Moving knowledge around: a strategy for promoting inclusion and equity within education systems

Mel Ainscow, 2021

Throughout the world 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. There are, however, countries that have made progress in reducing this gap whilst at the same time having high overall standards. The implication is that it *is* possible for countries to develop education systems that are both excellent and equitable.

The challenge for practitioners is, therefore, to find ways of breaking the links between disadvantage and educational failure. This paper summarises what research has to say about this agenda, drawing in particular on evidence generated through a programme of studies I have carried out with colleagues internationally over the last 25 years.

Factors to be addressed
In trying to make sense of the complex processes involved it is useful to see them in relation to an 'ecology of equity'. By this I mean that the extent to which students' experiences and outcomes are equitable is not dependent only on the educational practices of their schools. Instead, it depends on a whole range of interacting processes that reach into the school from outside. These include the demographics of the areas served by schools, the histories and cultures of the populations who send (or fail to send) their children to the school, and the economic realities faced by those populations.

This suggests that it is necessary to address three interlinked sets of factors that impact on the learning of pupils. These relate to: *within-school factors* to do with existing policies and practices; *between-school factors* that arise from the characteristics of local school systems; and *beyond-school factors*, including the demographics, economics, cultures and histories of local areas. Focusing on these factors can create the conditions for 'moving knowledge around'.

Within school factors: Our research suggests that 'schools know more than they use'. 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.

The use of evidence to study teaching within a school can help to foster the development of practices that are more effective in reaching hard to reach learners. Specifically, this can create space for rethinking by interrupting existing discourses. Particularly effective techniques in this respect involve the use of mutual lesson observation, sometimes through video recordings, and

evidence collected from pupils about teaching and learning arrangements within a school.

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. The goal of lesson study is to improve the effectiveness of the experiences that teachers provide for all of their pupils. The focus is on a particular lesson, which is then used as the basis for gathering evidence on the quality of experience that pupils receive. These lessons are called research lessons and are used to examine the responsiveness of the pupils to the planned activities. In our recent research, schools in five European countries (i.e. Austria, Denmark, England, Portugal and Spain) have involved children as researchers in this process (see: https://reachingthehardtoreach.eu/).

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. Our recent research in Australia suggests that this process requires ethical leadership: specifically, an ethic of care, justice and critique.

Between school factors: Moving beyond what happens within individual schools, research suggests that collaboration between differently performing schools can reduce polarisation within education systems, to the particular benefit of learners who are performing relatively poorly. It does this by both transferring existing knowledge and, more importantly, generating context specific new knowledge.

In terms of schools working in highly disadvantaged contexts, evidence from City Challenge in London and Greater Manchester, and Schools Challenge Cymru in Wales, suggests that school-to-school partnerships can be a powerful means of fostering improvements. Most notably, we have seen how they led to striking improvements in the performance of some schools facing the most challenging circumstances. Significantly, we found that such collaborative arrangements can have a positive impact on the learning of pupils in all of the participating schools.

This is an important finding in that it draws attention to a way of strengthening relatively low performing schools that can, at the same time, help to foster wider improvements in the system. It also offers a convincing argument as to why relatively strong schools should support other schools. Put simply, the evidence is that by helping others you help yourself.

Beyond school factors: Our research also leads me to conclude that closing the gap in outcomes between those from more and less advantaged backgrounds will only happen when what happens to children outside as well as inside schools change. This means changing how families and communities work, and enriching what they offer to children. In this respect we have seen

encouraging 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, 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.

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, not just those that attend their own schools. They also have to develop patterns of internal organization 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 school systems have to adjust their priorities and ways of working in response to improvement efforts that are led from within schools.

Implications

The research summarised here is based on the idea that schools have untapped potential to improve their capacity for improving the achievement of pupils from poorer backgrounds. The challenge is to mobilise this potential. This suggests a series of strategic questions that those in schools need to consider as they seek to find more effective ways of breaking the link between poverty and low attainment. These are as follows:

- Does your school provide opportunities for staff to share their expertise?
- Does your school collaborate with other schools in exploring ways of promoting the learning of all pupils?
- Is your school active in involving the wider community in supporting its work?

These questions reinforce the argument that school improvement is a social process that involves practitioners in learning from one another and from others. The major factor in determining success is the collective will to make it happen. The task of those involved in leadership roles is, therefore, to create a supportive climate that will encourage such developments.

Further reading

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Mel Ainscow CBE is Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Manchester, Professor of Education at the University of Glasgow and Adjunct Professor at Queensland University of Technology, Australia. A long-term consultant to UNESCO, he is currently involved in a series of international initiatives to promote inclusion and equity within education systems. He can be reached at Mel.Ainscow@manchester.ac.uk