

## **Collaboration as a strategy for promoting equity in education: possibilities and barriers**

**Mel Ainscow  
University of Manchester**

Many educators take the view that working together with others is a major means of achieving improvements in schools. The danger is that this belief can distract attention from the complexities involved in achieving effective forms of collaboration. There is a related risk that politicians and policy makers - seeing collaboration as the silver bullet of educational reform – might decide to mandate it as a means of achieving success. In so doing, they may overlook how other policies make this difficult.

With these concerns in mind, in this paper I reflect on many years of working with colleagues on a programme of development and research projects that have been based around collaborative ways of working. In so doing, I point to the many possibilities that this approach offers whilst, at the same time, examining the barriers that can obstruct progress. This analysis leads me to construct a proposal regarding the conditions that are needed in order to make collaboration work, focusing in particular on what I see as the major challenge facing education systems around the world, that of achieving equity.

### **Responding to equity**

A recent Education for All Global Monitoring Report points out that, despite improvements over the last 15 years, there are still 58 million children out of school globally and around 100 million children who do not complete primary education (UNESCO, 2015). The report goes on to conclude that inequality in education has increased, with the poorest and most disadvantaged shouldering the heaviest burden. Indeed, it suggests that the world's poorest children are 'four times more likely not to go to school than the world's richest children, and five times more likely not to complete primary school' (page ii)

Whilst this situation is most acute in the developing world, there are similar concerns in many wealthier countries, as noted by the OECD (2012), which reports that across its member countries, almost one of five students does not reach a basic minimum level of skills to function in today's societies. It is also noted that students from low socio-economic background are twice as likely to be low performers, implying that personal or social circumstances are obstacles to achieving their educational potential.

In responding to these challenge there is growing interest internationally in the use of strategies that place an emphasis on the power of market forces (Lubienski, 2003). In particular, a number of national education policies are encouraging schools to become autonomous; for example, in parts of Australia, the independent public schools; the academies in England; charter schools in the USA; the voucher reforms in Chile; concertado schools in

Spain; and free schools in Sweden. Alongside this emphasis on school autonomy is a focus on parental choice. This usually takes place within education systems where high-stakes testing systems are intended to inform decision making, whilst at the same time driving improvement efforts (Au, 2009). In addition, narrowly defined measures of effectiveness are used for purposes of accountability (Schildkamp, Ehren & Lai, 2012).

Whilst such developments have the potential to open up possibilities to inject new energy into the improvement of education systems, there is growing evidence from a range of countries that they are leading to increased segregation that further disadvantage learners from economically poorer backgrounds (Pickett & Vanderbloemen, 2015). So, for example, talking about the development of charter schools in the USA, Kahlenberg and Potter (2014) suggest they have led to increased segregation in school systems across the country. Other researchers point to similar patterns in Chile (Mc Ewan & Carnoy, 2000) and in Sweden (Wiborg, 2010).

Meanwhile, in my own country, England, we have recently reported how the creation of academy schools has reduced the level of funding that is available elsewhere throughout the education system and, in particular, diverted resources away from local authorities and the schools that remain within their control (Ainscow, Dyson, Hopwood & Thomson, 2016). Moreover, the manipulation of admissions suggests that these initiatives are contributing more directly to social segregation by effectively selecting 'easy-to-teach students into favourably funded schools. It seems, therefore, that as with other reforms badged as movements towards greater school autonomy, any gain in this direction comes at a price.

Other recent developments in England have illustrated further potential dangers, with increased migration bringing concerns about supposed links between the concentrations of children from minority groups in certain schools and processes of political radicalisation. These concerns erupted most notably in the so-called Trojan Horse affair in Birmingham, where the Secretary of State came to believe that members of minority groups were working to control the governance of schools, with a consequent danger of so-called independent state schools being taken over by extremist elements within a community (Kershaw, 2014). All of which suggests that 'educational market places' need some form of checks and balances.

There are, however, countries that have made progress by adopting a very different approach, one that combines quality with equity (OECD, 2012). In these contexts, the OECD reports that the vast majority of students have the opportunity to attain high level skills, regardless of their own personal and socio-economic circumstances. To take an example, in Finland - the country which regularly outperforms most other countries in terms of educational outcomes - success is partly explained by the progress of the lowest performing quintile of students who take the PISA tests out-performing those in other countries, thus raising the mean scores overall (Sabel et al, 2011). This has involved a much greater emphasis on support for vulnerable students within mainstream schools, as opposed to in segregated provision

(Takala, Pirttimaa & Tormane, 2009). The implication is, therefore, that it is possible for countries to develop education systems that are both excellent and equitable (Schleicher, 2010). The challenge for practitioners and policy-makers is to find ways of breaking the link between disadvantage and educational failure.

### **A different way of thinking**

The argument developed in this paper provides a different way of thinking about how to address this challenge, one that is much influenced by the work of Hargreaves and Shirley (2009). Having analyzed examples of successful school change from various parts of the world, they go on to argue for approaches that emphasize democracy and professionalism, rather than bureaucracy and market forces. Such approaches, they suggest, transfer trust and confidence back from the discredited free market of competition among schools, and reinvests them in the expertise of professionals.

Influenced by these argument, in what follows I reflect on evidence from a series of studies - carried out with my colleagues in England and various other national contexts - in order to consider how approaches based on 'democracy and professionalism' can be operationalized. Most of this work, which is already reported in scholarly literature, uses what we define as a 'development and research' approach (Ainscow et al, 2012b). This is one of a family of methodologies referred to by Fishman et al (2013) as 'design-based implementation research'. These aim to transcend traditional research/practice barriers in order to facilitate the design of educational interventions that are 'effective, sustainable, and scalable'. They are seen as occurring when researcher and practitioner knowledge meet in particular sites, aimed at producing new knowledge about ways in which broad values might better be realized in future practice.

Our work is guided by the principle of equity, which – following the lead of OECD - we take to involve notions of inclusion and fairness. Working 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, 2012a). 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 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 also important to recognize the complexities of interactions between the different elements in this ecology, and their implications for achieving more equitable education systems. As we work on improvement projects with schools, we therefore find it helpful to think of three interlinked areas within which equity issues arise:

- *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 local school systems. 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 organizations, 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 I explore possibilities for linking within-school, between-school and beyond-schools factors in order to develop collaborative improvement approaches.

### **Within school factors**

Our research suggests that 'schools know more than they use' (Ainscow et al, 2012a). This means that the starting point for strengthening the work of a school is with the sharing of existing practices through collaboration amongst staff, leading to experimentation with new practices that will reach out to all students. This approach draws on the work of many other scholars who have explored processes of collaborative inquiry as a strategy for professional development and school improvement (e.g. Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Elliot, 1991; Kemmis, 2010; Locke, Alcorn & O'Neill, 2013)

At the heart of the processes in schools where changes in practice do occur is the development of a common language with which colleagues can talk to one another and, indeed, to themselves, about detailed aspects of their practice (Huberman, 1993). Without such a language teachers find it very difficult to experiment with new possibilities (Ainscow, 1999). Much of what teachers do during the intensive encounters that occur is carried out at an automatic, intuitive level. Furthermore there is little time to stop and think. This is why having the opportunity to see colleagues at work is so crucial to the success of attempts to develop practice. It is through shared experiences that colleagues can help one another to articulate what they currently do and define what they might like to do (Hiebert et al., 2002). It is also the means whereby space is created within which taken-for-granted assumptions about particular groups of learners can be subjected to mutual critique.

We have found that the use of evidence to study teaching within a school can help in generating such a language of practice (Ainscow et al, 2003). This, in turn, can help to foster the development of practices that are more effective in reaching hard to reach learners. Specifically, it can create space for rethinking by interrupting existing discourses. The starting point for such processes is often with a consideration of statistical evidence regarding student progress. However, the need to dig deeper into factors that influence progress usually requires an engagement with qualitative forms of evidence. Particularly powerful techniques in this respect involve the use of mutual lesson observation, sometimes through video recordings, and evidence collected from students about teaching and learning arrangements within a school.

Under certain conditions such approaches provide 'interruptions' that help to make the familiar unfamiliar in ways that stimulate self-questioning, creativity and action. In so doing they can sometimes lead to a reframing of perceived problems that, in turn, draws the teacher's attention to overlooked possibilities for addressing barriers to participation and learning. In this way, differences amongst students, staff and schools can become a catalyst for improvement.

A powerful approach for introducing these techniques is lesson study, a systematic procedure for the development of teaching that is well established in Japan and some other Asian countries (Lewis et al, 2006). The goal of lesson study is to improve the effectiveness of the experiences that teachers provide for all of their students. The focus is on a particular lesson, which is then used as the basis for gathering evidence on the quality of experience that students receive. These lessons are called research lessons and are used to examine the responsiveness of the students to the planned activities.

An example from a recent study illustrates what this involves (see Messiou et al, 2016, for more details). The project involved two cycles of collaborative action research carried out by teams of teachers in eight secondary schools in three countries (i.e. England, Portugal and Spain), with support from university researchers. The schools were chosen because of the diversity of their student populations. Using an evolving framework to guide their efforts, each team experimented with ways of collecting and engaging with the views of students in order to foster the development of more inclusive classroom practices. Typically, teachers worked in trios following a lesson study approach. Meanwhile, members of the university teams monitored the process and outcomes of these activities.

So, for example, in planning their joint lesson, one trio of teachers identified students within each of their classes who they saw as being particularly vulnerable. They felt that by thinking about the lesson with these individuals in mind they might create new and different ways of facilitating the learning of all of their students. One teacher talked about a student who had an understanding of language but would not speak, even when invited. Another teacher focused on one of his students who had severe dyslexia. This led the teachers to discuss how they might plan their lessons differently; for example, they talked about getting the students to write on the whiteboard, and getting students to rehearse verbally what they wanted to say, rather than writing arguments down.

The trio decided that they needed to work with some of their students before teaching the lesson to get an idea of how they preferred to learn. They also wanted to consider how best to plan the lesson to support the many differences amongst the students. They therefore selected seven students, each from a different ethnic background, six of who were born outside the country. The teachers got these students together at lunchtime and asked them to rank their preferences regarding different classroom activities that can be used when studying poetry. One of the teachers explained:

Initially, they were quite reluctant to perhaps voice an opinion that they thought we wouldn't like.... We stepped back for a bit and just left the recording device on the table and let them talk about what they liked and what they didn't like, because if we're not imposing our views on them, they were more likely to be honest.

The overall aim of the lesson was to develop confidence in and awareness of a variety of dramatic techniques. Each teacher taught the lesson with their

two colleagues watching, making changes in the light of the regular discussions that took place as they proceeded. It was noticeable that these became increasingly focused on matters of detail and, as a result, led to a greater emphasis on mutual challenge and personal reflection. By the end of the process the three teachers all commented that they had been challenged to rethink their lesson planning and facilitation. Through this, they realized that new approaches gave members of the class the opportunities to learn out of their “comfort zones” and, in so doing, move beyond the teachers’ expectations about the capabilities of their students.

As a result of analyzing experiences such as this one, we were able to conceptualize a strategy for teacher development in respect to student diversity (Messiou & Ainscow, 2015). Central to the strategy is the idea of engaging with the views of students, a process that should permeate all the processes involved and can take many forms. Relating our research to the findings of others who have explored the potential of student voice (e.g. Fielding, 2001; McIntyre, Pedder & Rudduck, 2005; Mitra, 2004) led us to argue that it is this factor, more than anything else, that makes the difference as far as responding to learner diversity is concerned. In particular, it is this that brings a critical edge to the process that has the potential to challenge teachers to go beyond the sharing of existing practices in order to invent new possibilities for engaging students in their lessons, as we saw in the example. Where such changes take place, it is useful to think of them as the result of an interruption to continuing thinking and practice which brings about a transformation from “single-loop” to “double-loop” learning (Argyris & Schon, 1996) – that is, from learning which enables practice to be improved incrementally, to learning which shifts the assumptions on which practice is based.

In these senses, the evidence from this study supports research findings from elsewhere which suggest that classroom based research of this kind can be a powerful way of moving practice forward within a school (e.g. Copland, 2003; Talbert et al., 2010). What is distinctive in this particular project, however, is the added value that comes from engaging students themselves in the process. It is also clear that the use of the approach presents various organizational challenges that have to be addressed. In particular, the work of the teacher trios sometimes proved to be challenging of the status quo within the schools in the study. Consequently, greater collaboration was needed amongst teachers in order to support the introduction of new practices. This required organizational flexibility and the active support of senior staff, prepared to encourage and support processes of experimentation.

This points to the importance of forms of leadership that encourages colleagues to challenge one another’s assumptions about particular students. We know that some schools are characterized by ‘inclusive cultures’ (Dyson, Howes & Roberts, 2004). Within such schools, there is a consensus amongst adults around values of respect for difference and a commitment to offering all students access to learning opportunities. This consensus may not be total and does not necessarily remove all tensions or contradictions in practice. On

the other hand, there is likely to be a high level of staff collaboration and joint problem solving, and similar values and commitments may extend into the student body, and into parent and other community stakeholders in the school. The implication is that senior staff within a school have to provide effective leadership by addressing these challenges in a way that helps to create a climate within which teacher professional development can take place (Riehl, 2000).

### **Between school factors**

The approach I have outlined so far is based on the idea of those within schools collecting and engaging with various forms of evidence in order to stimulate moves to create more inclusive practices. Our research provides encouraging evidence of the potential of this approach (see: Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2006; Miles & Ainscow, 2011; Ainscow et al, 2012b). However, it has also thrown light on the difficulties in putting such an approach into practice within current policy contexts. This made us analyze the limitations of within-school strategies, leading us, in turn, to argue that these should be complemented with efforts to encourage greater cooperation between schools, and between schools and their wider communities.

In recent years, my colleagues and I 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 & Howes, 2007; Ainscow, Muijs & West, 2006; Ainscow et al., 2003; Ainscow & West, 2006; Ainscow et al., 2005; Muijs et al., 2010; Muijs et al., 2011). Together with the work of others (e.g. Chapman & Hadfield, 2010; Fielding et al, 2005; Hill, 2008), these studies indicate that collaboration between schools has an enormous potential for fostering the capacity of education systems to respond to learner diversity. More specifically, they show how such partnerships can help to reduce the polarization of schools, to the particular benefit of those students who seem marginalized at the edges of the system, and whose performance and attitudes cause increasing concern.

It is important to realize, however, that using such partnerships is not a straightforward process. Too often they lead to meetings without any significant action. An example from England illustrates some of the complexities involved within a policy context that emphasizes competition between schools. It involved a network that used visits between schools to generate evidence regarding their shared focus on developing more inclusive practices (see: Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2006).

The visits were not always successful. This seemed to be particularly so when the host teachers interpreted the visits solely as opportunities for the visitors to learn. On these occasions, the hosts positioned themselves as teachers rather than learners. Typically, the visit then consisted of a demonstration or performance of various teaching strategies that had been judged to be successful, usually followed by a short question and answer session. On these occasions, those receiving the visit might merely rehearse what they



already knew and respond to questions beyond the procedural as if they were challenges, rather than openings for debate.

On the other hand, successful visits were usually characterized by a sense of mutual learning amongst hosts and visitors. It was noticeable, too, that the focus for these visits often took some time to identify and clarify. Indeed, the preliminary negotiations that took place were in themselves a key aspect of the process. So, for example, during one such visit, the visiting teachers were each invited to observe two children. A simple observation framework, designed by the teacher research team in the host school, focused on children's interactions with peers and teachers. The children to be observed were chosen by the class teacher, who, on this occasion, was the deputy head of the school. They were chosen on the basis that they were the children he knew least about in his class. In addition to observations, the visiting teachers were asked to interview the children. Again, a loose structure was devised but the main emphasis was on the visitors following up things that they had seen during observations.

Afterwards, one of the visiting teachers said that the day had been "absolutely fascinating...". He added: "There is no way in your own school you could do this". This seemed to be born out by some of the imagery used by students about their teacher in interviews that day. For example, one child commented: "He's like a piranha looking round the class. He knows when I'm not listening". And, another student remarked: "He could be a really good teacher if he could explain but he gets too frustrated." The joking response by the class teacher to such statements was: "I want to go home! I've had enough now!"

The personal nature of these observations, and the teacher's willingness to listen to this feedback with colleagues from his own and another school, illustrate the extent of the challenge that was sometimes involved in this sort of collaboration. Indeed, such visits were not "cosy", nor did they always result in a rosy glow. The key factor seemed to be that of mutual challenge. In the particular example, the teacher's seniority and the fact that he had volunteered for this degree of scrutiny may have been factors in creating a climate within which he felt able to enter into such a challenging dialogue with colleagues from another school.

For me, the most convincing evidence about the power of schools working together comes from my involvement in the Greater Manchester Challenge, a three-year initiative in the north of England. It involved over 1,100 schools in ten local authorities, and had a government investment of around 50 million British Pounds (see Ainscow 2015, for a detailed account of this initiative). The decision to invest this large amount 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, the London Challenge, the success of which has been widely reported, leading to extensive debates as to what were the key factors that led to its impact (e.g. Barrs et al, 2014; Claeys et al, 2014;

Greaves, Macmillan & Sibieta, 2014; Hutchings et al, 2012; Kidson & Norris, 2014).

A detailed analysis of the context led to the conclusion that plenty of good practice existed across the Greater Manchester schools. Consequently, it was decided that collaboration and networking would be the key strategies for strengthening the overall capacity of the system to reach out to vulnerable groups. More specifically this involved a series of inter-connected activities for 'moving knowledge around' (Ainscow, 2012). Once again, an engagement with evidence proved to be important in making this happen.

So, for example, Families of Schools were set up, using a data system that grouped between 12 and 20 schools on the basis of students' prior attainment and socio-economic background. This approach partnered schools that serve similar populations whilst, at the same time, encouraging collaboration amongst schools that were not in direct competition with one another because they did not serve the same neighborhoods. Comparisons of the performance of schools within a Family were often a catalyst for sharing ideas. Led by headteachers, 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 the most disadvantaged contexts, evidence from the Challenge suggests that school partnerships were the most powerful means of fostering improvements (Hutchings et al., 2012). Most notably, what we called the Keys to Success programme led to striking improvements in the performance of some 200 schools facing the most challenging circumstances. 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, an approach that has been used effectively in other parts of the world (Jensen & Sonnemann, 2014).

Another 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, some 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 groups, such as those categorized 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.

The powerful impact of the collaborative strategies developed in the Greater Manchester Challenge points to ways in which improvement 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.

It is worth adding that another key factor in the success of both the London and Greater Manchester Challenge programmes was the involvement of teams of expert advisers. Chosen because of a track record of leading successful school improvement, they were given the mandate and resources to intervene in schools, helping them to develop, implement and monitor the impact of their own improvement plans. In so doing, they too were a form of interruption to the status quo within the schools.

### **Beyond school factors**

Our research has led us to argue that the development of schools that are effective for all children will only happen when what happens outside as well as inside the school changes (Ainscow et al., 2012a). This means changing how families and communities work, and enriching what they offer to children. Another example gives a flavor of the sorts of practical actions that can be taken.

A few years ago, I attended a breakfast meeting attended by some 50 or so parents (all women) from three English primary schools that had developed a longer-term partnership through the Greater Manchester Challenge. All the schools serve areas of social disadvantage, two on a public housing estate where most families are white, and the other serving an inner city district where many families have recently arrived from other countries. The groups of parents from each school took it in turns to tell their experiences of acting as champions who foster parental involvement.

One group presented posters summarizing changes in their school over the previous four years. Together they explained how a school that had been largely excluding of parents had been turned into a warm and welcoming context. All the groups talked about particular strategies they had developed. For example, the inner city school uses what they call 'walking buses'. These involve volunteer parents picking up children each morning who have previously had records of poor attendance and/or punctuality.

Many of the women wanted to speak, offering personal testimonies as to how their involvement in school had influenced them. One talked about how it had 'changed her life', in that her own schooling had been disastrous in ways that meant that she had little confidence about supporting her own children's learning. A woman who had recently arrived from Brazil talked emotionally about what it was like arriving at the school with no knowledge of English. Accounts such as these led to occasional tears, and much hugging amongst the participants.

Some of the parents explained how their involvement had encouraged them to return to education in order to gain formal qualifications. As a result, some are now employed in their child's school in support roles. One woman explained how she had started as a cleaner, then became a lunchtime

supervisor, and is now a teaching assistant. She went on to talk warmly about how senior staff in their schools had encouraged their active involvement, using first names to refer to particular school leaders. Significantly, it was reported that each of the schools has designated a senior member of staff to support these activities.

Moving beyond the involvement of family member, we also have encouraging evidence of what can happen when what schools do is aligned in a coherent strategy with the efforts of other community players – employers, community groups, universities and public services (Ainscow, 2012a). 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. However, our experience suggests that the success of such partnerships is dependent upon a common understanding of what they are trying to achieve.

With this argument in mind, my Manchester colleagues Alan Dyson and Kirstin Kerr are currently exploring the idea of area-based initiatives modeled on the principles underpinning the highly acclaimed Harlem Children's Zone in the USA (Dyson & Kerr, 2013). This work is attempting to improve outcomes for children and young people in areas of disadvantage through an approach that they characterize as being "doubly holistic". That is to say, they seek to develop coordinated efforts to tackle the factors that disadvantage children and enhance the factors which support them, across all aspects of their lives, and across their life spans, from conception through to adulthood.

Developments such as this have 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 working that enable them to have the flexibility to cooperate with other schools and their wider communities. 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.

### **Overcoming barriers**

The experiences described in this article suggest a way forward that policy makers could use to ensure that the impetus that comes from greater school autonomy will lead to improvements that will benefit all children and young people. This is based on an assumption that education systems have further potential to improve themselves, provided policy makers allow the space for practitioners to make use of the expertise and creativity that lies trapped within individual classrooms. The aim must be to 'move knowledge around' and, as I have argued, the best way to do this is through strengthening collaboration within schools, between schools and beyond schools.

I have also suggested that an engagement with evidence of various forms can act as a catalyst for such developments, through the interruption of existing ways of working. This leads me to argue that it is now time for school evaluation to be carried out *by schools for schools*, in ways that can act as a

stimulus for improvement. This echoes the recommendations of Fullan, Rincon-Gallardo & Hargreaves (2015) who argue for a move away from a heavy reliance on external accountability towards an investment in the professional capital of teachers and school leaders. However, this has to be challenging and credible. In other words, it must not involve forms of collusion within which partner schools endorse one another in an acceptance of mediocrity.

In thinking about how the approach I have described might be used more widely it is essential to recognize that it does not offer a simple recipe that can be lifted and transferred from place to place. Rather, it defines an approach to improvement that uses processes of contextual analysis in order to create strategies that fit particular circumstances. As I have illustrated, this involves an engagement with various forms of evidence, leading to the development of locally determined strategies. In this way, those involved probe beneath the surface of headline performance indicators to understand how local dynamics shape particular outcomes for students. In so doing this helps to identify barriers to progress and resources that can inject pace into efforts to move things forward.

What is distinctive in the approach is that it is mainly led from within schools, with principals and other senior school staff having a central role as 'system leaders' (Hopkins, 2007). And, as I have argued, this requires new thinking, practices and relationship across education systems. It is predictable that such changes will lead to periods of organizational 'turbulence' (Hopkins, Ainscow & West, 1994). The nature of this phenomenon will vary from place to place, but in general it arises as a result of the reactions of individuals within an education system to ideas and approaches that disrupt the status quo of their day-to-day lives. It is worth noting, however, that there is research evidence to suggest that without periods of turbulence, successful, long-lasting change is unlikely to occur (Fullan, 2007). In this sense turbulence can be seen as a useful indication that things are on the move.

In reflecting on all of this, I am reminded of Robert Bales' theory of group systems that we used in earlier research (see Ainscow, Hargreaves & Hopkins, 1995). Bales predicts that attempts to get different stakeholders to pull together around a common purpose are likely to provoke tensions between the need to establish cohesion amongst groups, whilst, at the same time, taking actions to achieve these goals. Put simply, it is relatively easy to maintain cooperation until the moments when hard decisions have to be made, most particularly regarding the setting of priorities and the allocation of resources.

### **Policy implications**

There are important implications in all of this for the future roles of district level administrators and support staff. They have to adjust their ways of working in response to the development of improvement strategies that are led from within schools. Specifically, they must monitor and challenge schools in relation to the agreed goals of collaborative activities, whilst senior staff within schools share responsibility for the overall management of improvement

efforts. In taking on such roles, district level staff can position themselves as guardians of improved outcomes for all young people and their families - protectors of a more collegiate approach but not as custodians of day-to-day activities.

Having analyzed two relatively successful large-scale improvement initiatives, Andy Hargreaves and I recently suggested a way of supporting local authorities in responding to these new demands (Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015). We argue that, in taking on new roles, districts can provide a valuable focus for school improvement, be a means for efficient and effective use of research evidence and data analysis across schools, support schools in responding coherently to multiple external reform demands, and be champions for families and students, making sure everybody gets a fair deal.

The problem is, of course, that not all local school systems or districts are strong. Therefore, a way to reduce variation amongst school districts is to promote collaboration among them so they share resources, ideas, and expertise, and exercise collective responsibility for student success. In adopting this 'leading from the middle' approach, districts can become the collective drivers of change and improvement together.

Finally, of course, all of this has significant implications for national policy makers. In order to make use of the power of collaboration as a means of achieving both excellence and equity in our schools, they need to foster greater flexibility at the local level in order that practitioners have the space to analyze their particular circumstances and determine priorities accordingly. This means that policy makers must recognize that the details of policy implementation are not amenable to central regulation. Rather, these have to be dealt with by those who are close to and, therefore, in a better position to understand local contexts.

## **Conclusion**

The research summarized in this paper points to the sorts of conditions that are needed in order to use processes of collaboration to foster equity within education systems. This way of thinking is based on the idea that schools have untapped potential to improve their capacity for improving the achievement of all of their students, particularly those from poorer backgrounds. The challenge therefore is to mobilize this potential. This reinforces the argument that school improvement is a social process that involves practitioners in learning from one another, from their students, and from others involved in the lives of the young people they teach. As we have seen, an engagement with evidence can be a powerful catalyst for making this happen.

A helpful theoretical interpretation that can be made of these processes is that, together, they help to strengthen social capital. In other words, they create pathways through which expertise and lessons from innovations can spread. In recent years, the work of Robert Putnam has been influential in making the idea of social capital a focus for research and policy discussion. He explains:

Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to the properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them (Putnam 2000, p.19).

Writing about the United States, Putnam states that ‘what many high-achieving school districts have in abundance is social capital, which is educationally more important than financial capital’ (p. 306). He also suggests that this can help to mitigate the insidious effects of socioeconomic disadvantage.

It seems, then, that a major factor in determining success in promoting equity in education is our ability to strengthen social capital. The task of those involved in leadership roles is, therefore, to create the climate that will support such developments. In so doing, they must be driven by the view that, as far as educational progress is concerned, poverty need not mean destiny.

**Note:** Many colleagues have influenced the ideas presented in this paper. In particular, I must acknowledge the important contributions of: Alan Dyson, Tony Booth, Chris Chapman, Sue Goldrick, Andy Hargreaves, Andy Howes, Kirstin Kerr, Olwen McNamara, Kyriaki Messiou, Susie Miles, Daniel Muijs, Denis Mongon and Mel West.

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