

PROMOTING EQUITY IN EDUCATION

Staff
College



THINK PIECE 4

SCHOOL-TO-SCHOOL COOPERATION

SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS AND COOPERATION HAVE BECOME AN INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT PART OF WHAT HAS BEEN REFERRED TO AS A 'SELF-IMPROVING' OR 'SCHOOL-LED' SYSTEM. (HOUSE OF COMMONS EDUCATION COMMITTEE, 2013)

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. The research summarised earlier provides encouraging evidence of the potential of this approach. However, it has also thrown light on the difficulties in putting such thinking into practice, particularly within policy contexts that put pressure on schools to compete. This points to some of the limitations of within-school strategies, suggesting that these should be complemented with efforts to encourage greater cooperation between schools.



IMPACT

There is considerable evidence that school-to-school collaboration can strengthen improvement processes by adding to the range of expertise made available. 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 sometimes help to reduce the polarisation of schools, to the particular benefit of those students who seem marginalised at the edges of the system, and whose progress and social attitudes cause concern.

There is also evidence that when schools seek to develop more collaborative ways of working this can have an impact on how teachers perceive themselves and their work. Specifically, comparisons of practices in different schools can lead teachers to view underachieving students in a new light. In this way, learners who cannot easily be educated within a school's established routines come to be seen less as 'having problems' but as encouraging teachers to re-examine their practices in order to make them more responsive and flexible.

LEARNING FROM DIFFERENCES

Developing partnerships between schools is not a straightforward process. Too often they can lead to meetings without any significant action. For example, in some networks, schools are encouraged to visit one another in order to generate evidence regarding their shared focus on developing more inclusive practices. However, these visits are not always successful. This seems to be particularly so when the host teachers interpret visits solely as opportunities for the visitors to learn.

On these occasions, the hosts position themselves as teachers rather than learners. Typically, the visits then consist of a demonstration of various teaching strategies that had been judged to be successful, usually followed by a short question and answer session. In these situations, those receiving the visit merely rehearse what they already knew and respond to questions beyond the procedural as if they were challenges to their practices, rather than openings for debate. On the other hand, successful visits are likely to be characterised by a sense of mutual learning amongst hosts and visitors. It is noticeable, too, that the focus for these visits often takes some time to identify and clarify. Indeed, these preliminary negotiations are in themselves a key aspect of the process of mutual professional learning.

MOVING KNOWLEDGE AROUND

Convincing evidence of the power of schools working together comes from the City Challenge programmes in London and Greater Manchester. The success of these initiatives has been widely reported, leading to extensive debates as to what were the key factors that led to their impact.

An important feature of City Challenge was the emphasis placed on contextual analysis as the starting point for developments. This led to the conclusion that plenty of good practice existed across the schools in the two city regions. 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 of learners. More specifically, this involved a series of inter-connected activities for *moving knowledge around*. 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 served 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 neighbourhoods. Comparisons of the performance of schools within a Family were often a catalyst for sharing ideas and the stimulus for collaborative inquiry. Led by headteachers, the Families of Schools proved to be successful in strengthening collaborative processes, although the impact was varied.

IMPLICATIONS

The powerful impact of the collaborative strategies developed in City Challenge points to ways in which improvement processes used within individual schools can be deepened and, therefore, strengthened. This involves 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.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

- **Is your school(s) a member of any collaboratives?**
- **If so, is this adding value to attempts to foster equity?**
- **What are the challenges and might they be overcome?**

FURTHER READING

- Ainscow, M. (2016) Collaboration as a strategy for promoting equity in education: possibilities and barriers. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, 1 (2), 159 – 172
- Armstrong, P. and Ainscow, M. (2018) School-to-school support within a competitive education system: views from the inside. *School Effectiveness, School Improvement*, 29:4, 614-633
- Ehrich, L.S., Harris, J., Klenowski, V., Smeed, J. and Ainscow, M. (2015) Ethical leadership in a time of increasing accountability. *Leading & Managing*, 21 (1), 22-35
- Gilbert, C. (2018) *Optimism of the will: the development of local area-based education partnerships. A think-piece*. London: UCL Institute of Education
- Hadfield, M. & Ainscow, M. (2018) Inside a self-improving school system: collaboration, competition and transition. *Journal of Educational Change*, 19(4), 441-462
- Rincón-Gallardo, S. & Fullan, M. (2016) Essential features of effective networks in education. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, 1 (1) 5 - 22