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RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGE OF EQUITY WITHIN EDUCATION SYSTEMS

Respondiendo al desafío de la equidad en los sistemas educativos

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ABSTRACT: Children enter schools from different backgrounds, have different experiences of education, and leave with very different results. In many countries, the poorest children tend to lose out most starkly, achieve the worst results and attend the lowest performing schools (Giroux & Schmidt, 2004; OECD, 2010; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). A fundamental challenge for policy makers and practitioners, therefore, is to find ways of breaking the links between disadvantage, educational failure and restricted life chances.

In this paper, I describe and analyse the experience of a three-year project in England that sets out to address this equity agenda. This leads me to draw out lessons that may be relevant to those in other contexts who are focused on this challenging issue.

KEYWORDS: inclusion, equity, education systems.

RESUMEN: Los niños ingresan en las escuelas con orígenes diferentes, tienen diferentes experiencias de educación y abandonan las escuelas con resultados muy diferentes. En muchos países, la mayoría de los niños más pobres son los que más pierden, alcanzan los peores resultados y asisten a escuelas de rendimiento más bajo (Giroux y Schmidt, 2004; OCDE, 2010; Wilkinson y Pickett, 2009). Un desafío fundamental para los responsables políticos y profesionales, por lo tanto, es encontrar formas de romper los vínculos entre la desventaja, el fracaso escolar y las oportunidades de vida restringidas.

En este trabajo, describo y analizo la experiencia de un proyecto de tres años en Inglaterra, que pretende dar respuesta a esta agenda de equidad. Esto me lleva a extraer lecciones que pueden ser pertinentes para aquellos que en otros contextos se centran en esta difícil cuestión.

PALABRAS CLAVE: inclusión, equidad, sistemas educativos.

The context of England

THE ENGLISH EDUCATION SYSTEM is a particularly useful context to consider when thinking about the challenge of equity. This was shown in a 2007 OECD study, which reported that the impact of socio-economic circumstances on young people's attainment was more marked in the UK than in any other of the 52 countries considered.

More recent data illustrate the nature of the patterns of inequality that exist (Kerr & West, 2011). For example, if we look at student attainment levels in England, we see that:

- White British students –both boys and girls– are more likely than other ethnic groups to continue to underachieve.
- Of the minority ethnic groups, Chinese and Indian pupils are generally the most successful and African-Caribbean pupils the least.
- Poverty, as indicated by eligibility for free school meals[1], is strongly associated with low attainment, more so for white British pupils than for other ethnic groups.
- Children from homes with single and/or unemployed parents, and parents who have few educational qualifications themselves, often do less well at school.

These patterns are echoed by studies that have examined the performance of schools and their students at various stages of education across the UK. Summing this up, Benn and Millar (2006) argue that one of the biggest problems the country faces is «the gap between rich and poor, and the enormous disparity in children's home backgrounds and the social and cultural capital they bring to the educational table» (p. 145).

Recent years have seen intensive efforts to address these challenges. These efforts are linked to an intensification of political interest in education, especially regarding standards and the management of the state system (Whitty, 2010). Competition between schools is seen as one of the keys to 'driving up standards' and further reducing the control of the local authority over provision. All of this is intended to 'liberate' schools from the bureaucracy of local government and establish a form of market place. In this way, it is intended that families will have greater choice as to which school their youngsters will attend.

At the same time, there has been a huge number of policy initiatives aimed at addressing the equity agenda. Predictably, government statements point to improvements in test and examination scores, arguing that the impact of the various interventions has been significant. Within the research community, however, there is a variety of views (Gray, 2010). There is also a worry that the various national strategies, whatever their benefits, have tended to reduce the flexibility with which schools can respond to the diverse characteristics of their students (Ainscow & West, 2006).

Meanwhile, it has been argued that the development of the educational market-place, coupled with the recent emphasis on policies fostering greater diversity of

[1] In England, children from economically poor backgrounds are entitled to a free lunch in schools. This is used as a proxy indicator of the numbers of disadvantaged children.

schools, has created a quasi-selective system in which the poorest children, by and large, attend the lowest-performing schools (Ainscow *et al.*, 2007). Consequently, the least advantaged schools fall progressively further and further behind their high-performing counterparts. In terms of these effects, through selective advantaging and disadvantaging of schools, it can be argued that the policies that have generally led to increased standards, have also increased, rather than decreased, disparities in education quality and opportunity between advantaged and less privileged groups. The policy priority, therefore, is to find ways of continuing to improve the education system but in a way that fosters equity.

City Challenge

Over the last three years I have led a major educational initiative that sets out to address this important policy agenda across ten local authorities[2] in England. Known as the Greater Manchester Challenge, the project has involved a partnership between national government, local authorities, schools, leaders, teachers and other stakeholders, and has had a government investment of around £50 million. The decision to invest such a large budget reflected a concern regarding educational standards in the region, particularly amongst children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The approach adopted was influenced by an earlier initiative in London (Brighouse, 2007).

The Greater Manchester city region is home to a population of 2.5 million people and has over 600,000 children and young people. Across the region, there are approximately 1,000 schools and colleges. The area is diverse in a range of ways, with very high levels of poverty. Children and young people come from a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, with a high proportion whose families have Asian heritage. Nearly 16% have a first language other than English.

The overall aims of the Challenge are to raise the educational achievement of all children and young people, and to narrow the gap in educational achievement between learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers. The vision, which was developed through extensive consultation and agreed with representatives of the ten partner local authorities, attempts to draw stakeholders together around the common purpose of making sure that *all* children and young people: have high *Aspirations* for their own learning and life chances; are ensured *Access* to high quality educational experiences; and *Achieve* the highest possible standards in learning. These ambitious goals (known as the 'Three As') necessitate reforms at all levels of the education service. This being the case, the aim is to encourage experimentation and innovation, rather than simply doing more of the same.

The Challenge also sets out to take advantage of new opportunities provided as a result of adopting an approach that draws on the strengths that exist in different local authorities. These include possibilities for: tackling educational issues that cut across local authority boundaries (such as, declining school performance at the secondary school stage, the development of personalised 14-19 learning pathways); linking

[2] There are 152 English local authorities. They are democratically accountable for providing a range of services for their local communities, including education. The ten local authorities in Greater Manchester are: Bolton, Bury, Oldham, Manchester, Rochdale, Salford, Stockport, Tameside, Trafford and Wigan.

educational issues to broader social and economic agendas (such as, population mobility, employment, transport, housing, community safety, health), none of which respect local authority boundaries; and the freer exchange of expertise, resources, and lessons from innovations across the region, not least through the linking of schools and colleges in different local authorities.

The impact of all of this has been significant in respect to overall improvements in test and examination results. So, for example, Greater Manchester primary schools now outperform national averages on the tests taken by all English children. And, in the public examinations taken by all young people at 16, in 2010 secondary schools in Greater Manchester improved approximately three times faster than schools nationally. Significantly, the greatest improvements occurred in those schools serving the most disadvantaged communities.

It is, of course, difficult to make causal claims in respect to the factors have led to these improvements – as is the case with most educational and social science research. However, if indicators point in a positive direction in relation to intended purposes (i.e. more involvement in particular Challenge activities associated with improved outcomes), a fair degree of confidence in any interpretations can be made and can be seen as evidence of impact.

Taking this position, the evidence we have suggests that two overall factors that have contributed to the improvements:

- Increased collaboration within the education system, such that the best practices are made available to a wider range of children and young people; and
- The active involvement of community partners, including local businesses, universities and colleges, faith groups, voluntary organisations, academy sponsors and the media.

In what follows I explain in more detail the strategies that have been used.

Moving knowledge around

The Challenge strategy 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 helped to pinpoint a range of human resources available within the context of Greater Manchester that could be mobilized in order to support improvement efforts. Recognising the potential of these resources, it was decided that networking and collaboration –within and across schools– should be the key strategies for strengthening the overall improvement capacity of the system.

This approach builds on our earlier research evidence which suggests that, under appropriate conditions, greater collaboration within schools is a means of fostering improvements (West, Ainscow & Stanford, 2005); and that collaboration between differently-performing schools can reduce polarization within education systems, to the particular benefit of learners who are performing relatively poorly (Ainscow, 2010; Ainscow & Howes, 2007; Ainscow, Muijs & West, 2006; Ainscow & West, 2006). It does this by both transferring existing knowledge and, more importantly, generating context specific new knowledge.

With this in mind, during the first year of the Challenge various initiatives were taken to move knowledge around. The ways in which these activities were intended to be linked are summarized in Figure 1.

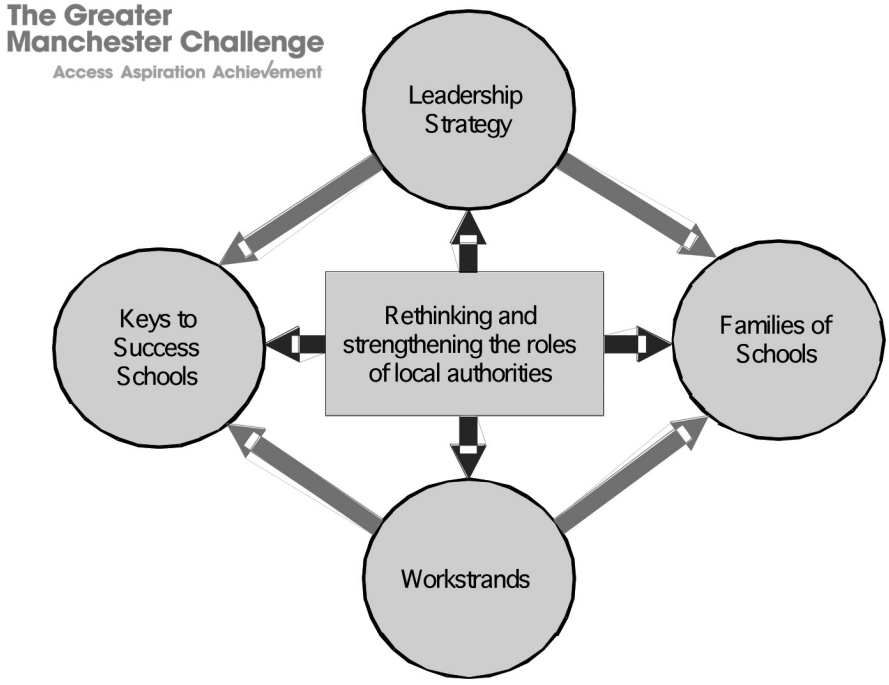

FIGURE 1. The elements of the Greater Manchester Challenge strategy.

Initially, arrangements were facilitated by the small team of Challenge Advisers but they are now mainly led by head teachers. In what follows I summarise the elements of the strategy.

Families of Schools. In an attempt to engage all schools in the city region in processes of networking and collaboration, Families of Schools were set up, using a data system that groups schools on the basis of the prior attainment of their pupils and their socio-economic home backgrounds. There are 58 primary Families and 11 secondary, each of which has between twelve and twenty schools from different local authorities. The strength of this approach is that it groups together 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.

Figure 2 is a graph taken from the Families of Schools data system. It illustrates how schools within a Family can be compared in terms of the overall attainment levels of their students (i.e. the horizontal axis) and the improvements that have occurred over the previous three years (i.e. the vertical axis). So, for example, in this example

(which is for secondary Family 6), why does school number 1 seem to be doing so poorly compared with schools 15 and 98?

The varied performance amongst Family members offers possibilities for using differences as a resource to stimulate the sharing of expertise and joint efforts to innovate in order to: improve the performance of every school; increase the numbers of outstanding schools; reduce the gap between high and low performing groups of learners; and improve outcomes for particular vulnerable groups of learners.

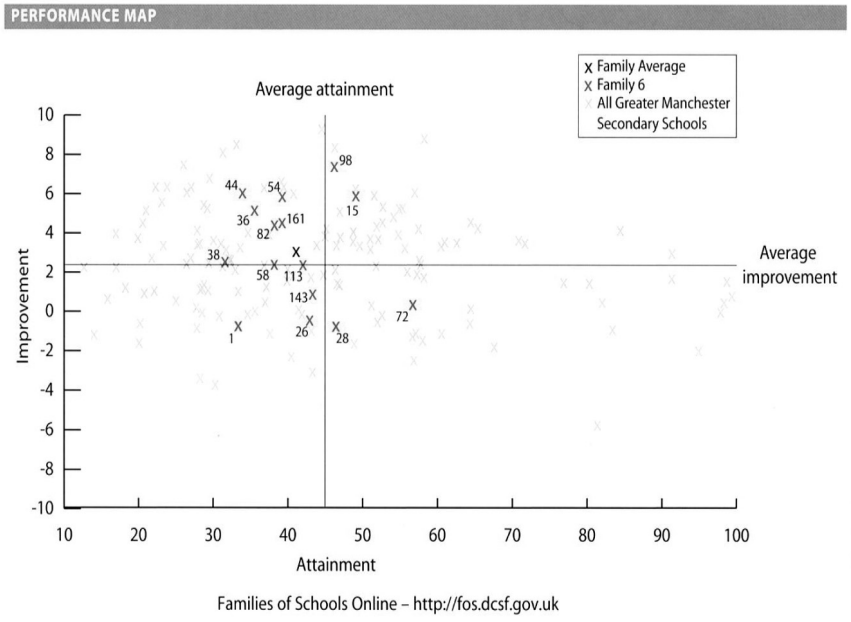

FIGURE 2. Data display for Family 6 (secondary schools).

We have found, however, that for this to happen schools have to dig more deeply into the comparative data in order to expose areas of strength that can be used to influence performance across their Family; whilst also identifying areas for improvement in every school. In so doing, they must be wary of the dangers associated with what Simon (1978) refers to as 'satisficing'. Put simply, this involves attempts to meet criteria for adequacy, leading to an acceptance of a satisfactory outcome, rather than aiming for the best possible level of improvement.

With this in mind, the average performance for each Family –both in terms of overall attainment and recent improvement trends– provides a benchmark against which overall goals for each of the partner schools can be set. At the same time, the analysis of data with regard to sub-groups of pupils (e.g. boys and girls; those from ethnic minorities) and different subject areas also enables a Family to work on the issue of within-school variation. The collective goal must then be to move all of the Family members in a 'north-easterly' direction on the performance graph.

In thinking about how to make this happen, we have found that it is important to be sensitive to the limitations of statistical information. What brings such data to life

is when 'insiders' start to scrutinise and ask questions as to their significance, bringing detailed experiences and knowledge to bear on the process of interpretation. The occasional involvement of colleagues from partner schools can deepen such processes, not least because of the ways in which they may see things, or ask questions, that those within a school may be overlooking.

Even then, there are still limitations that need to be kept in mind. Statistics provide patterns of what exists: they tell us what things are like but give little understanding as to why things are as they are, or how they came to be like that. This is why qualitative evidence is needed to supplement statistical data. For example, there is increasing evidence that mutual observation amongst colleagues and listening to the views of learners can be a powerful means of challenging thinking and provoking experimentation (Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2006). Again here, there is potential for schools to support one another in collecting and engaging with such evidence in a way that has the potential to make the familiar unfamiliar.

Led by headteachers, the Families of Schools are proving to be successful in strengthening collaborative processes within the city region. For example, primary schools in one Family are working together to strengthen leadership in each school. This has included head teachers visiting one another to carry out 'learning walks'. Eight schools in another primary Family identified a shared desire to build stronger relationships with the children's families – for example, parents of children with English as an additional language where there were communication issues, or groups of pupils with lower attendance.

In the secondary sector, schools within one of the Families have been using a web based system where students can showcase their work via podcasts, videos and blogs, allowing teachers, parents and students from their own and other schools to view and comment on their efforts. Talking about his school's involvement, a highly respected secondary headteacher commented, «This is the most powerful strategy for school improvement I have experienced».

Our monitoring of the work of the Families of Schools points to the following conditions that lead to the greatest impact on student achievement:

- There is a collective commitment to improve the learning of every pupil, in every school in the group.
- The schools analyse statistical data, using professional insights in order to identify areas that need addressing.
- In the same way, schools pinpoint expertise within the schools that can be used to address these concerns.
- Collaborative activities involve people at different levels, including, in some instances, children and young people.
- A small number of head teachers take on the role of leading these collaborative activities.

In moving collaboration forward in a way that supports the development of all schools and students within a Family, shared leadership is a central driver. This requires the development of leadership practices that involve many stakeholders in collectively sharing responsibility. Often this necessitates significant changes in beliefs and attitude, and new relationships, as well as improvements in practice. The goal,

however, must be to ensure that collaboration is between school communities, and not restricted to head teachers, not least because arrangements that rely on one person are unlikely to survive the departure of those individuals who brokered them.

Keys to Success. 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. Specifically, what we refer to as the Keys to Success programme has 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 have made has helped to trigger improvement across the system.

What happened in each of these schools is unique, based on a detailed analysis of the local context and the development of an improvement strategy that fitted the circumstances. However, a common feature was that their progress was achieved through carefully matched pairings of schools that cut across local authority boundaries.

Sometimes these involved what seem like unlikely partners. For example, a highly successful school that caters for children from Jewish Orthodox families worked with an inner city primary school –the largest primary school in the city region– to develop more effective use of assessment data, and boost the quality of teaching and learning. This school has a very high percentage of Muslim children, many of whom learn English as an additional language. Over a period of 18 months, the partnership contributed to significant improvements in test results, and throughout the school the majority of students are now reaching national expectations for their ethnic groups. It also led to a series of activities around wider school issues, such as the creative arts, where the two schools shared their expertise. The headteacher of the Jewish school commented: «It's been a totally positive experience, built on mutual respect. This is a great school and the learning is definitely a two-way process».

Another partnership involved a primary school that has developed considerable expertise in teaching children to read, supporting a secondary school in another local authority where low levels of literacy have acted as a barrier to student progress. Describing what had happened, the head of the primary school commented: «Together we have developed the use of a letters and sounds phonics strategy to support improvements in literacy among the three lowest English sets in Year 7, including pupils with special educational needs. We had seen real impact using a more multi-sensory approach to the teaching of phonics within in our own school and I couldn't see any reason why it shouldn't be used to similar effect with older pupils». She went on to talk with enthusiasm about the professional development opportunities all of this had provided for her own staff.

Another example involved an outstanding grammar school[3] for girls that partnered a low performing inner city comprehensive in another local authority. The impact on attendance, behaviour and examination results have been remarkable. Reflecting on this, the head teacher of the grammar school says, «I spend about three days a week at the school and one of my assistant heads works 50% of the time with the senior leadership team to build capacity. It was apparent from the outset that the team had

[3] Grammar schools select academically students at the age of eleven. In general they do not tend to cater for young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

the skills to move the school forward but its members were not forged into a team and were not made accountable». She also commented on the benefits gained for her own school.

As these examples show, the evidence is that such arrangements have had a positive impact on the learning of students in both of the partner schools. This is a highly significant finding in that it draws attention to a way of strengthening relatively low performing schools that can, at the same time, help to foster system wide improvements. It also offers a convincing argument as to why a relatively strong school 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 shows that it is not enough. The essential additional ingredient is an engagement with evidence that can bring an element of mutual challenge to collaborative processes.

We have found that evidence is particularly essential when partnering schools. School collaboration is at its most powerful where partner schools are carefully matched and know what they are trying to achieve. Evidence also matters 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 have been devised to help schools to support one another in carrying out reviews. In the primary sector, this involves colleagues from another school acting as critical friends to internally driven review processes; whilst in secondary schools, subject departments have been involved in 'deep dives', where skilled specialists from another school visit to observe and analyse practice in order to 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. For example, in one primary school they helped senior staff raise pupil attainment and build leadership capacity. The school was judged satisfactory with good features as a result of an inspection in 2007, but the following year its test scores in mathematics dipped dramatically. Eighteen months after enlisting support from another school, attainment was significantly higher. «The rise in standards», says the head teacher, «is largely down to quality conversations between senior leaders at our school and another primary school in the neighbouring borough. This has reinvigorated leadership, helped set direction and boosted confidence going forward». In describing her involvement, the head teacher of the partner school explained: «I feel my school has benefited a great deal too. The main impact has been for me and the senior leadership team, as I have been able to have challenging and confidential discussions about the strategic direction of the school and make changes in the way members of the leadership team work together. This has, in turn, given me the confidence to distribute leadership more effectively and delegate with confidence».

The Leadership Strategy. Within the Greater Manchester Challenge, head teachers are seen as having a central role as system leaders. The good news is that our experience suggests that many successful head teachers are motivated by the idea of taking on system leadership roles.

Reflecting on his experience of working as a system leader, one head teacher commented:

> I have a strong conviction that impact is maximized through a willingness to learn oneself when giving support and to ensure that, at all times, the client school is at the centre. In other words, no matter how experienced or skilled you might believe yourself to be, it is important to be flexible and meet the school where it is at – rather than to go in with a «template» of answers. To do this, strong, professional and objective relationships have to be established with all key players you are working with and supporting.

Another head teacher explained that, for her, the key to successful partnership working across schools is mutual trust and an understanding that there are opportunities for the development for both schools. She explained, «It's just about working together to try to support each other and making sure we are doing something really useful, not just reinventing the same thing». Using the image of an orchestra, she added, «The school's own staff are the principle instruments, the external partners are just helping with the conducting».

We now have some 150 or so outstanding head teachers who are designated as system leaders[4]. Increasingly they are driving forward improvement efforts across the city region. In addition to their involvement in the partnerships set up to support Keys to Success schools, they have explored other mechanisms for making better use of the expertise that exists within the schools.

One important strategy to facilitate the movement of expertise has been provided through the creation of various types of hub schools. So, for example, there are hub schools which provide specialist support for pupils with English as an additional language (EAL). These schools have all engaged enthusiastically in the process of sharing practice, not least through workshops they led at a conference attended by over 200 practitioners from across the region. Many of these schools also receive visits from colleagues in other schools, run seminars and shared resources electronically.

Similarly, there are what are called teaching schools[5] that provide highly regarded professional development focused on bringing about improvements in classroom practice. So far over 1,000 teachers from across the city region have taken part in these programmes that involve powerful adult learning strategies, such as the modeling of effective classroom techniques, practice and feedback, and peer coaching. Once again, here, there is strong evidence of mutual benefit in this approach – it has had a positive impact on the quality of classroom practice and student learning, in both the schools receiving support and within the teaching schools themselves.

Other hub schools offer support in relation to particular subject areas, and in responding to groups of potentially vulnerable groups, such as those with special educational needs. In this latter context, a further significant development has involved new roles for special schools in supporting developments in the mainstream.

The Work Strands. In talking about the various strategies for moving knowledge around, many head teachers report that it has been important that the partnerships involve schools from different local authorities. Indeed, one head commented that, for him, all of this had been a 'game-changer'. This suggests that cross-border

[4] This is now part of a national scheme where outstanding head teachers are designated as National or Local Leaders of Education. As such, they are expected to provide support to other schools. They receive additional training in relation to their support roles.

[5] Teaching schools are seen as having a similar role as teaching hospitals. On the basis of the excellent practice that exists, they offer professional development to staff from other schools. This approach, which was developed within City Challenge, is now part of national policy.

collaboration can provide a mechanism for encouraging innovation, although we have noticed that, sometimes, it can simply lead to time consuming meetings that have little direct impact on learners in classrooms.

Within Greater Manchester, we introduced a series of what we refer to as work strands in an attempt to use cross-border collaboration to inject further innovation and pace into the system. Each of these initiatives is led by one of the local authority partners and focuses on educational issues facing all local authorities, linking improvement efforts to broader social and economic agendas.

In some instances the work strands have proved to be effective in facilitating the exchange of expertise, resources, and lessons from innovations across the city region in relation to issues such as: raising aspirations, strengthening the contributions of governors, and closing the gap between high and low achieving groups of students. Importantly, they have led to the involvement of community partners, local businesses, universities and media organizations.

For example, the four universities in Greater Manchester are working together on a project known as 'Higher Futures for You'. The overall aim is to raise self belief and aspirations amongst primary school children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Through carefully orchestrated visits to local places of employment, pupils are helped to understand the career opportunities that are available to them. During a final workshop, the children share their knowledge with members of their families. This initiative, which aims to work with 200 primary schools, was originally developed by the head teacher of one school. Through the Challenge, this creative project now reaches many more children and families.

Another of the work strands set out to explore the use of learner voice as a strategy for re-thinking what schools offer to their students. In carrying out this work a partnership was developed with the Institute for Citizenship, an independent charity that promotes democratic citizenship and citizenship life skills. This led to an additional focus on the experience of young people outside of school. As a result, schools across Greater Manchester have collaborated in addressing the question: *In developing children as participative citizens in designing the way things are in school, can we achieve greater civic participation beyond school?* The schools involved have been enthused by the opportunity provided, and have been committed to widen and deepen the involvement of students (and parents).

In another experimental initiative, 16 students from disadvantaged backgrounds have shared jobs in three major companies. Each student attended their internship one day per week throughout the year and caught up with missed schoolwork during the rest of the week. The evidence suggests that parents were very positive once they saw the impact on children's social skills in their home environment. Meanwhile, within school, aspirations changed, so did attitudes to catch up on missed school work, as the students made links between a good career and attaining targets at school. There was evidence, too, of shifts in aspirations; for example, from mechanic to engineer, childcare to business, and 'don't knows' to IT and Law. The approach is now being developed in five more schools, across three of the local authorities, involving 40 students and seven other business organisations.

Rethinking the roles of local authorities. The creation of a system for improvement that is driven by schools themselves, and that involves cooperation between schools and other community organisations, begs questions regarding the

roles of local authorities. Indeed, it raises the possibility that the involvement of a middle level administrative structure may not even be necessary.

The experience of Greater Manchester suggests that local authority staff can have an important role to play, not least in acting as the conscience of the system – making sure that all children and young people are getting a fair deal within an increasingly diverse system of education. In order to do this they need to know the big picture about what is happening in their communities, identifying priorities for action and brokering collaboration.

This has required significant structural and cultural changes, with local authorities moving away from a 'command and control' perspective, solely focused within their own boundaries, towards one of 'enabling and facilitating' collaborative action across the city region. At times, local authority colleagues have found these changes challenging, particularly during a time of reducing budgets. The strengthening of cross-border cooperation at many levels has provided contexts within which mutual support can be provided in addressing these challenges.

Through the Challenge, greater collaboration has been achieved across the ten partner local authorities. In this way, officers and support staff at various levels have been able to assist one another in addressing new policy demands. In some instances, local authorities have been supported by experienced consultants in carrying out thorough reviews of their school improvement arrangements. Encouragement for these radical changes has been provided by the Chief Executives of the ten local authorities, who see further improvements in their school systems as a key element of their overall strategy for the economic and social development of the city region.

Drawing out the lessons

So, what can we learn from this ambitious and complex project? In particular, what does it suggest about how to develop education systems that are effective for all young people, particularly those from less advantaged backgrounds?

A useful theoretical interpretation that can be made of the strategies I have summarized is that, together, they have been successful in strengthening social capital. In other words, they have helped to establish pathways through which good practice can spread.

Drawing on ideas from various international projects, Mulford (2007) defines social capital in terms of the groups, networks, norms, and trust that people have available to them for productive purposes. He goes on to suggest that by treating social relationships as a form of capital, they can be seen as a resource, which people can then draw on to achieve their goals.

In recent years, the work of Putnam (2000) has been most influential in making the idea of social capital a focus for research and policy discussion. In so doing, he has demonstrated how it can help to mitigate the insidious effects of socioeconomic disadvantage. Writing about the United States, he states that «what many high-achieving school districts have in abundance is social capital, which is educationally more important than financial capital» (p. 306).

The evidence I have summarized in this paper suggests six interconnected strategies that have helped to foster stronger social capital across the city region. More specifically, these strategies facilitate the sorts of mutual benefit that I have described

when schools learn how to learn from one another. In this sense, they provide the basis for what Hargreaves (2010) describes as a 'self improving school system'.

The strategies are as follows:

1. **Realising untapped potential.** We have found that schools have considerable expertise that can be used to improve themselves – *the development of new working relationships have helped to mobilise this potential.*
2. **Using evidence as a catalyst.** A sharp analysis of evidence has led to the identification of issues that need urgent attention and the human resources to support improvement efforts in relation to these issues – *this has had to be responsive to changing circumstances.*
3. **School-to-school collaboration.** As I have explained, we have strong evidence that school partnerships have been the most powerful means of fostering improvements, particularly in challenging circumstances – *however, this has had to be coordinated and monitored sensitively.*
4. **Cross-border collaboration.** This has provided an effective mechanism for encouraging innovation at various levels of the system – *it has not, however, proved to be effective in relation to some policy areas.*
5. **System leadership.** Many successful head teachers have been motivated by the idea of taking on improvement roles with other schools – *their involvement has had to be encouraged, monitored and supported.*
6. **Rethinking the roles of local authorities.** Staff from local authorities have had an important role in monitoring developments, identifying priorities for action and brokering collaboration – *this has required new thinking and practices.*

As far as Greater Manchester is concerned, the urgent task now is to use these six strategies to ensure continuing improvement beyond the period of the Challenge. With this in mind, an 'agency' is being developed that will take on the role of coordinating cross-border school-to-school partnerships. Led by a group of 18 outstanding head teachers, it is representative of the different types of school and local authorities.

In moving forward, the success of the strategies I have described provides grounds for optimism. At the same time, it is important to recognise that the gains made have been hard won, and often they remain fragile and could easily be lost. It must also be remembered that, despite these overall improvement, the school system continues to let down significant numbers of learners. Consequently, ways have to be found to maintain the momentum, focusing on high leverage activities (Ainscow, 2005); i.e. actions that are likely to have a direct and powerful impact on the learning of children and young people.

Wider implications

In thinking about how the six strategies might be used more widely it is essential to recognise that they do not offer a recipe that can be simply lifted and transferred to other contexts. Rather, they offer an approach to improvement that 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, with head teachers and other senior school staff having a central role as system leaders.

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 working that enable them to have the flexibility to cooperate with other schools and with stakeholders beyond the school gate.

It means, too, that those who administer area schools systems have to adjust their priorities and ways of working in response to improvement efforts that are led from within schools. With this in mind, they need to collaborate in exploring the implications, supporting one another in moving thinking and practice forward – and, in so doing, exploring where collaboration could also offer efficiencies in relation to the use of human resources.

It has to be recognised, however, 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* the school changes. This means changing how families and communities work, and enriching what they offer to children. As I have explained, there is powerful evidence from Greater Manchester 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. 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.

Finally, there is a key role for central governments in all of this. The evidence from the English experience over the last twenty years suggests that attempts to command and control from the centre stifle as many local developments as they stimulate (Ainscow & West, 2006). 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 will, therefore, require cultural change.

This paper is dedicated to the memory of my colleague and dear friend Carlos Ruiz Amador.

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