundary object. It exists between different social spaces with varying interpretations and functions; for instance, it is functioning as a means of reporting research, as a tool for teaching, and potentially as a tool to effect schools practices.

Viewing the boundary in this way provides a focus to reflect upon experiences, and different socially-situated perspectives. Exploring boundary objects seems a particularly rich focus for such reflection since experience of them depends upon the use of them. These objects exist between different social spaces with varying interpretations and functions; they do not come with an inherent nature. Groups working with an object will frequently need to shift back-and-forth between their



different interpretations. In scaling an object up, however so that a standardised approach is taken to that object, there seems to be a danger of dominance around one group's interpretation of any given object, reflecting the relative importance of that grouping in the wider social space. For example, medical labels (such as autism, down syndrome, PMLD: profound and multiple learning disabilities, PTSD: Post-traumatic stress disorder) carry with them a particular power which arises from their function both in medical and administrative spaces. But the power allotted to these functions, carries over into educational or family spaces where alternative interpretations and responses are equally in evidence. These interpretations might, for example, be associated with advocacy and relational understandings of learning (and labelling) which have less influence than the dominant interpretation from the space beyond.

The originators of the notion of boundary object stated in their first paper (Star and Griesemer, 1989) that boundary objects are both robust enough to maintain an identity across sites but fluid enough to adapt to local needs and constraints which arise from several parties using them. In the school context you could consider such objects as: a school library, a timetable, a lesson plan, or a formalised support plan. These may serve to structure or support communications and the development of practices, but how we understand them (their form, their value to us and how we interact with them) will vary hugely across spaces and contexts.

A leading role everyone can play when thinking about marginality and people's membership in different social spaces is to reflect upon the objects associated with these spaces and to use these reflections to inform practise. There are, for example, tensions between multiple membership across group, alongside problems of identity and loyalty, which can be experienced through our uses of objects across those spaces.

Meanings attached to objects are fundamentally uncertain. They do not neatly transfer across different systems and arenas of use. For example, understandings of an impairment, a religious symbol, a type of food and so forth; as they move across boundaries (between spaces), particular interpretations come to dominate, and minority interpretations can create vulnerabilities. Consequently, people can easily find themselves oscillating between ways of presenting themselves and their understandings. They can feel a pressure to compromise their other interpretation or to take a risk in revealing their own interpretation.

Such responses are particularly significant in a diverse learning space such as a classroom, where students and staff can have a wide variety of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds and widely varying responses to everyday boundary objects. The role of leadership in this context, would seem to be about raising possible other interpretations. It is about challenging presumptions about standardised or residual categories and advocating for other people's understandings and experiences.

## 4 Advocating for others




***Could you  
speak up?***

Drawing on a range of literature Bradley-Levine (2021) suggests a variety of advocacy roles that teachers can take up. They can:

- create democratic and caring learning spaces
- use place-based and culturally-relevant instructional approaches that aim to empower students
- build connections to those who share similar cultural backgrounds or educational experiences
- seek solidarity with other teachers through collective struggle on behalf of their students
- knowingly act toward social change
- take an interest in social issues at all levels of the school, the local community, and wider world
- challenge themselves to do what is right rather than do what is uncomplicated
- challenge colleagues to put students' needs first and not their own self-interests.

These advocacy roles can be undertaken across the full range of areas in which teachers (and other practitioners) play a leadership role. This, for example might include classroom and instructional improvement, parental involvement, school–community relationships and school organisation. It may involve formal roles or informal activities, involving participative decision making, collaboration, initiating and implementing improvements, cultivating a professional community, or supporting others individually and/or collectively (Smylie & Eckhart, 2018).

### Activity 8: Speaking up

 45 minutes

Watch the following videos, which cover a wide range of ways in which practitioners can advocate for others. As you watch make notes about:

- the different kinds of advocacy you see in evidence
- the capacities which are (perhaps) needed to work this way
- other areas and approaches to advocacy which might be possible.



Video content is not available in this format.

Video 7: How ESOL teachers and specialists can advocate for their students



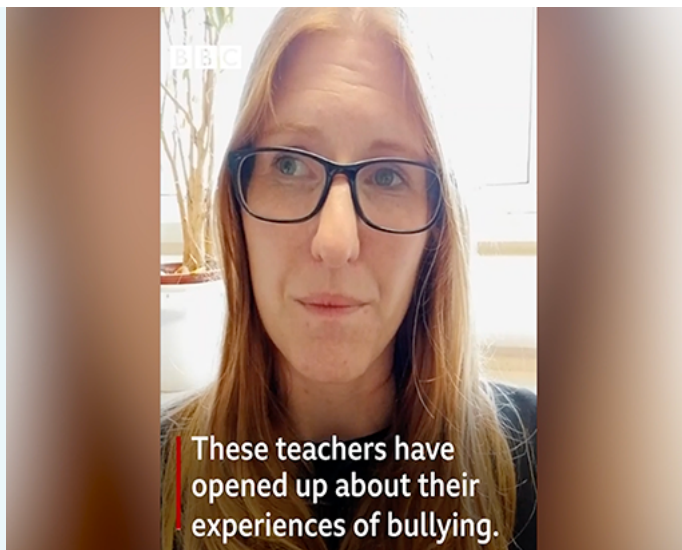
Video content is not available in this format.

Video 8: Advocacy in Action: Speaking Up for Students and the Teaching Profession



Video content is not available in this format.

Video 9: Bullying: Teachers share their stories in video for pupils



Video content is not available in this format.  
Video 10: Domestic violence education



Video content is not available in this format.  
Video 11: Diversity in the classroom



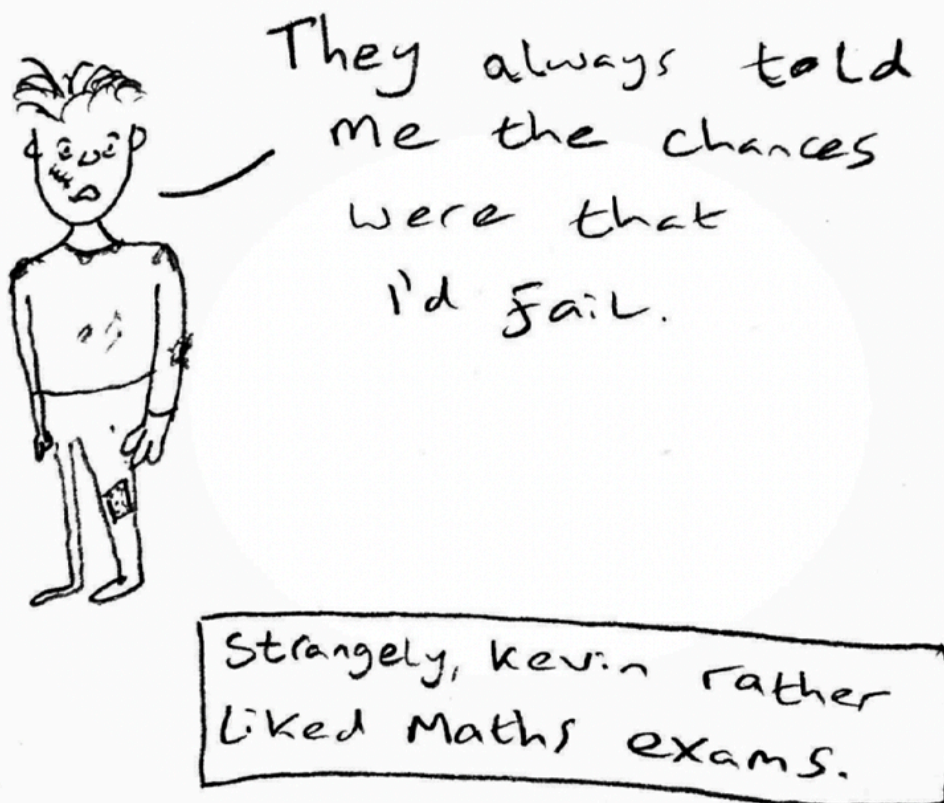
People advocated in ways that ranged from the very mundane to the very proactive and political; their actions could simply involve them being themselves to sharing life experiences; they might just require them to share practices with colleagues but they could also open up profound, troubling issues and personal positions. The people in these videos seemed to show a range of capacities, including a willingness to collaborate and share ideas, a capacity to take risks and put themselves in the public spotlight, as well as to explore their own identity, understandings and life histories, and to be open to issues which may be beyond their experience. You might have spotted that there was no mention of the need for teachers to go on training courses or transform their identity and practices, but that the advocacy on show was very much a result of having a concern for others and being an engaged citizen, with an interest in creating change.

There were a great many issues that were not in evidence; for example, issues of disability or additional support were largely missing, as were issues of gender or sexuality. People will be campaigning about these issues too. The authors of this course, for example, have seen films about issues such as advocating for refugees, children of military personnel and people experiencing hunger and poverty.

The breadth of advocacy is not something which can be defined by categories, issues or types. It requires ongoing flexibility which can respond to the numerous and fluid issues that arise in a school context. Advocating for others (or yourself), therefore, is not always simple and there are times where the process can bring people into contact with new understandings and practices. For example, policy advocacy can require that practitioners acquire the language and procedures used by policymakers (Aydarova et al., 2022). These practitioners may also need to push against barriers when attempting to make a policy difference beyond the school, where their expertise can be doubted or they can lack the support or time required to be fully involved in the various stages of policy making (Derrington & Anderson, 2020).

Another challenge is ensuring that the manner or nature of what you are advocating for is in the best interests of the people you are advocating for. For example, many would suggest that viewing disability as a deficit in the child is very much against the interests of the child. Yet this is the dominant discourse used by schools and parents in talking about children's interests and needs (for example Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013). In seeking to support people in school we can easily be advocating for practices which actually marginalise them further.

The unintentional capacity for practitioners to misrepresent people is evident in an interesting study which looked at how teachers understand the community that their students come from. The disparities and injustices they identified did not properly reflect the students' authentic communities and meant practitioner solutions placed responsibility on members of a presumed 'community'. In order to properly understand the issues they were engaging with the researchers suggested: 'teachers must be able to facilitate conversations to understand these disparities within the larger systemic-historical context' (Philip et al., 2013, p. 182).



## 4.1 Understanding the best option


There are various terms which can be applied to practitioners who are seeking to lead on issues of equity in their everyday lives. One such is Teacher activist. Teacher activists often draw upon feminist and critical pedagogies with a strong focus on social justice. For example, a study by Marttinen et al. (2020) explored how an activist approach could name, critique, and transform inequities associated with school-aged girls' understanding of themselves and the world around them and the effect it has on their involvement in physical activities. They concluded that at heart of the activist approach was a depth of trust and a capacity to cultivate that trust, and a recognition that it was a process of small steps.

Such activism can be undertaken individually within a learning context but it can also be experienced in a wider, collective context. Let's consider an example of 'pedagogical



resistance' from an early years setting in Scotland. The practitioners named their approach 'Lived Stories', and it was intended to serve as an alternative to the local authority's top-down 'tick-box' methods for assessing the children. They wished to capture a holistic and more impressionistic portrait of children, illustrating the richness and complexity of their educational experiences.

### Activity 9: Knowing best

 60 minutes

Read the following article: McNair, L. J., Blaisdell, C., Davis, J. M., & Addison, L. J. (2021) '[Acts of pedagogical resistance: Marking out an ethical boundary against human technologies](#)', *Policy Futures in Education*, 19(4), pp. 478–492. (Read from p. 483 – p. 489 starting at: Research methods.)

As you read make notes about:

- The competing values which are at play.
- The necessity to compromise to achieve goals.
- The ways in which voices are silenced.
- The fears you might have in working in a way that subverted what was being expected of you by central authorities.
- How simple it would be to introduce a new way of working in a system with which you are familiar.

The practitioners' had a different view of how to evaluate learning and development and their values were therefore in conflict with the dominant national model. The power of the system to evaluate and judge the setting however made them pull back from a full engagement with the possibilities presented by the Lived Stories approach, including not engaging with the voice of children within the process. This acceptance of compromise allowed them to enact processes that concerned them and to develop their practice. The Author of this course recalled a more extreme version of this stepping back from the challenge in a study about 6 English Language Arts pre service teachers in the United States (Cook, 2021). They recognised injustice and inequity and wished to address such issues as teacher-activists. However, they soon adopted a hands-off approach that the researchers called 'passive activism'. This allowed them to shield and distance themselves from the visibility and vulnerability that accompanies activist work. As their initial topic became more concrete, they became less directly involved and put themselves at less personal risk. Cook recognises however that such passivity was not necessarily a bad thing but could be seen as a necessary first step into civic engagement; a step which mediates the potential risks.

The Author reflected on the times when they have put their necks on the line for something they believed in. The nature of risk is something which has come up repeatedly in this course. Risk is a fundamental aspect of any consideration of formal and informal leadership; after all even seeking to avoid risk is itself a risky undertaking.

In seeking to put ourselves forward as advocates we put our own sense of identity on the line; we are aligning ourselves with others or with an idea, which by its nature is not the dominant idea of the time – otherwise why would we be having to advocate for it?

It is likely that there will be push back of some kind or further complications in moving a proposal forward. This can have an impact upon our relationships with others in ways which may not be predictable. However, the purpose of taking such a risk is the possibility of a positive outcome. It is also about one's own sense of empowerment; a moment in which you are agentive in search of a broader social ambition. Of course, the range of issues which need confronting is huge. Our systems are, after all, profoundly unfair for many people. In many ways the things which need challenging may feel overwhelming. This perhaps is part of the problem identified in the paper by Cook; people want to make profound and significant changes, but the reality is that this may be nearly impossible to achieve. This brings us back to the notion of the possible; the importance of small steps and small victories.

## Conclusion

In this course you have considered the nature of leadership and the ways in which it is fundamentally a key part of everyday school practice. As members of a school community we are expected to work closely with each other, creating a range of opportunities to explore our own understandings and to engage with opportunities for change. At its core this requires that we accept that we cannot control our educational experiences; they will be involved in a fundamentally uncertain relationship even within formal structures designed to deliver greater certainty. The uncertainty however opens up spaces in which everyone can explore the needs and priorities of others; it opens up opportunities to seek ways of engaging with positive change. In thinking about your involvement with activism you will also have to think about your own values and the nature of the change you wish to take place. The context in which this change is situated will be full of diverse cultural, political or historical influences, however it seems fair to suggest that in most educational contexts people will share a common concern for other people's well-being.

When considering how you can contribute to individual or collective well being, it may be helpful to reflect back on the broad range of issues and examples of activism highlighted in this course. There have been examples of larger numbers of people joining together to drive change. But leading others to be empowered and/or championing equality, inclusion and participation is often embedded in the small, localised activities that occur within our everyday routines. Raising issues with a group of colleagues, pausing to reflect upon the ways in which things are done, even that random act of kindness can be the building blocks that lead to change.

In many ways, studying this course and staying with it to the end is an example of one small step, an engagement with activism. It would suggest that you have a commitment to understanding issues associated with equality and how you can support others to move towards a better lived experience.

Making a difference requires we take that first step...and then keep on going.

If you haven't already, you might want to consider exploring the related OpenLearn course [Leadership for inclusion: thinking it through](#).

If you enjoyed this course, you might be interested in the Open University [Inclusive Practice Leadership and Management Masters](#) pathways.

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### Text

Activity 1: extract: Grassroots Leadership Models: A Conceptual History of Thought and Practice Section: Elements of Grassroots Leadership that can be Transferred to Educational Leadership, pp.11–13 in Davidson, F.D. & Hughes, T.R.(2021) 'Grassroots Leadership Models: A Conceptual History of Thought and Practice', *The Palgrave Handbook of Educational Leadership and Management Discourse*, pp. 1–16. Publisher Palgrave Macmillan.

Activity 4: Quotes taken from: Lehan, T. (2016) "Cooling the mark out": experienced teaching assistants' perceptions of their work in the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs in mainstream secondary schools, *Educational Review*, 68(1), pp. 4–23.

Activity 7: Waitoller, F. R., & Kozleski, E. B. (2013) 'Working in boundary practices: Identity development and learning in partnerships for inclusive education', *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 31, pp. 25–45. © The Author(s)

Activity 9: Acts of pedagogical resistance: Marking out an ethical boundary against human technologies 2021 The Author(s) McNair, L. J., Blaisdell, C., Davis, J. M., & Addison, L. J. This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed

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Table 1: A model of change goals and grassroots leadership actions and strategies (based on Ehrich & English, 2012) Springer International Publishing

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Activity 3: 'Dolores has finally found a school she can get into' courtesy Jonathan Rix

Activity 8: 'Strangely, Kevin rather liked maths exams courtesy' Jonathan Rix

### **Videos**

Video 2: Middle Leadership: courtesy: National Academy for Educational Leadership Wales [Home - National Leadership Wales \(nael.cymru\)](http://nael.cymru)

Video 5: Teacher Collaboration: Spreading Best Practices School-Wide. Courtesy: <https://www.edutopia.org/>

Video 7: How ESOL teachers and specialists can advocate for their students. Courtesy: Colorin Colorado

[How ESOL teachers and specialists can advocate for their students - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)

Video 8: Advocacy in Action: Speaking Up for Students and the Teaching Profession. Courtesy: International Literacy Association <https://www.literacyworldwide.org>

Video 9: Bullying: Teachers share their stories in video for pupils Courtesy: Perins School <https://www.perins.net/>

Video 10: Domestic violence education: Public Service Broadcasting Trust (Fixers UK) <https://www.fixers.org.uk/>

Video 11: Diversity in the classroom. Courtesy The City University of New York [The City University of New York \(cuny.edu\)](http://www.cuny.edu)

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