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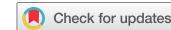Routledge
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Leading Inclusive Education: The Impact of a City's Place-Based Pedagogical Partnership with Higher Education on Secondary School Inclusion

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ABSTRACT: *The focus of this article is leadership for inclusive education. The work presented explores a three-year (2021–2024) place-based pedagogical partnership (PBPP) with schools and higher education (HE) leading change for inclusion and school improvement across Plymouth city's secondary school network. National and international governments emphasise the role HE has in partnering with its local communities to achieve equal education access, inclusive pupil progress and student equality. The aims of this project and partnership were firstly to build meaningful relationships across secondary school leadership teams, local council, regional government and two city universities, and secondly to develop sustained practices that had evidenced impact on inclusion. The data reported highlights how the project co-created new practices, communication channels and policies, which contributed to school improvement, inclusive education and the development of new pedagogy. A pedagogical partnership model was established, taking a critical collaborative approach in aims and working from a place-based, contextual space. Findings show how the partnership impacted on the collaboration style of school leaders; improved pupil attendance, attainment and achievement developed new Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programmes; developed alternative education provision; and established a mentoring programme for school pupils. Outcomes and findings contribute knowledge to the evolving discourse of inclusive education, emphasising the relevance and impact of place-based pedagogic partnerships working across institutions to lead inclusion.*

Keywords: Inclusionequalitypedagogical partnershipplace-basedleadership

1. Introduction

> What if equality . . . were to provide a point of departure? What would it mean to make equality a presupposition rather than a goal, a practice rather than a reward situated firmly in some distant future . . . ? (Ross, 1991, p. xix)

In this paper we explore the impact place-based pedagogical partnership (PBPP) had in leading and sustaining new forms of secondary level inclusive education for school improvement. Inclusion in this article means the attendance, progression, and success of all learners within the formal education system regardless of background, challenge or need. This paper draws together findings from a three-year study undertaken from 2021 to 2024. In presenting the 'lived experience' of partners, the paper outlines challenges faced, impact on participants, learning gained and evidence-based practical changes focused on inclusion. We present research findings including knowledge shared from our participants' perspectives as they navigated and collaborated to lead, co-create and apply new and revised practices for inclusion.

We draw on the work of Cook-Sather *et al.* (2014, pp. 6–7) to define pedagogical partnership (PP) as 'a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally to curricular or pedagogical conceptualisation, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis'. The PP model traditionally sits in the higher education space referring to models of shared learning, teaching and curriculum development, with students working in parity with academics (Cook-Sather *et al*., 2014). PPs are known for their inclusive impact and co-creation of new practices for equality in education; they emphasise the equal role of partners and value the knowledge each brings to the work (Gibson and Cook-Sather, 2020). Matthews *et al.* (2019) argue that a pedagogical partnership gives priority to dialogue in teaching and learning and negotiation between partners that is mutually respectful and inclusive. The aim of dialogue in a pedagogic partnership is co-creation: Chemi and Krogh (2017, p. 8) define co-creation in pedagogical partnerships as 'the process of creative (original and valuable) generation of shared meaning and development'. This relates to the work and practice of comparable models, for instance partnership learning communities (Glenn *et al*., 2017) communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) and service learning (Deeley, 2015).

The model developed in Plymouth involved partners from the following institutions: 19 secondary schools, a city council and department of education regional leaders, collaborating with a research team working across two city universities. Research data explores how the collaboration resulted in cross-sector (secondary and higher education) systemic change, established a revised city leadership plan for inclusion, caused challenges for partners resulting in resistance to the work, developed new channels of communications, and evidenced practices of inclusion which made an impact on measures of equality.

Our findings corroborate the former and current UK government's position (DfE, 2024; OfS, 2022) on the HE sector prioritising innovative collaborations with partners beyond the campus gates to enhance local community place-based wellbeing and higher education's contributions to global priorities of equality and inclusion (UNESCO, 2017). We conclude our paper by considering how applying a PBPP model offers a way forward for a representative and effective understanding of inclusion and effective leadership for inclusion as evidenced in this research project.

2. Leading Inclusion Through Place-Based Practice

Internationally, universities are extending their external collaborations and partnerships for progress and impact in research, student learning and professional or graduate experience (Jones *et al.*, 2021). More recently, this growth has been in response to complex national and global challenges, such as poverty, sustainability, social wellbeing and inclusion, as referenced in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) (UNESCO, 2017). In response, universities are extending their collaborative projects and networks beyond the lecture theatre and campus, including students working and learning within their local community and wider networks to advance value and enhance social and economic wellbeing (Filho *et al.*, 2021; Jones *et al.*, 2021).

This development in HE reflects a place-based education model, where partnerships, understanding and working for wellbeing in the local and contextual community is prioritised by practitioners and leaders in education and more recently government (OfS, 2022; Yemini *et al.*, 2023). Increasingly popular, place-based work challenges forms of education which decentre community priorities and needs. It aims to understand local challenges and the relationships and interconnections that exist to enhance a community's life and people's well-being (Vander Ark *et al.*, 2020; Yemini *et al.*, 2023).

The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) prompted many countries, including the UK, to take a new direction in their education policy and aims, one that emphasised social justice and equality, revising pedagogic and systemic practices for the inclusion and successful education of all children in one school community regardless of need, disability or circumstance. This global shift in education policy and practice provided a foundation for the development of inclusive education as an international discourse, as follows (UNESCO, 1994, p. 11):

> Inclusion and participation are essential to human dignity and to the enjoyment and exercise of human rights. The fundamental principle of the inclusive school is that all children should learn together, where possible, and that ordinary schools must recognise and respond to the diverse needs of their students.

Since the 1990s, inclusion in education has been promoted globally, hailed by leaders as a human rights matter and policy priority (Banks, 2025; Oliver, 1996; UNESCO, 2020), whilst the lack of inclusion has also been identified as a source of multi-generational education failures (DfE, 2012; Warnock, 2005). Inclusion, it is argued, can only happen if 'mainstream schools become capable of educating all children in their local communities' (Ainscow, 2020, p. 8). A more recent, globally accepted position on inclusion can be sourced within Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability [CRPD] (UNESCO 2017; United Nations, 2025), as follows: 'every person with a disability has the right to "inclusive, quality and free" education on an equal basis with other children, no matter their disability, gender, race and socio-economic and cultural background'.

Whilst this is a recognised position on inclusion, the complexities and challenges of translation into a clear definition with evidenced and sustained practice is consistently problematic (Gibson *et al.*, 2024; Qvortrup and Qvortrup, 2018; Williams-Brown *et al.*, 2023). In considering current applications and definitions of inclusive education, Byrne (2022, p. 302) notes concerns regarding the concept's elasticity and inconsistent practices as follows, 'the inclusion umbrella has become so broad and all encompassing, that it risks becoming a new way to describe and legitimise age old norms of mere integration and/or segregation within mainstream settings'.

As further highlighted by Azorin and Ainscow (2020, p. 59), capturing the concept of inclusion as both an educational principle and a practical application remains amongst the most challenging tasks related to education'. Inclusion's conceptual flexibility means that many schools and educators grapple with what and how inclusion can be implemented in practice and at any one time and place (Ainscow, 2020; Qvortrup and Qvortrup, 2018).

Research has highlighted the variables that contribute towards successful inclusive education. These range from the application of democratic management and decision making processes in schools (Gibson and Blandford, 2005; Osborne *et al.*, 2021), to managers who work in inclusive ways (Osborne *et al.*, 2021; Woodcock and Woolfson, 2019), school staff who have positive attitudes towards inclusion, staff with high levels of teaching efficacy for inclusion and work in partnership with colleagues (Wray *et al.*, 2022), the availability of necessary resources (Woodcock and Woolfson, 2019), and education community networks that partner with and support families, children and parents (Blandford *et al.*, 2023b; Osborne *et al.*, 2021). In England it is the responsibility of regional government and local councils working with school and Multi-Academy leadership teams to translate inclusive education ideas and policy into effective practice and establish effective leadership of this work in their community. As reflected in research evidence, national education results, pupil progression data, the Universities UK Blueprint for Change (2024) and the previous UK Government's policy on alternative SEND provision

(Department for Education, 2023), the 4 countries of the UK, are struggling to achieve this (Butler, 2025; UK Parliament, 2024).

Addressing the challenge of inclusion's ideological and conceptual flexibility, Qvortrup and Qvortrup (2018, p. 804) assert the need 'for an educational definition of inclusion which covers the numerous processes of inclusion and exclusion that unfold in education'. They proffer that the discourse of Inclusive Education must first understand its history – what *was* inclusion – secondly grasp its contemporary milieu – what *is* inclusion – and thirdly critically consider what inclusion will *become*, including its possibilities. Qvortrup and Qvortrup further maintain that a framework based on systems-theory is required for inclusion to be understood as a multidimensional process, occurring in many arenas (formal and informal education spaces) and at various times. Sandoval and Messiou (2022) further advance the tensions involved in defining and practising inclusive education as a system-wide process. They argue that, at their core, frustrations with inclusion, institutional and cultural blockages can be addressed through school improvement and sustained systemic change. Sandoval and Messiou (2022, p. 780) also consider inclusion's broader frame of reference, evidencing the importance of context:

> Inclusive education is a contested term, with varying definitions in different contexts [...] We are talking about processes that do not point out to a univocal or unidirectional path, but rather constitute a broad frame of reference, interpreted and understood differently according to different groups and institutions [.] this can be achieved through improving schools [.] following Hopkins's definition 'a systematic and sustained effort, which seeks to change the internal conditions in the schools'.

This point is also made by Ainscow where it is evidenced that (2020, p. 123): 'efforts to promote inclusion and equity within education systems should be based on an analysis of particular contexts.'

The UK SEND and Alternative Provision Plan (Department for Education, 2023) aligns with the previous government's Headteachers' standards document (Department for Education, 2020a) in its attempt to deliver a successful and sustained model of inclusive education through prioritising cross-sector partnership with higher education for learner progression. The Headteachers' standards document (Department for Education, 2020a) includes a section directing education leaders to work closely with key user groups – including parents, pupils, teachers and school leaders – when delivering inclusive education, offering a lengthy definition of leadership for inclusion but lacking context-based case study examples of what generates evidence-based impact and can be replicated.

Blandford (2017) argues that effective leadership for inclusion focuses on models of partnership, where leaders prioritise the building and sustaining of practitioner and leadership networks both within and external to their school communities. That position is corroborated by Azorín and Ainscow's study (2020, p. 58) on cross-sector collaboration as modelled with a group of schools in

Northern Spain. Their work evidences the importance of partnership and applying a contextual focus in 'generating credible evidence [...] developing trust among stakeholders; and resolving contradictions and tensions.' A key outcome of Azorín and Ainscow's study, was the importance of reviewing the learning and teaching context and hearing the views and ideas of all partners involved. Thompson *et al.*'s (2021) research adds further in making a case for the importance of autonomous leadership and equitable partnerships working across schools, as opposed to the 'indentured autonomy' (Thompson *et al.*, 2021) experienced by the academisation process. Writing in response to the centralisation of education in England, Thompson *et al.* (2021) argue that the academisation of schools offered a cruel optimism to leaders in education. What is needed, they argue, are equitable partnerships working across and within schools with genuine autonomous school leadership.

The following section provides a summary of the ecology of Plymouth city's education provision, its challenges with inclusion and its response in the form of a place-based partnership with a three-year research project.

3. A City's Story and a New Approach – Place-Based Pedagogical Partnership

Nation-state signatories of UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goals (UNESCO, 2017) must consider their purpose and application in their country, providing evidenced impact on the delivery of results by 2030. For many, global south and north, this takes place against a backdrop of unequal distribution of resources and learning opportunities caused by factors such as poverty, war, prejudice, politics, access to school, healthcare provision and disability (Ainscow, 2020; Kenny *et al.*, 2023). In 2020, the UNESCO (2020, p. 23) summarised the scale of the global challenge for inclusive education as:

- 'An estimated 258 million children, adolescents and youth, or 17% of the global total, are not in school.
- In 10 low- and middle-income countries, children with disabilities were 19% less likely to achieve minimum proficiency in reading than those without disabilities'.

Countries do not exist in a vacuum, and such inequalities are reflected in the UK. Consistent and increasing levels of inequality can be observed in England via the mapping of GCSE results and pupil attainment alongside attendance data and postcode or geographical location (Education Policy Institute (EPI), 2025). Research highlights the challenges of intergenerational poverty and its continuous existence within particular geographical locations, e.g., inner cities, coastal cities, English regions including the south-west and geographically isolated communities (Drescher *et al.*, 2022; Ivinson *et al.*, 2017)

In 2018–19 Plymouth's council and local authority had challenging Key Stage 4 results, with statistics on permanent pupil exclusions, attendance and achievement reflecting a wider national picture of stagnation in pupil learning and education achievement partly due to the Covid pandemic and continuing since (Major *et al*., 2024; Ofsted, 2023; Plymouth City Council, 2024; Williams-Brown *et al*., 2023). Major *et al*. (2024, p. 29) highlight the scale of these national challenges in a recent study, noting, 'the government's preferred benchmark [...] is the percentage of pupils achieving grades 5 ("good pass") or above in English and mathematics GCSEs. In 2018/19 before the pandemic this stood at 43.2% for pupils in all state schools. Our model suggests that this could drop to 38.8% for male pupils and 38.4% for female pupils taking GCSEs in 2030 . . . '. In 2021/22, Plymouth's English and Maths GCSE results were below regional and national averages, with 45.9% of pupils achieving a grade of 5+ in English and Maths compared with 46.6% nationally, the regional average of 49.2%, and the statistical neighbour (a group of demographically similar local authorities) average of 47.7% (Plymouth City Council, 2024).

This backdrop, along with Plymouth being selected for Covid-related government levelling-up funding (Department for Education, 2020b), encouraged the city council and regional DfE directors to consider school and university collaboration for inclusion and focus energy on delivering rapid and sustained improvement in a new cross school, authority and academy partnership. A Place-Based Pedagogic Partnership (PBPP) and strategy was launched across the city in 2021. As agreed and established by Regional Department for Education (Government) Directors, the PBPP consisted of the following partners: one co-ordinator employed by the local authority, nineteen headteachers and Special Educational Needs Co-Ordinators ([1]SENCOs), two city council leads for Education, one regional government lead, two university professors, two research assistants and forty university student mentors. Their task and foci were collaboration and partnership, to empower and transform Plymouth's leadership of inclusion, making progress with evidenced impact in schools, university partners and in turn, their city community. The model reflected seminal aspects of Place Based theory as articulated by Sobel (2004) and Yemini *et al*. (2023, p. 2) where pedagogy is noted as a core component: 'Place-based education (PBE) is considered an umbrella term for pedagogical practices that prioritise, community-based, and contextual learning to cultivate greater connectivity to local contexts and environments'.

Employed by the city council, the partnership's co-ordinator held termly in-person meetings, bringing the PBPP together to share school and pupil data, discuss and agree school improvement programmes and, in its early stages, co-create with university partners one city-wide definition of inclusion. Alongside these activities, university academics co-created with school partners a new programme of student mentoring for pupils at risk of exclusion. The mentoring programme opportunity was offered to all city secondary schools, via the

partnership's co-ordinator. Since its first year in 2022, the programme has had uptake from 15 of Plymouth's primary and secondary schools, run in consecutive years, and has worked with 203 pupils to date. Evaluation data show positive impact upon pupil attendance, attainment and wellbeing, enhanced mentor confidence and the sustained roll-out of our cross-discipline mentor training programme, offered annually to UG and PG students (Blandford *et al*., 2023b).

Early in its work, the partnership, led by the university academics considered an agreed definition of inclusion exploring where the cause of disadvantage and exclusion is situated and agreed that young people's disadvantage or inability to progress academically and/or socially is caused by systemic and cultural forms of exclusion, not by conscious choice. Thought was given to the essentials of education context – where and how learning, plus learner progression, take place. New ideas and practices of inclusive education were developed with teachers, student mentors, headteachers, and local government policy leaders. This giving of space for partner debate, reflection and the development of new pedagogical practices is considered essential for sustained and evidenced inclusive education (Ainscow, 2020).

The partnership strove to engineer a system that provided consistent and responsive city-wide and cross-sector leadership for inclusive education. The early stages involved the development of individualised school improvement plans. Building on this, participating schools collaborated to develop the following three strand strategy (Blandford *et al*., 2023a, p. 8):

(1) 'individual school support; partnership support; school improvement support
(2) a CPD offer that builds leadership capacity to implement evidence-based school improvement strategies leading to school improvement
(3) develop and implement a strategy that tackles key barriers to system improvement'

Partnership dialogue involved schools freely sharing their individual school data (pupil progression, attendance, exclusion), adopting a new city-wide co-ordinated system for alternative provision, developing a new graduated approach for inclusion and updated curriculum content for Maths and English, revising policies and practices for managing pupil behaviour and mental health, and new professional development programmes for teachers, teaching assistants and senior leaders. Less punitive forms of internal school exclusion practices were developed, aimed at keeping pupils in their school community and registered as attending their school. Furthermore, partners agreed that inclusive education needed a 3-stage approach, focused on: access, progress and achievement. The partnership worked to understand its education challenges, successes and needs as emergent from the context and culture of their city. As reflected in

Yemini *et al.* (2023), place-based working considers the social, geographical and cultural context; it does not look for generic approaches or models.

The cross-University research team, through a literature review process, devised three core research questions to guide the research component of the partnership's work. These informed the design and content of surveys, interview schedules and the mentor programme evaluation process:

- What leadership styles, actions and deliverables contribute evidenced impact for inclusion in Plymouth?
- What are the current communication challenges in schools for pupils, teachers and leaders?
- What communication and inclusive practice developments should be sustained for an inclusive PBPP community?

The framing of these questions recognises a link between leadership approaches and measurable inclusion outcomes, acknowledges the systemic nature of communication in educational institutions or environments and offers a shift in focus for the partnership from problem-identification to sustainability of evidenced impactful practices. In advance of the research's commencement, the work received ethical approval from Plymouth Marjon University's ethics committee, submitted and approved in August 2022 and followed BERA ethical guidelines (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018). The following section explores the projects methodology, along with the methods and tools developed to collect and analyse the data.

4. METHODOLOGY

The data for this paper comes from a mixed method research study, conducted to assess the impact and sustainability of Plymouth city's place-based pedagogic partnership for inclusion during the years 2021–2024. The research was conducted by a team representative of two city Universities, Professor Sonia Blandford at Plymouth Marjon University and Professor Suanne Gibson at University of Plymouth led the team, which included Jen Shute (University of Plymouth) and George Munn (Plymouth Marjon) as research assistants.

The mixed method research involved four stages: firstly, teacher, parent, and pupil questionnaires were distributed via the city's 19 secondary schools, resulting in responses from 907 pupils in years 7 and 10, 398 parents and 165 teachers. Secondly, 23 interviews were held with those who logged a willingness to be contacted upon completion of the questionnaire. Interviews were held with 6 Multi-Academy Trust Leaders, 10 school leaders, 2 teachers and 5 pupils. Thirdly, the co-creation, roll out, and evaluation of the 'Are We Included?' (AW!?) mentoring programme. Cohorts analysed for this paper included 136 at-risk pupils from across 7 Plymouth secondary schools, 17

teachers and school leaders, 41 parents and carers, and 20 university student mentors. All the aforementioned AWI? participants completed a pre- and post-programme evaluation survey to assess impact. Finally, the fourth source of data collected were 6 self-reflective narratives, submitted from the PBPP co-ordinator, one teacher, one research assistant, one student mentor, and the research team leads. In accordance with ethical guidelines, participants who submitted narrative contributions and could be identified were informed of this at the time of request, and their consent sought and given. For participants of interviews and pre- and post-mentoring programme evaluations, informed consent was requested in age-appropriate language in advance of the interview or the programme. These details were included in the submitted ethics application, approved by Plymouth Marjon University in August 2022.

Data collected were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2020). The thematic analysis took a systematic approach as follows: 'searching across [the] data set … to find repeated patterns of meaning' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 83), whilst acknowledging that reading of the data, free from the subjectivity and positionality of the researcher, is impossible when working within a qualitative research paradigm (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Bryman *et al.*, 2021). Systematic thematic analysis enabled the team to draw out themes from the data, reading and re-reading findings as the nuances and intricacies of participants' lived experiences emerged. A six-step process of thematic data analysis as originally devised by Braun and Clarke (2012, 2019, 2020) was applied to each data set as follows:

(1) initial familiarisation with the data during transcription and/or first read and review
(2) systematically coding the data to pull out initial points of interest and mapping
(3) aggregating the coded data to collate initial themes
(4) re-reading the data against those themes to review and develop further
(5) tidying and finalising of the selected themes as findings
(6) compiling of themes.

Key themes and nuances emerged highlighting the PBPP's impact on school practices, participants' professional knowledge and experiences, the challenges they faced, and the learning gained.

The following section summarises our findings and impact of the project. The quotations included are taken from the surveys and interviews with teachers, school leaders and parents, the 6 self-reflective narratives, and the evaluation data collected from pupils, teachers, parents and mentors before and after each mentoring programme was implemented. Each quote is labelled with the respondent's role and number. Our findings are structured around three key themes linked to our research questions: *Leadership*, *Communication*, and

a Sustainable Solution. Each theme draws out topical narrative and citations as emergent from the data, highlighting the development, challenges and impact of this project.

5. FINDINGS

Leadership

One particular issue that emerged within the first theme of leadership was complexity, in particular the complexities of leadership when partners came to the space with different priorities and varied value positions regarding inclusive education. This was reflected in tensions over the partnership shifting its focus and work in 2023/4 from the city's secondary school sector to include the city's primary school sector, resulting in concerns shared across the PBPP team regarding funding and conflicting partner views on the need for this shift:

> Colleagues in the city recognised that a Place-Based approach must span the phases; however, the movement from single phase, secondary, to multi-phase, including primary and SEND, resulted in stakeholder disengagement. (Place Based Pedagogical Partnership Co-ordinator)

The challenges and complexities Plymouth faces in its education delivery and school outputs/outcomes were also apparent, particularly in comparison to the national picture. Accounts from the self-reflective narratives pointed to the tensions experienced by schoolteachers who are committed to inclusion whilst also having to prioritise national league table commitments.

> From the outset there was a tangible willingness from schools to collaborate. Having taught in the city, I know the commitment of educators; yet I am also aware of the challenges faced by professionals who are under pressure to perform, meaning sometimes they have to make difficult choices. (Research Assistant 1)

Complexities regarding the key roles involved in leading change with a shared vision also became clear, as captured in the following narrative:

> City council leads, local authority education teams, and MAT leaders seemed at times to lack the strength needed to agree a common purpose. (University Professor 1)

In part, this reflected structural tensions between different layers of governance within the partnership: while councils remain accountable for wider social and economic outcomes, local authority education teams experience constraints due to diminished powers and the fact that MAT leaders can prioritise the performance of their own trusts. Such divergent responsibilities and accountability pressures can fragment decision-making and weaken the potential for a shared vision and purpose. The city's context exacerbates the urgency of leaders collaborating to avoid piecemeal measures that risk entrenching inequalities.

This challenge was particularly acute in a city characterised by above-average levels of deprivation, where data revealed persistent disparities between local schools and national benchmarks (Blandford *et al.*, 2023a). As one research assistant observed,

> The city's children are at the sharp end of the UK's current challenges and deserve the same opportunities as their peers across the nation. (Research Assistant 1)

In this sense, the absence of a combined strategy becomes not merely an issue of governance efficiency, but one with tangible consequences for children's life chances and regional social and economic wellbeing.

Responses captured in interviews with pupils and teachers were positive in terms of the need for a revised approach for leadership of inclusion in Plymouth – specifically citing collective concerns regarding school leadership, rising numbers of absent pupils, and pupil mobility. Many interviewees saw leading collaboration across the city as a key element of this work that could impact positively on pupils and educators alike:

> There is obviously a problem in the city with student mobility and pupils going into Elective Home Education. (School leader 16)

> With more and more students having a rapid decline in their attendance due to anxiety regarding school, sessions like these are a precious commodity in ensuring students feel valued and confident. (Teacher 1)

> What the Co-ordinator did brilliantly was to get as many of the schools involved in as many aspects as possible … you know, you wanted to be involved and be part of that group! (School leader 4)

> The experience has helped me gain a stronger level of professionalism and provided an opportunity to be a source of information and guidance for pupils at risk of exclusion.(University Student Mentor 8)

> It has been an overall positive experience around school improvement, and it has been well received by school leaders across the system. (School leader 2)

Taken together, these accounts suggest that the PBPP has been valued not only for addressing pressing challenges such as attendance and mobility, but for building and supporting capacity across the system. Participants saw the PBPP as more than a set of activities; its emphasis on collaboration and professional development appears to have generated a sense of momentum among stakeholders, positioning the initiative as a promising vehicle for long-term change and one that may sustain a new leadership approach for inclusion.

The benefits from this city-wide collaboration were reported in mentor programme evaluations and in interviews:

> This mentoring programme has forged strong foundations for engaging local Higher Education expertise and relationship with our local secondary schools. (University Student Mentor 8)

> It is an enjoyable thing, and it can make you realise that what you want to do in life might not be the only thing you want to do . . . you might want to open up your options. (Pupil 2)

> As someone who lives in the city, I wanted to work with colleagues to improve the quality of education and effect positive change for young people and their families. We agreed that Place-Based working occupies the space in the system where system leaders come together to collaborate on the issues that can only be overcome through joint working. (Place Based Pedagogical Partnership Co-ordinator)

Senior leaders, teachers, and university mentors spoke of and alluded to a shared responsibility between schools and a new culture that was emerging, with a growing realisation that Plymouth's challenges are best solved by Plymouth's solutions. This aligns with earlier arguments and evidence regarding the need for successful inclusive education to be framed by, and based on, context based.

The process of debating and agreeing a shared vision of inclusion within the PBPP was complex and, at times, contested. Different partners brought conflicting values and priorities, reflecting the diversity of their institutional contexts and individual positions. Yet, there was recognition overall of the importance of establishing a definition that all stakeholders could support. The PBPP drew positively on higher education (HE) leads to facilitate this dialogue with city Head Teachers, resulting in a definition that resonated with the city's identity, reflected school priorities, and aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4: 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'. The complexity of, and need for, this shared approach was also evidence in interviews and reflective narratives:

> If inclusion was to be embedded in policies and practises there needed to be a shared vision and understanding of inclusion. An early meeting agreed that inclusion should apply to all children regardless of their background challenge or need. (University Professor 1)

> Inclusive thinking means keeping our minds, ears and doors open – building our reach, growing opportunities, and keeping a focus on the progression and success of all. (University Professor 2)

This emphasis on universality positioned inclusion as an entitlement rather than an intervention and stakeholders acknowledged that embedding inclusion in policies and practices required a common framework. Together, the contributions framed inclusion as both a principle of equity and a lived experience for children. The PBPP's work in this area highlights the

importance of reconciling diverse leadership perspectives into a shared vision that can guide local practice, while also connecting to wider global priorities and agendas.

Communication

One particular issue that emerged within our second theme, Communication, was that of challenge, specifically the challenges young people have in articulating and expressing themselves, the challenges of establishing meaningful communication and collaboration across a multi stakeholder group, and the challenges of adequate teaching resource to support pupils' communicating and planning for their post-16 options and destinations:

> More and more students are lost without their phone, can't hold a conversation, can't make eye contact and can't sustain attention. As a school system, we are trying to combat these issues with Oracy lessons – lessons focused on talking and no paperwork. (Teacher 4)

Communication challenges were also present between PBPP stakeholders across the city, providing some barriers to Place-Based working:

> I witnessed conflicting agendas leading to frustration among headteachers who needed strong, co-ordinated regional leadership that listened and was responsive to need as understood by individual schools. (University Professor 1)

> To accommodate everyone, meetings were held online, … , the foci of these meetings were too broad. The group was trying to achieve too many objectives. (Place Based Pedagogical Partnership Co-ordinator)

> An independent organisation led communication between schools. I observed that the selflessness of the organisation was not matched by shared communication across schools. (University Professor 1)

These extracts highlight a tension at the heart of Place-Based working: the challenge of aligning diverse stakeholders with varying institutional priorities, levels of influence, and expectations of leadership. The frustration expressed by headteachers underscores how the absence of a coherent, trusted leadership structure can erode confidence in collaborative initiatives and impact on clear channels of communication. The comment that meetings were too broad and overburdened with objectives reflects a challenge of communication within multi-stakeholder partnerships – without clear and accepted mechanisms for collective agenda-setting, certain partners may feel that their locally understood needs are subordinated to broader or ill-defined goals. The failure to generate reciprocal communication between schools may be suggestive of the project's communication processes being mediated rather than genuinely co-owned. This may risk reinforcing dependency on external mediators rather than fostering sustainable, school-to-school networks of trust and accountability.

Some schools believed they already had clear communication channels and lines of support within their MAT, and felt that prioritising this over the city-wide partnership would be more beneficial for them:

> Some headteachers began to reflect that two of the strategic priorities; developing leadership capacity and securing improved outcomes in English and Mathematics, were the core remit of multi-academy trusts and did not require this PBPP system. (Place Based Pedagogical Partnership Co-ordinator)

Data also suggested a lack of commitment and shared understanding by some, which in turn challenged the process, while others emphasised the importance of partners knowing their locality and understanding Plymouth's place-based realities, challenges and potentials, when considering change:

> As a city, we have agreed the space that place-based activity holds and, consequently, stakeholders have a better understanding of why they are coming together and their common goals. (Place Based Pedagogical Partnership Co-ordinator)

> Some schools are starting to work more collaboratively together, but others still have not come along to join the party. (School Leader 12)

Partners shared how relationship building and providing new spaces for communication improved the wellbeing of both individual leaders and the wider partnership, whilst also streamlining decision making and moving practical changes forward for targeted education:

> I think there's been a good amount of connecting with other Headteachers. To be able to pick up a phone or send an e-mail and try and you know, unpick some of the challenges we're facing. (School Leader 10)

> The place-based initiative proved to be a focus for the majority of secondary schools to discuss issues that were evident in data relating to progression, attendance, and exclusions. The proliferation of managed moves that resulted in children not attending schools drew leaders together in a way that had not been seen prior to the place-based initiative. (University Professor 1)

Within the partnership, an increased atmosphere of collaboration and collegiality occurred as a result of new lines of communication, with headteachers picking up the phone to fellow headteachers, not being afraid to acknowledge they did not hold all the answers. For some this led to closer and more effective communication and working relationships between city schools.

Pupils participating in the mentoring programme cited the development of communication skills, growth in self-confidence, and clearer communication of post-16 careers pathways and destinations as important outcomes. Some key observations shared across the data included:

> The mentoring project gave students a voice in smaller, comfortable and caring environments. Students felt a lot less anxious about talking and became more

confident, having people invested in their hopes and ambitions for the future. This is huge. (Teacher 4)

It has changed my perspectives on what I am going to do when I am older. ... . I probably need to do things like going to university, getting GCSE grades. (Pupil 2)

The mentoring programme evidence offers a positive narrative, demonstrating tangible benefits for pupils in terms of confidence, voice, and aspiration. Yet critically, these impacts are framed at the micro level (individual growth within safe, small-group settings), raising questions about scalability and sustainability. To what extent these mentoring successes translate into broader cultural or structural changes within schools and across the partnership and how can they be communicated clearly across stakeholder groups remains to be answered. Without embedding specific practices into mainstream provision there is a danger that mentoring remains a valuable but isolated intervention rather than a lever for systemic change.

The accounts in our data reflect the unevenness that may characterise place-based partnerships, where some stakeholders embrace collective responsibility while others remain reluctant or disengaged. The 'lack of commitment and shared understanding' not only slows progress but risks reproducing existing inequities, as the most vocal or well-resourced actors shape the agenda while quieter voices might be marginalised. This highlights the importance of sustained investment in building trust for clear communication channels and a common language of collaboration. The emphasis on partners truly knowing their locality is also significant. It points to the danger of importing generic solutions or frameworks into Plymouth without sensitivity to its unique socio-cultural and economic realities. However, claiming knowledge of place does not automatically translate into equitable practice, particularly if some schools or communities feel their lived realities are overlooked in favour of dominant narratives about the city.

While partnership meetings appear to have fostered a more coherent sense of purpose, the persistence of divergent priorities suggests that dialogue alone is insufficient without accompanying structures of accountability. The metaphor of *not coming along to the party* reveals deeper questions about inclusion and exclusion: which schools are absent, why, and what systemic barriers prevent their participation? This risks turning the partnership into a coalition of the willing rather than a genuinely city-wide endeavour. Analysis of the data highlights a tension between emerging stakeholder collaboration – communicating and holding shared goals- and uneven commitment – conflicting priorities.

A Sustainable Solution

Analysis of the data highlighted persistent questions about sustainability and of the PBPP as a long-term strategy for system-wide improvement. Concerns about

competing priorities, fragmented leadership structures, and limited time and capacity are not merely operational challenges, they can signal deeper systemic misalignments between the partnership's collective aspirations and the institutional logics of schools, Multi Academy Trusts (MATs), and local authorities. For instance, the following participants suggest that:

> The lack of vision, collaboration, commitment and shared communication regularly became a source of frustration. At various points, school leads and Multi Academy Trusts presented separate solutions that could have mitigated against the success of the PBPP. (University Professor 1)

> I'm going to say that from my perspective, the Place-Based strategy has had no impact in my school, and this is largely because the support that I get from my Trust is overwhelmingly positive. (School Leader 5)

The examples of school leaders relying primarily on their MAT for support highlight a potential contradiction. While the PBPP aspires to city-wide collaboration, many stakeholders continue to operate within narrower organisational spaces and structures. This potentially risks undermining the 'place-based' ethos by reproducing competitive behaviours rather than prioritising collective responsibility.

Prioritising time for this work, and indeed sustaining it, was repeatedly noted as a significant barrier:

> I believe the overarching barrier to PBPP reaching its full potential is one of time. (Teacher 2)

> I analysed and evaluated city-wide exam performance by phase before finalising and publishing one Place-based plan with strategic goals. This was a complex and time-consuming process, but necessary to unify the phases and provide clear strategic direction to Place-based work. (Place Based Pedagogical Partnership Coordinator)

While serious pressure on time is an undeniable reality in schools, framing it as the *overarching barrier* risks obscuring other structural issues at play, including power imbalances, competing accountability frameworks, and unclear lines of decision making. Without explicit mechanisms to address these, partnerships such as the PBPP may remain vulnerable to being deprioritised when schools face external performance pressures.

Time challenges were also an issue with regards to the mentoring programme:

> With more and more students having a rapid decline in their attendance due to anxiety regarding school, sessions like these are a precious commodity in ensuring students feel valued and confident. (Teacher 4)

> The five weeks in school did not seem sufficient for many of these students, who seemed to blossom through the person-centred approach and soft skills development offered. (Research Assistant 1)

A greater length of time would have allowed for further growth of my rapport with mentees, and for them to apply the skills learnt in our sessions more widely in their subject lessons. (University Student Mentor 8)

The reflections in our data about the mentoring programme highlight the promise of place-based interventions at a micro level, with positive evidence of impact on pupil confidence, wellbeing, and aspirations. However, the recurring concern about insufficient time frames raises questions about scalability and depth. Short interventions risk being perceived as add-ons rather than being embedded within mainstream practice, limiting their transformative potential.

As an educator, our hope is always to instil the right qualities to help students in their future pathways. Through this programme, I was hoping to give students insights into what they could achieve and how. Watching the students grow in confidence week after week was very special. (Teacher 4)

Students have really engaged with the sessions and enjoyed their time with the mentors discussing ways to achieve their future goals. (Teacher 4)

While positive outcomes for mentors and mentees are documented, the challenge lies in ensuring these individualised gains are translated into systemic, lasting improvements across schools. Without clear strategies for institutionalising such programmes, their impact may remain episodic and vulnerable to fluctuations in funding.

The adoption of the PBPP's definition of inclusion by the local council and a university's ITE programme demonstrates a more durable form of legacy and suggests that place-based initiatives can shape policy and practice beyond their immediate lifespan:

The Inclusion definition agreed by all school leaders featured a year later in the council's new Graduated Response to Inclusion Framework. This framework helps schools and practitioners understand and meet their duties across SEND legislation and guidance. It also supports our city's families and young people to understand how their schools can support them. (University Professor 2)

However, this could also be read critically as evidence that conceptual contributions (definitions, frameworks) may outlast practical interventions (mentoring, collaborative structures). If so, there is a danger that the PBPP's most enduring outcomes remain discursive rather than structural, raising questions about the depth of systemic change achieved.

The relocation of leadership to MAT CEOs for 2024/25 presents both an opportunity and a risk. On one hand, embedding leadership within existing school structures could enhance sustainability and legitimacy. On the other, the concentration of leadership within MATs risks further entrenching hierarchical governance and sidelining smaller schools or alternative voices.

> At the end of 2023–24, Place-based activity will move from a centrally funded position to a self-sustaining one. The co-ordination function will be assumed by a multi-academy trust, enabling this critical work to become self-sustaining. (Place Based Pedagogical Partnership Co-ordinator)

There is also a risk of dependency on particular MATs and their agendas, which may not always align with city-wide or place-based contextual equity goals. Taken together, these accounts underscore a central paradox: while the PBPP has achieved moments of innovation, collaboration, and conceptual clarity, its future remains fragile due to enduring structural tensions. Sustainability will depend not only on securing funding or redistributing leadership, but also on addressing fundamental questions of power, accountability, and equity in cross-system collaboration. Without this, there is a risk that the PBPP becomes a time-limited initiative and does not deliver sustained systemic transformation.

6. DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to explore the development and impact of a place-based model of leadership for inclusion. The findings presented contribute knowledge to the evolving discourse of inclusive education, particularly the use and impact of a place-based pedagogic partnership, leading across institutional boundaries for inclusive education. A number of significant points may be made: Firstly, regarding the priority of working with and from context, the study brought leaders together, accessing and analysing contextual data from schools and Plymouth's education community to inform the development of new system wide practices and systems of communication for inclusion. Working in this way brought evidenced benefit to the school communities and city, whilst also resulting in 'push back' and 'opting out' by some leaders. This aligns with Beaton *et al.* (2021, p. 11) who evidence effective 'Inclusive practice as contextual and complex' advocating for the emergence of practices and forms of provision based on that understanding. The findings also align with the research of Ainscow regarding context-based analysis to promote inclusion and equality in schools (2020) and Beer *et al.* (2020, p. 12) on effective place-based education partnership for 'advancing well-being, achieved by acknowledging and working within the context of each district'.

Our findings reaffirm the reported benefit of cross-sector collaboration for inclusion, whilst also reinforcing the importance of adequate evaluation when developing and implementing a new model or mode of practice in this field (Coe, 2009). The work supports Osborne *et al.*'s (2021) evidence regarding inclusive outcomes when schools, local government and University leaders work together and apply meaningful evaluation of practices and programmes that emerge from their partnership. As noted, when participatory practices are effectively implemented at leadership levels this can 'engage and empower

communities and inform the provision of infrastructure and services that meet community needs' (Osborne *et al*., 2021, p. 8).

The challenges experienced in this study when partners collaborated emphasised the importance of valuing and giving space to conflicting participant views, definitions and varied experiences of inclusion, whilst also working together to develop and implement a consistent definition and workable model of inclusion. The challenges of schools working across local authorities, cities and Trusts has been highlighted by Azorin and Ainscow (2020), Baxter and Cornforth (2019) and Blandford *et al*. (2024), who evidence the importance of education collaborations leaving space for conflict. Understanding this brings a benefit to the partnership by enabling a deeper understanding and value of each individual partner's role and priorities, whilst the partnership retains an agreed understanding they are all working towards deeper clarity and agreed practices for inclusive outcomes. These factors correlate with our study findings with regard to the challenges faced when a collective body responds to conflicting institutional and partner needs, systemic funding priority shifts, finite resources, the timing of activities and meetings, and conflicting ideological positions and commitment levels.

7. CONCLUSION

Collaborative partnerships are pivotal in shaping a shared understanding of inclusion that can anchor the development of systems, practices, and methods. As noted, collaboration was prioritised at the early stages of this project's work, reflecting Qvortrup's and Qvortrup (2018) evidence that inclusion's conceptual flexibility requires a clear definition and a shared understanding from advocates, practitioners and leaders that it is a multi-dimensional process with a complex history. The challenge our partnership experienced was in agreeing to the principle of inclusion in our work and its subsequent application – what does inclusion look like in our various education spaces and how do we evaluate it to sustain evidenced practices and methods? As further highlighted by Azorin and Ainscow (2020, p. 59), capturing the concept of inclusion as both an educational principle and a practical application remains amongst the most challenging tasks related to education'. Inclusion's conceptual flexibility means that many schools and educators grapple with what and how inclusion can be implemented in practice and in any one time and/or place (Ainscow, 2020; Qvortrup and Qvortrup, 2018). We argue this challenge, and the subsequent questions it raises, needs continual critical consideration by leaders and practitioners in partnership and by the wider discourse of inclusive education.

This partnership's work, the practices that emerged, and the impact achieved, responds to Sandoval and Messiou's (2022) assertion that current frustrations with inclusion can be addressed through school collaborations and sustained systemic change. By applying a place-based pedagogic partnership

with higher education to develop and lead new forms of inclusive policy and practice, changes took place in how key stake holders in Plymouth worked towards agreed objectives of equality and social justice in their schools. This said, it should also be noted that the practical knowledge and model of inclusion emergent in this study and city is contextual and therefore may not represent a blueprint model for other cities, but will hopefully provide inspiration, models of practice and ideas that do transfer. What the study reported here does provide is stakeholder-based evidence regarding a model of cross-sector leadership for inclusion, as well as affirmation of collaboration and pedagogical partnership when education communities investigate and develop new methods and systems for inclusion.

Plymouth's PBPP continues to grow, with new partners joining from Further Education colleges and wider school networks. The partnership is currently considering how to future proof evidence-based inclusive provision, whilst also working to address a regional trend in growing numbers of elective home education and chronic absenteeism. The emphasis this project placed on partner parity, city context, collective learning and practice reaffirms a view that applying a PBPP approach to inclusion can result in significant impact. Collaboration, partner contextual realities, conflict, local priorities and potentials remain core and central to Plymouth's Place Based Pedagogic Partnership's purpose and practice.

8. DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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10. NOTES

[1] The role of Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator became a mandatory role in UK schools from the launch of the first UK Code of Practice for Special Educational needs published by the government in 1994- all schools are required to have a named qualified teaching member of staff in this role since 1994. The Code of practice has been revised twice times since 1994, to meet changing primary and secondary education priorities and needs in this area, see- 2001 and 2014 and most recently replaced by the government's SEND and alternative provision improvement plan in 2023. SENCos have responsibility for the record keeping of all pupils in the school with SEND, their individual Education and Health Care plans to ensure their

inclusive education and to support staff with professional development needs thus ensuring all pupils receive effective inclusive education.

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