

# PROMOTING EQUITY IN EDUCATION

## THINK PIECE 5

# WORKING WITH THE COMMUNITY

***'...CLOSING THE GAP IN OUTCOMES BETWEEN THOSE FROM MORE AND LESS ADVANTAGED BACKGROUNDS WILL ONLY HAPPEN WHEN WHAT HAPPENS TO CHILDREN OUTSIDE AS WELL AS INSIDE SCHOOLS CHANGES.'* (AINSCOW, DYSON, GOLDRICK & WEST, 2012)**

Ensuring that all children receive effective support from their families and communities is essential to the promotion of equity. This in turn means ensuring that schools can build on the resources offered by families, and support the extension of those resources. In this respect, we have seen important examples of what can happen when what schools do is aligned in a coherent strategy with the efforts of other local players – employers, community groups, colleges, universities and public services.

This does not necessarily mean schools doing more, but it does imply partnerships beyond the school gate, where partners multiply the impacts of each other's efforts. Our experience suggests that the success of such place-based partnerships is dependent upon a common understanding of what those involved are trying to achieve and, once again, an engagement with various forms of evidence to stimulate collective effort.



## PLACE-BASED DEVELOPMENTS

Where we have found schools leading place-based developments, they have often built on the foundations laid by previous collaborative arrangements, such as education action zones or extended school clusters. Others, however, have had to start effectively from scratch, investing firstly in building new relationships, so that they can create foundations for change.

Partnerships between schools, and between schools and community stakeholders, can extend the range of expertise that can contribute to this form of area development. This collaborative process recognises that teachers' professional knowledge, and their knowledge of their school context, is as important as researchers' knowledge of the wider research-evidence base. Bringing these together can help to create powerful interventions in a particular context, and from which other schools can learn.

Area-based initiatives are intended to involve a wide range of partners working together in a co-ordinated manner. Schools are often the key to these partnerships and may be their principal drivers. However, this is not simply about enlisting other agencies and organisations in support of a school-centred agenda. Rather, they are aimed at improving a wide range of outcomes for children and young people, including but not restricted to educational outcomes – much less, narrowly-conceived attainment outcomes. Health and wellbeing, personal and social development, thriving in the early years and positive employment outcomes are all as important as how well children do in school.

None of this arises from a down-grading of the importance of attainment but from a recognition that all outcomes for children and young people are inter-related. Furthermore, the factors which promote or inhibit one outcome are very likely to be the factors which promote or inhibit outcomes as a whole.

As a result, the focus of such initiatives is the population of the area, rather than the population of schools per se, and they may be led by non-educational organisations, such as housing associations or regeneration partnerships. Moreover, they are envisaged as being long-term, thinking in terms of a ten-year time horizon, and are committed to acting strategically, basing their actions on a deep analysis of the local area's underlying problems and possibilities.

## COLLECTIVE IMPACT

Internationally, there is a range of initiatives that link schools and other agencies in area-based action. In the absence of co-ordination by central government, the idea of what is known in the USA as 'collective impact' is beginning to gain traction. In other words, the complex problems that beset schools in common with all public services in the context of diversity, inequality and disadvantage are seen as demanding multi-strand responses at the local level.

Such approaches draw on the principles underpinning the highly acclaimed Harlem Children's Zone in the USA. This project involves efforts to improve outcomes for children and young people in areas of disadvantage through an approach that they characterise 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.

The Harlem project has been described by researchers as 'arguably the most ambitious social experiment to alleviate poverty of our time'. Another American programme, StriveTogether, acts as a central backbone organisation for sites using similar ideas that are locally tailored across the United States. These initiatives are guided by indicators that span young people's lives 'from cradle to career', with progress determined using data at all stages.

## IMPLICATIONS

Developments such as these 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 in their local area, 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 and their local communities.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

- **Are schools involved in the development of area-based activities?**
- **What are the challenges and how might they be addressed?**
- **How can this thinking be taken forward?**

## FURTHER READING

- Ainscow, M., Dyson, A., Goldrick, S. and West, M. (2012) *Developing Equitable Education Systems*. London: Routledge
- Dobbie, W. and Fryer, R.G. (2009) *Are high-quality schools enough to close the achievement gap? Evidence from a bold social experiment in Harlem*. Cambridge: Harvard University
- Dyson, A. and Kerr, K. (2013) *Developing children's zones for England: What's the evidence?* London: Save the Children
- Grossman, A.S., Lombard, A. and Fisher, N. (2014) *StriveTogether: Reinventing the local education ecosystem*. Harvard Business School
- Whitehurst, G. J. and Croft, M. (2010) *The Harlem Children's Zone, promise neighbourhoods, and the broader, bolder approach to education*. Washington: The Brookings Institution