

Making schools effective for all: rethinking the task

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Using evidence from a series of studies carried out over 20 years, this article explores ways of developing schools that are effective for all children and young people. The argument developed is intended to challenge those leading school improvement to return to their historical purpose, that of ensuring a sound education for every child. The authors argue that in order to achieve this it is necessary to complement within-school developments with efforts that link schools with one another and with their wider communities. This means that school improvement processes have to be nested within locally led efforts to make school systems more equitable and to link the work of schools with area strategies for tackling wider inequities and, ultimately, with national policies aimed at creating a fairer society. This article considers the implications of this analysis for the work of senior staff at all levels of the education system.

Keywords: equity; fairness; inclusion; school improvement

At its point of origin, the school effectiveness movement was rooted in rebellion against conventional explanations of educational failure, particularly those put forward to explain low educational performance in areas characterised by poverty and deprivation (Edmonds 1979). Central to the development of this tradition was the conviction that schools can and should make a difference, regardless of social context.

The argument developed in this article starts from the assumption that school effectiveness and improvement thinking has become domesticated within a political discourse that stifles discussion and equates achievement with measurable outcomes from standardised tests (Slee, Weiner, and Tomlinson 1998; Thrupp 1999). As a result, in national contexts such as our own, where reform policies have been based on a rather narrow view of effectiveness, strategies seeking to bring about school improvement have, in practice, acted as a barrier to the development of educational practices that can serve all students, particularly those in more unfavourable socio-economic contexts.

This article uses evidence from our programme of research carried out with schools and school systems over many years in order to offer an alternative way forward. The approach we describe is built on the principle of equity and uses processes of inquiry to stimulate ‘school improvement with attitude’ (Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006). At its best, this approach provides space and opportunities for developing new understandings and generating new practices. However, we argue

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that such possibilities can only be utilised if potential barriers in the wider context are overcome.

Equitable school improvement

Our research is guided by the principle of equity, which we take to involve notions of inclusion and fairness. As we have worked with schools over many years, we have become aware of the complexities this involves. One way to think about the processes at work is to see them as linked within an ‘ecology of equity’ (Ainscow et al. 2012). By this, we mean that the extent to which students’ experiences and outcomes are equitable is not dependent only on the educational practices of their teachers, or even their schools. Instead, it depends on a whole range of interacting processes that reach into the school from outside. These include the demographics of the areas served by schools, the histories and cultures of the populations who send (or fail to send) their children to the school and the economic realities faced by those populations. Beyond this, they involve the underlying socio-economic processes that make some areas poor and others affluent, and that draw migrant groups into some places rather than others. They are also influenced by the wider politics of the teaching profession, of decision-making at the district level, and of national policy-making and the impacts of schools on one another over issues such as exclusion and parental choice. In addition, they reflect new models of school governance, the ways in which local school hierarchies are established and maintained, and the ways in which school actions are constrained and enabled by their positions in those hierarchies.

It is important to recognise the complexities of interactions between the different elements in this ecology and their implications for achieving more equitable school systems. As we work on improvement projects with schools, we find it helpful to think of three interlinked areas within which equity issues arise. These are:

- *Within schools.* These are issues that arise from school and teacher practices. They include: the ways in which students are taught and engaged with learning; the ways in which teaching groups are organised and the different kinds of opportunities that result from this organisation; the kinds of social relations and personal support that are characteristic of the school; the ways in which the school responds to diversity in terms of attainment, gender, ethnicity and social background; and the kinds of relationships the school builds with families and local communities.
- *Between schools.* These are issues that arise from the characteristics of the local school system. They include: the ways in which different types of school emerge locally; the ways in which these schools acquire different statuses so that hierarchies emerge in terms of performance and preference; the ways in which schools compete or collaborate; the processes of integration and segregation which concentrate students with similar backgrounds in different schools; the distribution of educational opportunities across schools; and the extent to which students in every school can access similar opportunities.
- *Beyond schools.* This far-reaching arena includes: the wider policy context within which schools operate; the family processes and resources which shape how children learn and develop; the interests and understandings of the professionals working in schools; and the demographics, economics, cultures

and histories of the areas served by schools. Beyond this, it includes the underlying social and economic processes at national and – in many respects – at global levels out of which local conditions arise.

Looked at in this way, it is clear that there is much that individual schools can do to tackle issues within their organisations, and that such actions are likely to have a profound impact on student experiences, and perhaps have some influence on inequities arising elsewhere. However, it is equally clear that these strategies do not lead to schools tackling between- and beyond-school issues directly. No school strategy can, for example, make a poor area more affluent, or increase the resources available to students' families, any more than it could create a stable student population, or tackle the global processes underlying migration patterns. But perhaps there are issues of access, or of the allocation of students to schools, that might be tackled if schools work together on a common agenda.

Bearing these arguments in mind, in what follows we explore possibilities for linking within-school, between-schools and beyond-schools strategies in order to develop more equitable improvement approaches.

Improving schools

Over the past 20 years or so we have been privileged to be part of a wider group of colleagues who have carried out research in order to determine effective strategies for improving schools. A feature of this programme of research is that it has involved collaboration with practitioners. In order to develop our argument we will reflect on three of these initiatives.

Improving the Quality of Education for All (IQEA)

This programme of collaborative research began towards the end of the 1980s at the University of Cambridge. Over many years IQEA grew as a result of projects carried out with schools, both in the United Kingdom and overseas (see Ainscow 1999; Clarke, Ainscow, and West 2005; Hopkins 2007; Hopkins, Ainscow, and West 1994; West and Ainscow 2010 for more detailed accounts of some of these projects). These involved teams of researchers working in partnership with colleagues from schools to identify ways in which the learning of all members of the school community – students, parents and staff – could be enhanced.

Working with schools in the IQEA projects was based on a *contract* that attempted to define the parameters for our involvement, and the obligations those involved owed to one another. In particular, the contract emphasised that all staff were consulted; that an in-school team of coordinators were appointed to carry the work forward; that a critical mass of staff were to be actively involved; and that sufficient time would be made available for necessary classroom and staff development activities. Meanwhile, we committed ourselves to supporting the school's developments, usually in the first place for one year. Often the arrangement continued, however, and in some instances we were involved for periods as long as seven years. We provided training for the school coordinators, made regular school visits and contributed to school-based staff development activities. In addition, we attempted to work with the schools in recording and analysing their experiences in a

way that also provided data relevant to our own on-going research agendas. These data also contributed to our analysis of these developments.

As a result of such engagements with schools involved in the IQEA project, we evolved a style of collaboration that we referred to as ‘working with, rather than working on’. This phrase attempted to sum up an approach that deliberately allows each project school considerable autonomy to determine its own priorities for development and, indeed, its methods for achieving these priorities. In attempting to work in this way, we found ourselves confronted with staggering complexity, and by a bewildering array of policy and strategy options. It was our belief, however, that only through a regular engagement with these complexities could a greater understanding of school improvement be achieved.

Our monitoring of developments in the schools involved in IQEA led us to conclude that such inquiry-based analyses can be a powerful means of stimulating schools’ deliberations as they design their own improvement strategies. We also found that they were useful in identifying strategies appropriate to each school’s own stage of development. In the case of schools that are relatively low-performing, the initial emphasis was usually placed on gathering evidence that could be used to strengthen system procedures, through the tightening of management and leadership arrangements (West, Ainscow, and Stanford 2005). For schools that were performing more effectively, the focus was likely to be on continuing improvement, not least by looking at within-school variation. We also found that there is always scope for the strengthening of teachers’ classroom practices, as no school works equally well for all of its students. These findings from IQEA about the potential of inquiry-based approaches influenced the development of another project focused on schools.

Understanding and developing inclusive practices in schools

This initiative began in 2000 when members of our group won a grant from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Teaching and Learning Research Programme that enabled us to push forward our ideas about inquiry-based approaches to the development of schools. The initiative, which took the form of a three-year collaborative action research project, involved 25 urban schools, their associated local education authorities and three universities (i.e. Canterbury Christ Church, Manchester and Newcastle). Together we explored ways of developing more inclusive practices in the schools.

We saw inclusion as a value and set of practices about which something was already known. Moreover, as established authors and researchers in the field, we had played our part in generating this prior knowledge (e.g. Ainscow 1999, 2006; Clark et al. 1999; Dyson and Millward 2000). We also knew – from our own work and from others in this field – that acceptance of the value and practices of inclusion was frequently resisted by practitioners who saw themselves as having other priorities and as working within constraints that made inclusive practice impossible. This was particularly the case in the then English policy context where a ‘relentless focus on standards’ was being imposed on schools by central government (Blair 2005).

We therefore needed a means of releasing practitioners from the constraints of national policy and enabling them to change their value positions and assumptions. We saw the use of research evidence as offering this means. We made the assumption that, when practitioners were confronted by evidence about their own practices, they

would – with appropriate encouragement from their critical friends – begin to recognise the non-inclusive elements of those practices and find ways of making them more inclusive. Fortunately, this is what did most often happen.

What we noted as these developments occurred was neither the crushing of the schools' efforts to become more inclusive by the government's policies for raising standards, nor the rejection of the standards agenda in favour of a radical, inclusive alternative (Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006). In most of the schools, the two agendas remained intertwined. Indeed, the focus on attainment appeared to prompt some teachers to examine issues in relation to the achievements and participation of hitherto marginalised groups that they had previously overlooked. Likewise, the concern with inclusion tended to shape the way the school responded to the imperative to raise standards.

Our analysis revealed how social learning processes within schools influenced people's action and, indeed, the thinking that informed their actions (Ainscow, Nicolaidou, and West 2003). Often this was stimulated by various forms of evidence that created a sense of interruption to existing ways of thinking and working. Particularly powerful techniques in this respect involved the use of mutual observation, sometimes through video recordings, and evidence collected from students about teaching and learning arrangements within a school. Under certain conditions such approaches provided *interruptions* that stimulated self-questioning, creativity and action. In so doing, they sometimes led to a reframing of perceived problems that, in turn, drew attention to overlooked possibilities for addressing barriers to participation and learning.

We concluded, however, that none of this provided a straightforward mechanism for the development of more inclusive practices. We found that any space for reflection that was created as a result of engaging with evidence may sometimes be filled according to conflicting agendas. Indeed, we documented detailed examples of how deeply held beliefs within schools prevented the experimentation that is necessary in order to foster the development of more inclusive ways of working (Ainscow and Kaplan 2006; Howes and Ainscow 2006).

The outcomes of the inclusion project have been widely reported in the scholarly literature (Ainscow et al. 2004; Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006; Ainscow et al. 2006; Dyson, Gallannaugh, and Millward 2003; Howes et al. 2004, 2005). In terms of the development of a methodology for enabling research to contribute to more equitable policy and practice, the main lesson we drew was that it is possible to infuse a critical dimension into a collaborative action-research project, so that issues of social justice (in this case, a focus on inclusion) are considered as practitioners shape their action. We also concluded that the critical friendship of 'outsiders' (in this case, ourselves as researchers) is a way of keeping these issues on the agenda.

An equity research network

The two projects we have described so far clearly have much in common, not least in the way they: sought to stimulate a process of change in practice (i.e. they had an action strand); formulated action with reference to overarching principles; had a research strand that invited practitioners to inquire into their own practice and assumed that such inquiry would impact on the values on which practitioners act;

and positioned university researchers as critical friends of and technical supporters for practitioners.

Between 2006 and 2011 we had a chance to explore these ideas in more detail through our involvement in yet another group of schools (see Ainscow et al. 2012 for a detailed account of this project). The initiative was located in an area characterised by socio-economic disadvantage, and social and ethnic segregation. The district's secondary school system comprised a hierarchy of 16 schools, some selective on the basis of attainment or religious faith, with others being non-selective and described as comprehensive schools.

The network grew out of an existing partnership of 4 secondary schools, with 10 other schools joining in at various stages over the five-year period. Whilst the head teachers involved had developed very good working relationships, and this had led to some collaborative activities, they felt that the impact had been limited. Consequently, they decided that there was a need to develop ways of working that would challenge the practices, assumptions and beliefs of staff, and which would help to create a stimulus for further sustainable improvement. With this in mind, they approached us to support and facilitate the use of research to strengthen their network. The schools agreed to fund our involvement.

Through discussions involving the head teachers, it was agreed that equity was a central issue facing each of the partner schools. It soon became evident, however, that what this meant was different in each context, not least in respect to the groups of learners who seemed to be missing out within existing arrangements. As a result, it was agreed that the work of the network should take account of these differences by adopting a broad set of research questions to focus its activities, within which each school would determine its own particular focus. These questions were as follows:

- Which of our learners are most vulnerable to underachievement, marginalisation or exclusion?
- What changes in policy and practice need to be made in order to reach out to these students?
- How can these changes be introduced effectively and evaluated in respect to student outcomes?

In taking the strategic decision to focus attention on groups of learners thought to be missing out within existing arrangements, we were anxious that this might lead to narrowly focused efforts to 'fix' students seen as being in some sense inadequate. However, collecting evidence about these groups usually led to a re-focusing of attention around contextual factors that were acting as barriers to their participation and learning. In this way, most of the projects carried out gradually became mainstream school improvement efforts that had the potential to benefit many students.

As with our earlier projects, staff inquiry groups were set up in each school, usually consisting of five or six members representing different perspectives within their school communities. These groups took part in introductory workshops at which we discussed with them an initial analysis we had made of the area, based on a consideration of various documents, statistics and interviews with a selection of stakeholders, including head teachers, local authority staff, community group representatives and politicians.

Following this process of contextual analysis, we took the staff teams through a process of planning the investigations they intended to carry out. In so doing, we helped them to develop a clearer focus and plan the procedures they would follow. Subsequently, each school team set out to gather evidence about students identified as losing out in some way, the aim being to develop better insights regarding their experiences in the schools. The groups also shared their findings with their colleagues in the partner schools. In these ways, the intention was to deepen understandings of practices, beliefs, assumptions and organisational processes, both within and across the schools in the network.

Taking place as it did over a period of five years of intense government activity to improve educational outcomes – or at least raise the annually reported attainment levels – this was a time of multiple policy initiatives and interventions to drive up standards. Consequently, it is not easy to disentangle particular effects and attribute them to the work of the project teams, rather than the pressures imposed generally on schools over this period of time. Nonetheless, the evidence we collected showed that teachers in the schools themselves felt able to identify changes and to trace these to their involvement in the project. It can be also asserted that these schools contributed fully to the overall increase in examination results recorded in the particular local authority during this period. In fact, the percentage of students gaining five or more A* to C grades at GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) went up from 54.6% in 2005 to 76.5% in 2010, a rise of 22% (during the same period the national average went from 56.3% to 75.3%, or a rise of 19%). Looking at a more inclusive measure of student performance, during the same period the percentage of students gaining five or more A* to G grades went up at almost twice the national average, from 90% to 96.1% (compared to 89% to 92.7% nationally).

Our consideration of what this particular network achieved points to a series of factors that seem to be particularly important for the development of more equitable schools. At their most fundamental, the factors we are concerned with are located in classrooms, where, first and foremost, equity is about attitudes. Put simply, the attitudes of teachers – and of fellow students – can either promote or inhibit a fair, welcoming and inclusive working climate. In a school that is committed to fairness, all students should expect to be welcome in their classrooms – not only in explicit ways, which embrace cultural, social and intellectual differences – but also in implicit ways, so they will not feel marginalised because of feedback (or lack of it) on their behaviour and performance. Because all students are welcome, they can expect positive interactions as a normal part of their classroom experience. As a result, they will feel included, valued and acknowledged.

Then there is the issue of practice. If teachers favour one style it will tend to suit most of those students who are comfortable with that style. In effect, strong teaching orthodoxies can disenfranchise students who are less confident with or less engaged by that approach. Equity, therefore, requires practitioners who understand the importance of teaching the same thing in different ways to different students, and of teaching different things in different ways to the same students.

The network schools could point to examples of good practice in all of these areas before they joined the project. But the issue they were addressing through their involvement was whether they were sure that *all* students could feel they were embraced within these ways of working. In most of the schools there was evidence, too, of changes in classrooms so that specific groups who were felt to be missing out

were now more actively engaged in learning, and that this had been achieved through deliberate attention to the attitudes displayed, language used and interactions engineered in lessons, all of which were reflected in the range of teaching approaches used.

Of course, these are the less difficult aspects of equity to deliver. That is not to deny their value, but simply to accept that while adjustments in classroom practices can have significant impact on the experiences of particular students, they may not do much to alter the factors that led to these students ‘missing out’ in the first place. Often such factors are more intransigent, and therefore more difficult to influence as a single school.

School-to-school collaboration

The approach we have outlined so far is based on the idea of those within schools collecting and engaging with various forms of data in order to stimulate moves to create more equitable arrangements. The accounts we have summarised provide a convincing case for the power of this approach. These accounts have also thrown light on the difficulties in putting such an approach into practice within current policy contexts. This led us to analyse the limitations of within-school strategies, leading us, in turn, to argue that these should be complemented with between-school activities.

In recent years, we have carried out a series of studies that have generated considerable evidence that school-to-school collaboration can strengthen improvement processes by adding to the range of expertise made available (see: Ainscow 2010; Ainscow and Howes 2007; Ainscow, Muijs, and West 2006; Ainscow, Nicolaidou, and West 2003; Ainscow and West 2006; Ainscow, West, and Nicolaidou 2005; Chapman et al. 2010; Muijs, West, and Ainscow 2010; Muijs et al. 2011). Together, these studies indicate that school-to-school collaboration has an enormous potential for fostering system-wide improvement, particularly in challenging urban contexts. More specifically, they show: how collaboration between schools can provide an effective means of solving immediate problems, such as staffing shortages; how it can have a positive impact in periods of crisis, such as during the closure of a school; and, how, in the longer run, schools working together can contribute to the raising of expectations and attainment in schools that have had a record of low achievement. There is also evidence here that collaboration can help to reduce the polarisation of schools according to their position in ‘league tables’, to the particular benefit of those students who seem marginalised at the edges of the system and whose performance and attitudes cause increasing concern.

For the most part, these studies have focused on situations where schools have been given short-term financial incentives linked to the demonstration of collaborative planning and activity. Nevertheless, they convince us that this approach can be a powerful catalyst for change, although it does not represent an easy option, particularly in policy contexts within which competition and choice continue to be the main policy drivers.

The most convincing evidence about the power of schools working together comes from our recent involvement in the Greater Manchester Challenge. This three-year project, which involved over 1100 schools in 10 local authorities, had a government investment of around £50 million (see Ainscow 2012, for a detailed

account of this initiative). The decision to invest such a large budget reflected a concern regarding educational standards in the city region, particularly amongst children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The approach adopted was influenced by an earlier initiative in London (Brighouse 2007).

Reflecting much of the thinking developed in this article, the overall approach of the Challenge emerged from a detailed analysis of the local context, using both statistical data and local intelligence provided by stakeholders. This drew attention to areas of concern and also helped to pinpoint a range of human resources that could be mobilised in order to support improvement efforts. Recognising the potential of these resources, it was decided that networking and collaboration should be the key strategies for strengthening the overall improvement capacity of the system. More specifically, this involved a series of inter-connected activities for ‘moving knowledge around’ (Ainscow 2012).

So, for example, in an attempt to engage all schools in processes of networking and collaboration, *Families of Schools* were set up, using a data system that groups between 12 and 20 schools on the basis of the prior attainment of their students and their socio-economic home backgrounds. The strength of this approach is that it partners schools that serve similar populations whilst, at the same time, encouraging partnerships amongst schools that are not in direct competition with one another because they do not serve the same neighbourhoods. Led by head teachers, the Families of Schools proved to be successful in strengthening collaborative processes within the city region, although the impact was varied.

In terms of schools working in highly disadvantaged contexts, evidence from the Challenge suggests that school-to-school partnerships are the most powerful means of fostering improvements. Most notably, the *Keys to Success* programme led to striking improvements in the performance of some 160 schools facing the most challenging circumstances. There is also evidence that the progress that these schools made helped to trigger improvement across the system. A common feature of almost all of these interventions was that progress was achieved through carefully matched pairings (or, sometimes, trios) of schools that cut across social ‘boundaries’ of various kinds, including those that separate schools that are in different local authorities. In this way, expertise that was previously trapped in particular contexts was made more widely available.

Another effective strategy to facilitate the movement of expertise was provided through the creation of various types of *hub schools*. So, for example, some of the hubs provided support for other schools regarding ways of supporting students with English as an additional language. Similarly, so-called ‘teaching schools’ providing professional development programmes focused on bringing about improvements in classroom practice. Other hub schools offered support in relation to particular subject areas, and in responding to groups of potentially vulnerable students, such as those categorised as having special educational needs. In this latter context, a further significant strategy involved new roles for special schools in supporting developments in the mainstream.

Significantly, we found that such collaborative arrangements can have a positive impact on the learning of students in all of the participating schools. This is an important finding in that it draws attention to a way of strengthening relatively low-performing schools that can, at the same time, help to foster wider improvements in the system. It also offers a convincing argument as to why relatively strong schools

should support other schools. Put simply, the evidence is that by helping others you help yourself.

Whilst increased collaboration of this sort is vital as a strategy for developing more effective ways of working, the experience of Greater Manchester showed that it is not enough. The essential additional ingredient is an engagement with data that can bring an element of mutual challenge to such collaborative processes. We found that data were particularly essential when partnering schools, since collaboration is at its most powerful where partner schools are carefully matched and know what they are trying to achieve. Data also matter in order that schools go beyond cosy relationships that have no impact on outcomes. Consequently, schools need to base their relationships on evidence about each other's strengths and weaknesses, so that they can challenge each other to improve.

In order to facilitate this kind of contextual analysis, strategies and frameworks were devised to help schools to support one another in carrying out reviews. In the primary sector, this involved colleagues from another school acting as critical friends to internally-driven review processes; whilst in secondary schools, subject departments took part in 'deep dives', where skilled specialists from another school visited in order to observe and analyse practice, and promote focused improvement activities. The power of these approaches is in the way they provide teachers with opportunities to have strategic conversations with colleagues from another school.

The powerful impact of the collaborative strategies developed in the Greater Manchester Challenge points to ways in which the processes used within individual schools can be deepened and, therefore, strengthened. This requires an emphasis on mutual critique, within schools and between schools, based on an engagement with shared data. This, in turn, requires strong collective commitment from senior school staff and a willingness to share responsibility for system reform. Our study of new patterns of school leadership that are emerging in response to the structural changes occurring in the English education system offers some promise in this respect (Chapman et al. 2008).

Beyond the school gate

An OECD report (2007) argues that educational equity has two dimensions. First, it is a matter of *fairness*, which implies ensuring that personal and social circumstances – for example gender, socio-economic status or ethnic origin – should not be an obstacle to achieving educational potential. Second, it is to do with *inclusion*, which is about ensuring a basic minimum standard of education for all. The report notes that the two dimensions are closely intertwined since, 'tackling school failure helps to overcome the effects of social deprivation which often causes school failure' (11).

The report goes on to argue that a fair and inclusive education is desirable because of the human rights imperative for people to be able to develop their capacities and participate fully in society. It also reminds us of the long-term social and financial costs of educational failure, since those without the skills to participate socially and economically generate higher costs for health, income support, child welfare and security. In addition, increased migration poses new challenges for social cohesion in more and more countries.

Despite the efforts made in response to such arguments, in many parts of the world there remains a worrying gap between the achievements of students from rich

and poor families (Kerr and West 2010; UNESCO 2010; Wilkinson and Pickett 2000). The extent of this gap varies significantly between countries. For example, Mourshed, Chijioke, and Barber (2010) argue:

In a world-class system like Finland's, socioeconomic standing is far less predictive of student achievement. All things being equal, a low-income student in the United States is far less likely to do well in school than a low-income student in Finland. Given the enormous economic impact of educational achievement, this is one of the best indicators of equal opportunity in a society (8–9)

On a more optimistic note, the most recent international comparisons in relation to literacy indicate that the best-performing school systems manage to provide high-quality education for all of their students. For example:

Canada, Finland, Japan, Korea and the partner economies Hong Kong-China and Shanghai-China all perform well above the OECD mean performance and students tend to perform well regardless of their own background or the school they attend. They not only have large proportions of students performing at the highest levels of reading proficiency, but also relatively few students at the lower proficiency levels. (OECD 2010, 15)

The implication is that it is possible for countries to develop education systems that are both excellent and equitable. The question is: what needs to be done to move policy and practice forward?

Within the international research community, there is evidence of a division of opinion regarding how to respond to this question. On the one hand, there are those who argue that what is required is a school-focused approach, with better implementation of the knowledge base that has been created through many years of school effectiveness and improvement research (e.g. Hopkins, Reynolds, and Gray 2005; Sammons 2007). Such researchers point to examples of where this approach has had an impact on the performance of schools serving disadvantaged communities (e.g. Chenoweth 2007; Stringfield 1995). On the other hand, there are those who argue that such school-focused approaches can never address fundamental inequalities in societies that make it difficult for some young people to break with the restrictions imposed on them by their home circumstances (Dyson and Raffo 2007).

Such arguments point to the danger of separating the challenge of school improvement from a consideration of the impact of wider social and political factors. This danger is referred to by those who recommend more holistic reforms that connect schools, communities and external political and economic institutions (e.g. Anyon 1997; Crowther et al. 2003; Levin 2005; Lipman 2004). These authors conclude that it is insufficient to focus solely on the improvement of individual schools. Rather, such efforts must be part of a larger overarching plan for system-wide reform that must include all stakeholders, at the national, district, institutional and community levels.

An obvious possibility is to combine the two perspectives by adopting strategies that seek to link attempts to change the internal conditions of schools with efforts to improve local areas. This approach is a feature of the highly acclaimed Harlem Children's Zone (Whitehurst and Croft 2010), a neighbourhood-based system of education and social services for the children of low-income families in New York.

The programme combines education components (e.g. early childhood programmes with parenting classes; public charter schools), health components (including nutrition programmes), and neighbourhood services (one-on-one counselling for families; community centres; and a centre that teaches job-related skills to teenagers and adults). Dobbie and Fryer (2009) describe the Children's Zone as 'arguably the most ambitious social experiment to alleviate poverty of our time' (1). Having carried out an in-depth analysis of statistical data regarding the impact of the initiative, they conclude:

... high-quality schools or high-quality schools coupled with community investments generate the achievement gains. Community investments alone cannot explain the results. (25)

Our recommendations are based on this combined approach, although we are well aware that pressures created by national policies can lead to strategic dilemmas in so doing, particularly when schools feel obliged to demonstrate rapid increases in test and examination scores.

The analysis we have made of the ways in which external factors limit the possibilities for developing equitable schools offers vivid illustrations of the complexities involved (see Ainscow et al. 2012). In so doing, it makes a convincing case for carrying out an analysis of the wider context within which schools work. We have had considerable experiences of conducting such analyses in school districts. This has convinced us that transforming educational provision in relation to local neighbourhoods and services depends on identifying local priorities and ways of developing sustainable responses to these. To do this, it is necessary to engage in forms of contextual analysis that probe beneath the surface of headline performance indicators in order to understand how local dynamics shape particular outcomes; and to identify the key underlying factors at work and determine which of these factors can be acted upon and by whom.

This marks a shift in thinking about local transformation from a surface-level, quick-fix response – concerned with manipulating headline figures – to a deeper response, which by addressing issues in context aims to achieve sustainable and long-term improvements. In this way, the purpose is to produce a rich and actionable understanding of local issues. To help achieve this, the analysis may be bounded in one of three ways – none of which are mutually exclusive:

- *By the unit of action* – for example, a contextual analysis might focus on issues in an administratively defined area, such as a district or local authority, where there are already structures in place that can be used to drive action.
- *By geographical and social boundaries* – the analysis might focus on issues in an area that has clear physical boundaries, for example, main roads or imagined boundaries, such as a housing estate that residents strongly identify with – or some combination of the two.
- *By issues* – the analysis might focus on understanding a particular issue, such as poor school attendance or teenage gang membership. In these instances, while retaining a local focus, the analysis might extend beyond a particular neighbourhood or administrative area.

We have found that sometimes a contextual analysis may highlight issues that shape local circumstances but which local actors are not in a position to change – for example, global recession leading to the decline of local industry. However, the analysis should be able to identify how local processes and dynamics are being shaped by this; what is locally actionable; and what unit(s) of action can be utilised to develop an appropriate response.

In order to understand the complex dynamics at work in an area, as well as exploring outcome data, it is necessary to enable people who live and work there to talk about their understandings of local issues. We have found that a loose research framework can help to provide the freedom needed for this, while also ensuring that the data generated can be usefully compared, and used to create shared understandings and strategies (Ainscow et al. 2012).

Rethinking relationships

In thinking about how the strategies we have outlined in this article might be used more widely, it is essential to recognise that they do not offer a set of techniques that can simply be lifted and transferred to other contexts. Rather, they offer an overall approach to improvement that is driven by a set of values and uses processes of contextual analysis in order to create strategies that fit particular circumstances. What is also distinctive in the approach is that it is mainly led from within schools in order to make more effective use of existing expertise and creativity.

We argue that closing the gap in outcomes between those from more- and less-advantaged backgrounds will only happen when what happens to children *outside* as well as *inside* schools changes. This means changing how families and communities work, and enriching what they offer to children. In this respect, we have seen encouraging experiences of what can happen when what schools do is aligned in a coherent strategy with the efforts of other local players – employers, community groups, universities and public services (Ainscow 2012; Cummings, Dyson, and Todd 2011). This does not necessarily mean schools doing more, but it does imply partnerships beyond the school, where partners multiply the impacts of each other's efforts.

All of this has implications for the various key stakeholders within education systems. In particular, teachers, especially those in senior positions, have to see themselves as having a wider responsibility for all children and young people, not just those that attend their own schools. They also have to develop patterns of internal organisation that enable them to have the flexibility to cooperate with other schools and with stakeholders beyond the school gate (Chapman et al. 2008). It means, too, that those who administer area school systems have to adjust their priorities and ways of working in response to improvement efforts that are led from within schools.

There is a role for governments in all of this. The evidence from the English experience over the past 20 years suggests that attempts to command and control from the centre stifle as many local developments as they stimulate (Ainscow and West 2006; Gray 2010; Whitty 2010). Consequently, central government needs to act as an enabler, encouraging developments, disseminating good practice and holding local leaders to account for outcomes. All of this depends on the currency of knowledge exchange and, therefore, requires cultural change. This requires a new approach to national policy – one that can respond to local factors, while also

providing a unifying understanding of equity that can help to create coherence and foster collaboration across reform efforts (Ainscow 2005).

Conclusion

The arguments we have developed in this article are intended to challenge those leading school improvement to return to their historical purpose, that of ensuring a sound education for every child. We have suggested that in order to achieve this it is necessary to complement within-school developments with efforts that link schools with one another and with their wider communities. For this to happen, we propose five organisational conditions that need to be in place:

Condition 1: Schools have to collaborate in ways that create a whole-system approach. If, as we have argued, equity issues can arise between schools, then an approach to promoting equity is needed which crosses school boundaries. Put simply, all schools in an area need to assume some level of accountability for all of the children who live in that area. This means that the prioritisation of institutional advantage that is so characteristic of the current school system needs to be replaced by an approach that acknowledges the *mutuality* of schools.

Condition 2: Equity-focused local leadership is needed in order to coordinate collaborative action. Whether local authorities are any longer the appropriate vehicles for local coordination and policy-making is a moot point, but it is clear that some source of local leadership is needed, and that such leadership has to be concerned with equity issues across the area, rather than with the advantage of this or that institution. In this respect, we have seen a number of contexts in which senior staff from a group of schools have worked together in providing such a lead.

Condition 3: Development in schools must be linked to wider community efforts to tackle inequities experienced by children. Local coordination is not simply about managing schools into some sort of productive relationship with each other. It is also about linking the work of schools with that of other agencies, organisations and community groups that are concerned with the social and economic well-being of the area. Working individually, schools are helpless to tackle the deprivation and associated disadvantages that some of their students experience. Yet, there is no reason in principle why they cannot look beyond their gates and develop more holistic approaches to local problems in collaboration with other stakeholders.

Condition 4: National policy has to be formulated in ways that enable and encourage local actions. None of the developments we are suggesting will be possible without a national policy framework that encourages schools to orientate themselves towards wider equity issues. In our own country the perverse consequences of successive governments' education policies are all too evident – the narrow focus on measured attainment; the conflation of crude benchmarks of school performance with students' real achievements; the encouragement of schools to view themselves as self-interested institutions competing against each other rather than working in the interests of all children; the weakening of local leadership from local authorities; and the repeated attempts to solve deep-seated social and educational problems by improving, reforming and, ultimately, closing down the schools where those problems became manifest. Yet this is not the whole story of education policy over the past two decades. The nascent forms of school collaboration we have described

owed much to a policy emphasis on schools working together, and an unheralded yet crucial shift away from the 'lone school' model for providing education.

Condition 5: Moves to foster equity in education must be mirrored by efforts to develop a fairer society. Needless to say, even the most powerful area-based approaches to promoting equity are likely to have little more than palliative effects in the context of the powerful socio-economic forces that engender inequality and lead to marginalisation. There is, therefore, an important sense in which, in the absence of more fundamental social reforms, efforts to develop greater equity and service integration are inevitably doomed to failure. Yet, powerful as the forces that produce inequality and marginalisation might be, they are not entirely overwhelming. Policy in our country and elsewhere can and does make a difference to levels of poverty, to social segregation and integration, and to the gaps between rich and poor. Even without radical political change, different governments, as a matter of record, have made different decisions that exacerbate or ameliorate the impact of both underlying socio-economic processes and global influences.

Our conclusion is, therefore, that just as there is a complicated ecology of equity in and around schools, so there need to be multi-dimensional strategies to tackle equity issues. Specifically, school improvement processes need to be nested within locally led efforts to make school systems more equitable and to link the work of schools with area strategies for tackling wider inequities and, ultimately, with national policies aimed at creating a fairer society.

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