

# Surfacing theories of change in comprehensive area-based approaches to educational disadvantage

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Paper presented at the AERA Annual Meeting, Chicago, 17 April 2015

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### **Abstract**

On both sides of the Atlantic, there has been an interest in multi-strand area-based approaches aimed at improving outcomes for children and young people in low-income areas. Although the rationales for these approaches are impeccable, they tend to be articulated at a somewhat generalised level, and there is as yet no convincing evidence that such approaches can have transformatory effects. This paper reports the early stages of an evaluation of four 'Children's Communities', which are initiatives of this kind in major English cities. It draws on recurrent interviews with the Communities' leaders aimed at surfacing their theories of change as to how the Communities will improve outcomes for children and young people. These theories emerge as generally coherent but needing development in terms of balancing the relationship between professionals and non-professionals and theorising the way in which the Communities' limited actions might generate significant change. However, the leaders are aware of these problems, and conceptual tools are available which might be of help to them. The paper concludes that theories of change for these complex initiatives cannot entirely be pre-defined because the problems of social and educational disadvantage are essentially 'wicked'. What matters, therefore, is the capacity of Children's Communities to build their theories of change as they learn from their experiences.

### **Introduction**

In recent years, there has been considerable interest on both sides of the Atlantic in the complex relationships between schools, neighbourhoods and communities in areas of high poverty (see, for instance, Green & White, 2008; Kintrea, St Clair, & Houston, 2011; Lupton, 2006, 2010; Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2014; Tate IV, 2012). Despite the intensive focus on school improvement in many countries, there has been a growing realisation that poor educational outcomes for children and young people cannot be divorced from poor outcomes in other domains – such as health, mental well-being, criminality and employment. Moreover, these outcomes have been seen as having their origins in a complex nest of social and economic problems which particularly beset people living in the poorest places. In the UK, the term 'social exclusion' has been used to capture the complex, interacting nature of this situation:

Social exclusion is about more than income poverty. It is a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas face a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown. These problems are linked and mutually reinforcing so that they can create a vicious cycle in people's lives.

(Social Exclusion Unit, 2004: 3)

This realisation has in turn led to an interest exploring how far comprehensive area-based approaches – that is, multi-strand interventions in disadvantaged areas – might be needed to tackle the complex causes and impacts of educational disadvantage (Kerr, Dyson, & Raffo, 2014). In the USA, there is a history of 'comprehensive community initiatives' (Federal Partnership Project

Work Team, 2008) and the Harlem Children's Zone and Promise Neighborhoods have emerged currently as leading examples of initiatives focused on improving outcomes for children and young people. Broadly similar initiatives have emerged across Europe (Edwards & Downes, 2013), and in England, particularly, there is a long tradition of tackling social and educational disadvantage through 'area-based initiatives' (Dyson, Kerr, & Raffo, 2012; Kerr et al., 2014; Lupton, 2010). Typically, these initiatives in England involve targeting additional resources at the most disadvantaged areas whilst giving local policy makers and practitioners flexibilities to develop customised responses to the challenges of those areas. Typically, also, these initiatives are multi-component, linking the work of schools to that of other services and agencies. Latterly, our own work has focused on combining the lessons from the US with the traditions of English area-based initiatives in order to establish a series of 'Children's Communities', (A Dyson, Kerr, Raffo, & Wigelsworth, 2012), about which we shall say more in due course.

All of these approaches rest on the apparently impeccable rationale that co-ordinated interventions into all of the factors which place children in high-poverty areas at educational risk will reduce those risks far more significantly than single-strand interventions. In particular, while schools can achieve much on their own, more can be achieved if the work of schools is linked to the work of other community agencies. As Geoffrey Canada, formerly CEO of the Harlem Children's Zone, put it:

...one of our core beliefs is that in poor communities where, literally, all of the institutions are failing children, you can't do one thing and expect that you'll solve the issue of scale. I mean, you can save some children with an early-intervention program, and you can save some children if you work with addicted mothers, and you can save some children if you have afterschool programs. But if you start talking about how you're going to save most children, you have to do all those things, and do them over the long term, and you have to make sure you can count how many children actually received those services.

(Nauffts, 2002)

Despite the plausibility of such arguments, however, two major problems remain. The first is that convincing evidence as to the effectiveness of these approaches in practice remains elusive (Dyson & Kerr, 2013; Kubisch, Auspos, Brown, & Dewar, 2010). Whilst multi-strand interventions in multi-dimensional forms of disadvantage *ought* to improve outcomes for children and young people, it is far from clear that they actually do so or that it is the multi-strand nature of the intervention that makes the difference. Debates continue to rage, for instance, around the Harlem Children's Zone about the extent to which improved outcomes are attributable to the multi-strand nature of the Zone's interventions or simply to more standard forms of school improvement (Curto, Fryer Jr., & Howard, 2011; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011; Dyson & Kerr, 2013; Whitehurst & Croft, 2010). This may, of course, be no more than a problem of evaluations that are insufficiently comprehensive or sensitive to identify and attribute outcomes robustly, but the fact remains, that the kinds of generalised rationale advanced by Geoffrey Canada cannot yet be supported from robust evaluation evidence.

The second problem lies precisely in the generalised nature of the rationales that have so far been advanced. It is one thing to claim that multi-dimensional disadvantage requires multi-strand interventions. It is quite another to show precisely how particular strands in those interventions will overcome particular forms of disadvantage, how the strands will interact with and support one another, and how all of this will produce the outcomes that are intended. Moreover, any attempt to tackle educational disadvantage presupposes a robust understanding of how such disadvantage arises, both in general and in a specific location, and how the root causes of disadvantage might best be eradicated. Yet both the history of area-based approaches and our own experience of working with them suggests that their generalised rationales are rarely elaborated into detailed and well-tested theories of change (Cummings, Dyson, & Todd, 2011; Kerr et al., 2014). On the contrary,

they typically originate in rather poorly-specified government imperatives, or grow in a somewhat ad hoc manner out of local practice and the commitment of individual local leaders. Not surprisingly, therefore, they vary significantly from one another, even when they are notionally part of the same wider initiative, and their practices and rationales change frequently over time as new opportunities arise or as their leaders reach conclusions about ‘what works’ locally. Reviewing a major programme of area-based initiatives in England, for instance, Batty concludes that:

...theories of change were often non-existent, or ill-defined. Partnerships did not generally identify a set of evidence-based interventions which might plausibly change existing levels of disadvantage to desired outcomes over 10 years. Rather, projects were approved because of locally contingent factors: community demands, attitudes of agencies and available match-funding. It was widely assumed that projects would help to achieve outcomes, even if the processes through which this was to occur remained blurred.

(Batty, 2013): 1526)

In this context, the aim of this paper is to explore the extent to which one group of area-based initiatives – the Children’s Communities – are in fact able to articulate theories of change, and, if so, how coherent those theories are and how likely it therefore seems that the initiatives will generate the outcomes they seek.

## ***Children’s Communities***

Children’s Communities have been developed from work undertaken by a partnership of Save the Children, which is a major UK and international charity, and the Centre for Equity in Education at the University of Manchester. These Communities are founded on a set of shared principles.

Specifically, they:

- understand educational outcomes – and children’s outcomes more broadly – as the product of a wide range of social processes operating over time
- think in terms of a ‘cradle-to-career’ programme involving schools, families and communities – rather than a school improvement programme alone
- find ways to bring schools together in the interests of all the children and families in the area, bring services together on the same basis, and link the two so they can develop holistic strategies
- begin with an analysis of the local situation and the needs of children and families within this, and get partners to develop a shared understanding of this
- develop a robust, long-term strategy for tackling disadvantage and identify and/or develop effective actions to implement this strategy
- monitor outcomes and subject the [Community’s] work to public scrutiny
- sustain [their] activities over time.

(Dyson, Kerr, Raffo, Wigelsworth, & with Wellings, 2012: 26)

The work of the Communities is developed on the basis of these principles and on dialogue amongst themselves and between them, Save the Children and the Centre for Equity in Education. They do not, therefore, follow a detailed blueprint or restrict themselves to ‘approved’ interventions. Consequently, as with many area initiatives, there is some variation from site to site in the provision they make and the strategies they develop.

Four pilot Communities are currently in development, with various aspects of their provision already operational. All of these are located in major cities and serve areas within those cities where the populations experience significant disadvantage. The size of the areas varies from a relatively small social (i.e. subsidised) housing estate to a large suburb in a conurbation. Each Community involves a partnership of organisations and agencies capable of impacting on the lives of children, young people and their families. These variously include schools, pre-school settings, youth

services, housing providers, GP surgeries, post-compulsory education providers, social care services, police services and local government. Although one organisation typically acts as the catalyst for the development of the Community, management is by partnership and each Community has or is developing a governance structure to formalise this partnership. Although the interventions marshalled by the Communities differ in each case, they typically involve some enhancement of pre-school provision, work on the transitions of children and young people through the school system, health interventions, work on children's and young people's well-being, support for young people into post-compulsory education and into the labour market and work to strengthen families.

A major responsibility of the Centre for Equity in Education team is to undertake a long-term, comprehensive evaluation of the Communities. This is a challenging undertaking, not least because of scale and ambition of the Communities' work. The Communities are encouraged to develop a long-term (i.e. 10 year plus) strategy for improving *all* of the outcomes that matter for children and young people, and to do so by tackling the fundamental causes of the disadvantages which prevent children and young people doing well. In practice, therefore, the pilot Communities seek to have an impact on children's and young people's attainments, but also on employment outcomes, health and well-being, local crime rates, peer group cultures, parenting practices, adult employment, and anything else that is likely to impact on children and young people. As Robson (2005: 214), points out, complex area initiatives of this kind have proved challenging to evaluate because they struggle to track changes in area populations, to say whether changes might have occurred even without the initiative, to identify data at the correct spatial level, and to attribute causality in complex, open environments. The standard evaluation strategy is to identify counterfactuals – perhaps other areas that are like the intervention areas in all important respects, or the intervention areas themselves before the intervention is launched. However, comparisons between complex, multi-faceted entities such as urban areas are highly problematic, while their fluid demographic and economic dynamics makes comparisons of the same area over time almost equally problematic.

In this situation, our solution has been to develop a multi-strand evaluation framework. This includes the monitoring of key outcomes and some comparison with other areas, in the standard way. However, it also includes a cost-benefit evaluation and a detailed process evaluation. Most significantly, from the point of view of this paper, it includes a theory of change evaluation. Theory of change evaluations are one of a family of theory-based methodologies which rest on the assumption that purposeful action implies a theory of how particular action in a given situation will generate intended outcomes (Anderson, 2005; Connell & Kubisch, 1998; Dyson & Todd, 2010). Evaluators work to surface that theory in a form which makes explicit the causal chains which link actions to outcomes. It then becomes possible to seek empirical evidence as to whether the causal chains unfold in practice in the way the theory predicts. This approach has a number of advantages in the evaluation of complex interventions in open environments, and specifically in the evaluation of area-based approaches (Weiss, 1995). For instance, it focuses on the outcomes actually intended by the intervention rather than imposing what may be a somewhat inappropriate outcomes framework from outside. It also offers intervention leaders early feedback on whether the intervention is working as planned, without the need for end-point outcomes to materialise. Above all, it overcomes the problem of attribution. Even though it may not be possible to establish robust counterfactuals, the close tracking of causal links makes it possible to attribute outcomes to actions with a high degree of confidence.

Theory of change evaluation also changes the relationship between intervention leaders and evaluators in important ways (Dyson & Todd, 2010). In order to surface the theory of change, it is necessary for evaluators to work closely with leaders to help them articulate the outcomes they intend and the way in which their actions are expected to produce those outcomes. In some cases, theories of change may be explicit in the intervention's documentation, but this is often not the case.

Evaluators and intervention leaders then have to engage in a dialogue in which the former seek to build an explicit theory on what the latter are able to say about the initiative. At this early stage, the evaluation process acts as a support to planning (Connell & Klem, 2000) since the explication of the theory enables leaders to see where any gaps and implausibilities might lie. In this way, theory of change evaluations offer insights into the world-views of intervention leaders, making explicit how they understand the situations in which they are taking action, the kinds of outcomes they value in those situations, and how they believe the situations will respond to the actions they take. Whilst such insights might be possible through other research approaches – for instance, through extended interviewing – the requirement to articulate a coherent theory and the dialogue between evaluators and leaders make the theory of change approach, we suggest, particularly illuminating.

In the case of the Children's Communities evaluation, the explication of theories of change for each Community has taken the form of a five step process:

1. Leaders of each of the four initiatives and of those organisations and services contributing to the initiative (including schools, housing providers, health specialists and police) were interviewed to elicit their understandings of the area, the outcomes they sought to achieve, and the actions that would lead to those outcomes.
2. Drawing on these interviews, researchers then formulated outline theories of change which were taken back to interviewees for validation and/or development.
3. Researchers then tested these agreed theories of change in terms of a) their internal logic (e.g. whether intended outcomes addressed problems identified in the area) and b) their plausibility in terms of whether existing research evidence suggested that the actions proposed were likely to generate the desired outcomes.
4. Questions arising from the testing process were then taken back to leaders for a final round of theory development.
5. The resultant theories were then tested and (where necessary) further developed in workshops with a wider range of stakeholders (including front line professionals and community representatives).

Throughout this process, interviews were recorded and field notes taken of meetings. These records were used both to formulate and modify the theories of change and to produce explanatory accounts of the thinking underpinning these theories and any points of concern or disagreement amongst participants. In practice, the most intensive work in each Community has been undertaken with a core group of 2-4 leaders, who have been interviewed together on at least five occasions over a period of some two years. Less intensive interviews and discussions have been undertaken with between 12 and 50 other stakeholders in each Community over the same period, and sometimes on more than one occasion. This has generated a substantial data set of interview notes, draft theories of change and initiative documentation which has been analysed principally to develop each Community's theory of change, but which has also been subject to a thematic analysis to elaborate participants' understandings which underpin the theories and to identify process issues in the establishment of the Communities. It is the results of these analyses that are reported in the remainder of this paper.

### ***An exemplar theory of change***

The 'Shipton' Children's Community is located in a former ship-building and coal mining area that forms part of a conurbation in the North-East of England. The Community serves a population of some 42000 residents and is the largest of the four pilot areas. The population is predominantly White British and of relatively low socio-economic status. The educational outcomes for children in this socio-ethnic group have caused particular concern amongst policy makers recently, since they appear to be poorer than those for many other groups, including for many children from minority ethnic backgrounds (House of Commons Education Committee, 2014). The development of the Community has been led by a secondary (age 11-16) school which has long acted as a 'community'

school, offering additional services and activities to its students, their families and local residents. This school works with a formal partnership of twelve other schools serving the area, together with children's centres offering early years provision, youth workers, police, GPs and local-authority-managed children's services.

The Shipton theory of change was developed principally through recurrent interviews with the head teacher of the lead school and with the Coordinator who manages the work of the Community on a daily basis, and was then tested and developed further through discussions with the other stakeholders. The theory (represented in diagrammatic form in figure 1) sees the area as beset by a multiplicity of problems – high levels of young people who are 'NEET' (not in education, employment or training), a high incidence of youth disorder, mental health issues amongst children and young people, physical health problems (particularly in relation to obesity), and low levels of educational achievement. The roots of these problems are traced back ultimately to the loss of heavy industry in the last part of the Twentieth Century, and to the cultural dislocation that has followed from this. In effect, the cultural attitudes that have sustained the community historically – an expectation of being able to find work in the area, roles strongly differentiated by gender, and a belief that educational achievement is not essential to ensure good-quality employment – are no longer functional, yet the change in economic realities has not been accompanied by an equivalent change in beliefs. Therefore, as the area has experienced high levels of unemployment, a 'lost generation' of people has been created and the sense of disillusionment and aimlessness has been transmitted to the current generation of children and young people. This has led to the presenting problems outlined above, underpinned by the inability of families in some cases to prepare their children for the world in which they must make their way.

*Insert figure 1 about here*

In this situation, the Children's Community has identified three key strands of action – one focused on early intervention, one on tackling health and mental well-being problems, and one on changing attitudes and behaviours. These are expected to lead to a series of outcomes, which include but are not restricted to the elimination of the presenting problems with which the area is currently beset. An overarching outcome is the expectation that the area will offer the same opportunities and support structures to children and young people as do in other, more advantaged areas. Alongside this are a set of behavioural and attitudinal outcomes – healthier behaviours, a more positive community identity, better parenting, for instance – and an increase in employment opportunities and social mobility.

In this form, the theory of change is articulated at a somewhat general level, and the causal links between the three strands of action and the intended outcomes are difficult to discern. However, this 'top level' theory of change is supplemented by a more detailed theory for each strand of action, and by yet more fine-grained theories for each of the specific actions within those strands. Figure 2 shows how the early intervention – 'getting things right early' – strand is expected to work. Three sets of action – providing support for children's transitions into and out of the school system, providing support for parenting, and enhancing the quality of early years provision – are expected to prepare children to do well in school and to ensure they navigate transitions successfully. This will then ensure that they have better attainments in both primary and secondary phases, which will raise their aspirations and help secure them better opportunities post-school and, ultimately, in the world of work. These young people will then go on to be more aspirational parents, which will in turn feed back positively into the experiences their children have and so help create a virtuous cycle. Similarly, figure 3 shows the detailed working for one set of actions – the work of mentors who support children in the transition from primary to secondary school. At this level of detail, it becomes possible to see not only how the Community's interventions might work in practice, but also how their impacts might be evaluated. For instance, the expectation is that, amongst other

things, children will come to see the mentors as trusted adults, that they will become more familiar with the secondary school to which they are moving, and that they will become more confident about the move. All of these things are in principle observable, and it is not difficult to see how some mix of interviewing, questionnaire and observation could produce evidence to test whether these expectations were being fulfilled.

*Insert figures 2& 3 about here*

The diagrammatic models of these theories of change are very much works in progress. The theories themselves are somewhat fluid, partly because of imprecisions in their initial formulation, but also because Communities tend to learn their way towards a robust theory rather than being able to articulate it fully at first request. Moreover, their various articulations of the theories can be developed in different ways for different purposes. So, for instance, further work on the logical coherence of the ‘top level’ theories can be undertaken to ensure that the Communities have a robust overarching strategy, whilst the detail of the lower level theories can be developed further to form the basis of an operationalized evaluation plan. Even in their current state, however, these works in progress yield important insights into the thinking underpinning the Children’s Community initiatives. It is to an interrogation of this thinking that we now turn.

### ***Interrogating the theories of change***

Although there are important differences between the theories of change from the four Children’s Communities, there are also some significant similarities. One of these lies in the way that educational disadvantage is understood – how it is seen to arise, how it impacts on children and young people, and what the elimination of disadvantage might mean. As we see in the Shipton example, disadvantage is seen as having an economic basis and what we might call cultural consequences. The challenges in Shipton are seen as arising ultimately out of the decline of heavy industry in the area which has led to a decline in community morale, a collapse in aspirations, and a disengagement from education. Similar accounts are offered by two of the other Children’s Communities. ‘Millhurst’ is the most similar in that it is a neighbourhood in a post-industrial town which forms part of a large conurbation. Although the economic landscape comprised small and medium sized enterprises rather than the heavy industry of Shipton, the account offered is that these enterprises have reduced in number, whilst the culture they supported has remained. People are disillusioned, reluctant to commute beyond the immediate area, and unwilling to embrace means of bettering their circumstances.

A similar story is told in ‘Charterby’, a multi-ethnic inner city suburb. Here too the heavy industry which supported the city’s prosperity until the last part of the Twentieth Century has diminished, leading to high levels of unemployment, a loss of pride in the area, and a population which isolates itself from the opportunities available in the city as a whole. This situation is compounded by a stock of poor-quality social housing which means the area finds it difficult to attract a social mix of residents. ‘Northam’ is to some extent the exception. This is an area of social housing in a multi-ethnic London borough. The economics of the capital are different from those of cities in the regions, and the area is enjoying something of an economic boom. However, London is also economically polarised (Lee, Sissons, & Jones, 2013), and the complex dynamics of migration, housing availability, and population flows within the city create areas of marked poverty alongside more affluent areas. Northam is one such area, with a population that is divided within itself, suffering low confidence because of the stigma of the area, and reluctant to access the opportunities and supports that are available.

In this situation, a common response across all of the Children’s Communities is to instigate some sort of process of cultural change amongst residents, with a particular emphasis on children and young people on the grounds that they are most likely to be changeable. We have seen how Shipton

has a whole strand of action devoted to such change. This includes providing customised support to young people leaving school who are at risk of becoming NEET, working with employers to maximise work opportunities in the area, and developing apprenticeships based in the schools and other partner organisations in the Children's Community. In addition, other strands of action are intended to change the way children, young people and adults in Shipton see themselves. The Community, for instance, is recruiting adult residents as advocates to work with other adults on employment and parenting support, while we have already seen how improved educational attainment is expected to raise aspirations amongst young people. The other Communities have equivalent strategies. Charterby, for instance, has an active campaign to change the image of the area in the city and to instil a sense of pride in the area amongst residents, whilst at the same time involving residents in a range of community activities designed to change their perception of what is 'normal' in the area.

There is a great deal in these explanations and responses that seems logically coherent and plausible. The recognition of the economic origins of the problems in these areas seems important, and chimes with what we know about the ways in which people live their lives arises out of complex interactions between local and macro-level factors (Sampson, 2012). This locates the origin of the difficulties faced by the people who live in the areas in circumstances beyond their control rather than in their own shortcomings, which to a significant extent, this avoids the well-known danger of 'blaming the victim' (Ryan, 1976). It is, of course, arguable that the Communities advance an equally damaging 'culture of poverty' (Lewis, 1959) explanation for people's difficulties. If local people do not cause the economic misfortunes which beset them, there is little doubt that the behaviours and attitudes which are seen as resulting from those misfortunes are what prevents them from escaping their current situation. However, the understanding of culture represented in these theories of change is a relatively sophisticated one. For instance, the leaders of the Children's Communities have resisted the idea that such a culture is monolithic or resistant to change. The leaders in Shipton, for instance, have been keen to explain that the most negative aspects of the culture they describe are apparent only in some individuals and families, and that the actions they have taken already (the partnerships which form the basis for the Community have been developing for over a decade) have already had significant impacts on the attitudes and behaviours of children, young people and adults.

There are similar and related issues around the Community leaders' understandings of what local people can contribute to the improvement of their own situations. The Communities are professionally-led entities in which, for the most part, those who provide services to children and adults in the area decide what services are needed and how to deliver them. There is, of course, the danger that those professionals will hold a deficit-oriented view of the populations they serve (Cummings, Dyson, & Todd, 2007), focusing on what Coleman famously described as a 'tangle of pathology' (Moynihan, 1965) and what, many years later in the UK, the Social Exclusion Unit characterised as the 'linked and mutually reinforcing' problems which 'create a vicious cycle in people's lives' (Social Exclusion Unit, 2004): 3). It is certainly the case that the *raison d'être* of Children's Communities is to tackle the problems they see as besetting the populations they serve, and that the initial response of leaders to the invitation to characterise the situation of those populations was to generate a long list of such problems. In the first instance, at least, there was very little evidence that those populations might have assets which would enable them to address their own problems. They were instead constructed as being dependent on the service providers to change their attitudes and behaviours and to ensure that there were adequate opportunities in the area so that they could eventually go on to lead fulfilling lives.

Once again, however, this characterisation of leaders' views is a little simplistic. When viewing the first drafts of the theory of change diagrams, leaders were typically struck by the extent to which they were deficit-oriented and sought ways of placing greater emphasis on assets. They found it

difficult to move away entirely from a problem-oriented conceptualisation of the aims of a Children's Community. However, they were keen to 'soften' some of the more negative statements in the early drafts of their theories, and to include in those theories some acknowledgement that the Communities were only likely to be successful if they drew upon the assets of the populations they served. The Northam leaders, for instance, articulated the balance between the role of services and the assets of the population in the following way:

The approach of the Children's Community is to develop a nuanced understanding of individual and community needs, connecting both children and their parents to existing services, bringing services closer to the community when appropriate and exploring where improvements can be made. Alongside this, we are working to build the capacity of individuals and the community to help themselves and support one another, drawing on the many talents and resourcefulness of Pembury residents.

(‘Northam’ Children's Community Board report, 26 November 2014)

Whilst such words may seem tokenistic, they were in fact accompanied by action. For instance, the Northam Community makes extensive use of volunteering by residents to deliver its programmes, builds networks of families who support each other, and recruits 'community champions' to undertake community development work. Similarly, the Charterby Community runs an extensive publicity campaign highlighting the positive aspects of the area and its residents, works with residents to document their accounts of the area's history, and has recruited a doctoral student to map the assets used by children and young people and help the Children's Community make better use of them. What all of this suggests is that there are indeed tensions between the Children's Communities' professionally-led approaches and the imperative to pay due regard to the agency of children, young people and local residents – but that Community leaders are aware of these tensions and are working to avoid professional leadership becoming professional dominance.

However, there is a second set of issues in the Communities' theories of change in that there is arguably a large gap between the ambitious outcomes at which they aim and their capacity to achieve these outcomes. As in the case of Shipton, all four of the Communities aim at a significant transformation of children's and young people's lives, which in turn implies a transformation of the lives of adults and of the social and economic dynamics of the area as a whole. The idea of equalizing life chances between these disadvantaged communities and more affluent communities elsewhere is a laudable one, and echoes, for instance, the Harlem Children's Zones ambition:

...to work on a scale large enough to create a tipping point in a community's cultural norms, a threshold beyond which a shift occurs away from destructive patterns and toward constructive goals.

(Harlem Children's Zone, 2009): 4)

The record of area-based initiatives bringing about transformations of this kind, however, is not an encouraging one (Kerr et al., 2014). Kubisch et al. neatly sum up the situation on both sides of the Atlantic:

... most of the [Comprehensive Community Initiatives] have not produced the degree of community transformation envisioned by their designers... The reasons for this can be attributed both to "theory failure" and "implementation failure." On the theory side, it appears that it was overly optimistic to expect that a relatively modest amount of philanthropic or government dollars (usually about \$1-3 million per year) was enough to catalyze a series of events that could build on each other and lead to major improvements in well-being for the poorest people in the most distressed communities within a limited time frame (usually about 7-10 years). On the implementation side, issues such as weak capacity resulting from long-term underinvestment, the difficulty of balancing "process" and "product" objectives, the challenge of managing multiple relationships and activities, and inconsistent or abbreviated funding often stood in the way of sustainable community change. As a result, the actual programmatic effort did not achieve the necessary dose or scale.

We can see similar issues arising in respect of Children's Communities. The additional funding envisaged by Save the Children as their sponsors is in the order of £100,000 (about \$150,000) per Community for each of five years. In effect, this pays for two or three additional staff in the administration of the Community, but does not fund new programmes or provision for children, young people or their families. The Communities' impacts, therefore, are expected to arise from a more strategic and coordinated use of existing resources rather than from any injection of new capacity. Similarly, it is not clear how, if at all, the Communities can make a difference to the economic and material infrastructure of the areas they serve. The various partners in the Communities tend to be drawn from education, health and social services rather than from regeneration services or business. They cannot, therefore, impact in any straightforward way on the local labour market or on the transport connections between the areas and the larger conurbations of which they are a part. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that their theories of change tend to focus on offering the individual support to children, young people and families that is their stock-in-trade, and on a potentially nebulous notion of cultural change. As an example, all of the Communities have more-or-less extensive programmes of support for young people who are at risk of becoming NEET. However, in every case, these programmes focus more on supporting young people to take advantage of the training and employment opportunities that are already available than on expanding the number of those opportunities – particularly in terms of employment. The irony here, of course, is that the Communities' theories of change trace the ills of their areas back to economic roots, yet have no convincing way of changing the economic conditions which those areas face.

A further issue is that the Communities' partnerships are not comprehensive even in terms of education, health and social care services. All of the Communities struggle to secure full involvement from health, not least because of the current turbulence in the National Health Service in England (see Dixon, 2012). Shipton and Charterby are effectively led by schools, which makes it more difficult for them to secure full participation from other services – and, indeed, from other schools which do not already work closely with the lead schools. By contrast, Northam is led by a housing provider and finds it difficult to engage local schools. Millhurst is also led by a housing provider and struggles to secure full commitment from the local authority and its services. None of the Communities, therefore, can claim as yet to have established a partnership that is capable of impacting on all the aspects of children's lives that might be necessary to bring about the kinds of fundamental transformations that are intended. Moreover, even those partners who are fully committed are, of course, answerable to their funders and managers in central or local government and do not have anything like complete freedom to direct their resources to the Communities' priorities. This is most obviously true of schools which are accountable for a narrow range of attainment outcomes rather than for the broad transformational outcomes at which the Communities aim.

The consequence of this is that the grand ambitions of the Children's Communities tend, in practice, to be operationalised through a range of small-scale, targeted interventions. As we saw earlier, Shipton's aim of 'getting things right early' is embodied in a small team of transition mentors who do limited amounts of support work to help children over the move from primary to secondary school. True, there is a recognition that this is inadequate, and there are plans to expand this strand of action by creating a similar team to support transition from home to school, and by working more closely with early years providers. However, there are no plans to change the character of secondary schools or the ways in which children are helped to develop in primary schools because these things lie beyond the control of the Children's Community. Likewise, a recognition that what happens in

the home is of crucial importance has not as yet led to any firm plans as to how parents might be enabled to support their children more effectively.

Again, the situation is not quite as bleak as this might suggest. The recognition by Shipton's leaders of the limitations of their current approaches is shared by leaders in the other three Communities. All believe that they have to 'start where they are' in terms of the resources they currently have and the interventions they can currently marshal. However, all are committed to the development of their Communities well beyond the five-year timescale for which funding is initially being sought. There is an expectation that they will be able to extend their partnerships, resources and provision over time. Likewise, all recognise the limitations of their strategies in economic terms, and they are slowly beginning to build partnerships with employers. Shipton is hoping to take advantage of the promised development of an enterprise zone within the area, the housing providers leading Northam and Millhurst are themselves major employers capable of impacting on the local labour market, and the school leading the Charterby Community is sponsored by one of the biggest companies in the UK and has a strong vocational focus in its curriculum. Perhaps most important, although the additional resources available to the Communities by virtue of their participation in the Save the Children initiative are likely to be small, the partners in each Community represent the major public services in the area. The resources invested in those services are, of course, very much bigger, and the expectation of Community leaders is that it will be increasingly possible over time to ensure that those resources are aligned with the Communities' aims – not least because in each case the local authorities managing those services are key partners. Unlike some other similar initiatives, therefore, the Children's Communities are not restricted to constructing under-funded alternatives and additions to public services that are judged to be failing, but have a real prospect of creating an alignment between robust public services and their own aims.

### ***Some implications***

The picture which emerges from this analysis is complex. The four Children's Communities have with the help of the research team, articulated ambitious and – at one level – plausible theories of change. They have moved beyond a fragmentary analysis of the symptoms of the problems facing children and young people, towards a more comprehensive analysis which traces problems back to root causes and makes possible, in principle at least, a coherent, strategic effort to tackle those problems. However, those theories have two significant limitations. First, they reveal the Communities' analyses as being professionally-dominated. They focus predominantly on the problems of the areas and the deficits of their populations, with correspondingly less acknowledgement of the potential agency of those populations or of the assets on which they can draw in improving their own situations. Second, they make assumptions about the capacity of the Communities to have a transformatory effect on the lives of children and young people that appear to rest on somewhat shaky foundations. It is difficult to see that the Communities command the quantity or range of resources that would be necessary to have a significant impact across the whole population, and their ambitious strategies reduce in operational terms to a multiplicity of small-scale interventions.

The great danger, therefore, is that these Children's Communities will end up, like so many initiatives before them, as flurries of professionally-dominated activity which make no substantial difference to the lives of the people they claim to serve. Yet the Community leaders appear to be aware of these dangers, and if they cannot immediately avert them, they nonetheless see themselves as engaged in long-term ventures which may start from a somewhat limited base but will, if steered appropriately, develop towards the achievement of their ambitious aims. The pressing issue, therefore, may be less about the current limitations of the Communities than about what steering them appropriately might mean. What, precisely, do they need to do in order to create a more

balanced relationship with the people they serve and to develop the capacity to bring about real change?

To some extent, the answers to these questions have to come from the learning that the Communities can glean as they develop. The lack of convincing evidence to suggest that area initiatives are capable of transformatory effects suggests that there is no tried and tested blueprint that the Children's Communities can follow in any straightforward way. However, there may be some key ideas on which they can draw to inform their own development. One such idea is Warren's notion of 'relational power' (Warren, Hong, Leung Rubin, & Sychitkokhong, 2009; Warren & Hong, 2009; Warren & Mapp, 2011). Thinking particularly of school-parent relationships, Warren et al. characterise relational power in the following way:

Relational power can be contrasted to unilateral power, which emphasizes "power over" others, the capacity to get others to do one's bidding. Educators who fear parent power are operating out of a unilateral power framework of winners and losers. Relational power emphasizes the "power to" get things done collectively...

(Warren, Hong, Leung Rubin, & Sychitkokhong, 2009:2213)

They argue that relational power involves more than either educators seeking to involve parents in the life of the school, or educators and parents avoiding conflict with one another. Instead it involves them in recognising that each group has different assets and pooling those assets on the grounds that together they have greater capacity to effect change than if they operate separately. Moreover, in low-income communities where parents have traditionally been marginalised, it may also mean educators working with other community agencies to help develop parents' capacity for collaborative action and leadership. In other words, the notion of relational power does not mean that educators have the overlook their own distinctive assets, nor that they have to act as though parents can make full use of whatever assets they do have without some form of support.

Extending these arguments to the work of Children's Communities, the implication would seem to be that the professionals leading those Communities need to develop a strategy for developing 'relational power' with the children, young people and adults they seek to serve. Doing so does not mean that they have to abandon all forms of leadership themselves, nor that they should overlook the multiple ways which local populations have been marginalised and had their limited. Currently, such strategies are under-developed in the Children's Communities' theories of change – as they often are in other initiatives of this type (Cummings et al., 2011). However, the acknowledgement of the need for some genuine form of engagement with local populations suggests that this need not be a permanent state of affairs.

A second idea that may be powerful in the development of Children's Communities is that of the 'tipping point'. The Harlem Children's Zone has imported this idea from Gladwell's analogy between certain types of social change and medical epidemics (Gladwell, 2000). As with epidemics, Gladwell argues, major social change can begin with quite small changes which spread from individual to individual, until they reach a tipping point where they become systemic. Regardless of the validity of this analogy, it neatly captures an assumption that is common to the four Children's Communities, as it is to the Harlem Children's Zone and to many similar initiatives. That is the assumption that relatively small-scale action can, under the right circumstances, produce deep and widespread social change. That in turn justifies the relatively small-scale of the investment needed by initiatives of this kind, on the grounds that change can become self-sustaining. In the Children's Communities, we have seen the beginnings of this kind of self-sustaining change. For instance, the Northam Community has a programme for supporting vulnerable young people into education, employment and training. In the first instance, the programme works by targeting young people who might otherwise be hard to reach. However, our evaluation work shows those young people in turn recruiting their friends, and those friends recruiting other friends. Since the young people initially targeted include the opinion-formers amongst their peer group, it seems entirely possible

that a new attitude to education, training and employment is spreading amongst the young people of the area, and there are indeed many reports of changed behaviours and attitudes amongst young people as a whole (Dyson, 2015).

Gladwell is at pains to point out, however, that large-scale change does not necessarily result from small-scale actions if those actions are random. On the contrary:

Those who are successful at creating social epidemics do not just do what they think is right, They deliberately test their intuitions... To make sense of social epidemics, we must first understand that human communication has its own set of very unusual and counterintuitive rules.

(Gladwell, 2000: 258)

Creating a tipping point, he argues, may only mean pushing the social world gently – but it also means pushing it “in just the right place” (Gladwell, 2000: 269). The implications for Children’s Communities – and for other similar initiatives – is that their theories of change need to be nested within a broader theory of how their part of the social world – the people they are working with and the issues they are seeking to address – actually operates. They need to know, in other words, what ‘just the right place’ might be in their situation. In part, this is about knowing what effects different kinds of actions have in general, and, specifically, which kinds of actions are likely to have the strongest effects. To this extent, the emphasis on ‘evidence-based’ interventions which dominates policy thinking about education and other human services at present (see, for instance, Goldacre, 2013) is not misplaced. However, knowing ‘what works in general’ is no guarantee of ‘what works here’, much less of what works to create a tipping point. There is no substitute for a detailed knowledge of local dynamics or for a careful monitoring of how particular actions impact on the situation in which they are located.

It is probably true to say that the Children’s Communities are not yet at the point where they have fully-articulated and robust theories of local dynamics of this kind. However, they have made a promising start. In being helped to articulate their theories of change as they stand, they have also been required to formulate what they know about the areas and populations they serve, and to predict how their actions will impact on their situations. The ongoing theory of change component of the evaluation will provide them with continual feedback as to how those actions are indeed impacting and will require them to adjust their theories accordingly – in other words, they will be required constantly to ‘test their intuitions’. Moreover, if they can find a way of developing ‘relational power’ with the populations they serve, they should also gain insights by engaging directly with those people, just as, in turn, their understanding of how those people can cause change to become self-sustaining should feedback into their efforts to establish a more balanced relationship with them.

## **Conclusions**

We argued earlier that area-based approaches rest on apparently impeccable rationales, but often lack detailed accounts of how, precisely, to turn those rationales into effective action. They also lack robust evidence to suggest that their ambitions can indeed be realised in practice. The need for evidence still remains. We need to wait for more robust evaluations – including the ongoing evaluation of Children’s Communities – before we can say with any certainty what it is that initiatives of this kind are capable of achieving.

However, we can now say something about the theories of change underpinning the Children’s Communities, and hence about their chances of success. It is clear that these are not initiatives that are based on fully worked-out theories of change which require only a robust action plan to be guaranteed of success. There are tensions and ambiguities in the theories as they currently stand which need to be resolved as the initiatives unfold. In this respect, they reflect the long history of

such approaches on both sides of the Atlantic, in which the gap between promise and delivery remains significant. However, the situation is far from bleak. The awareness of leaders as to where these tensions and ambiguities lie, and the availability of conceptual tools to help them develop their theories, speak of potential for the future.

Moreover, we might want to ask how it could be otherwise. Churchman's (1967) famous distinction between 'tame' and 'wicked' problems is illuminating here. Both kinds of problems are challenging, but tame problems can be defined clearly, and even if the answer is not to hand, the kind of answer they call for is apparent. Wicked problems, on the other hand, are difficult to define with any clarity because they comprise many, interacting components. Although they may urgently need an answer, it is not clear what that answer might look like, nor that potential answers would satisfy all the stakeholders in the problem, nor even that the answers might not be worse than the solution. In this situation, solutions cannot be pre-defined outside the problem context. Instead, they have to be worked through, tested, argued over and reformulated in the field (Xiang, 2013).

Viewed in this way, there is every reason to see overcoming the social and educational disadvantages facing children and young people in low-income areas as a classic wicked problem. The absence of fully-developed theories of change may arise in part from the failures in planning of leaders of Children's Communities and similar initiatives. However, it also arises from the wicked nature of the problems they face, and the difficulty of finding a solution without engaging in the field, trying ideas out, and watching what happens as those ideas are implemented. To this extent, theories of change are not so much detailed blueprints for action drawn up in advance, as large-scale maps of the field, indicating promising directions for action, but needing to be worked out in detail on the basis of the outcomes of that action. The key to the success of these initiatives, therefore, is likely to lie less in the precision with which they are able to articulate theories of change in advance, than in their capacity to learn from what happens as their actions unfold.

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**Figure 1: Shipton 'top-level theory of change**

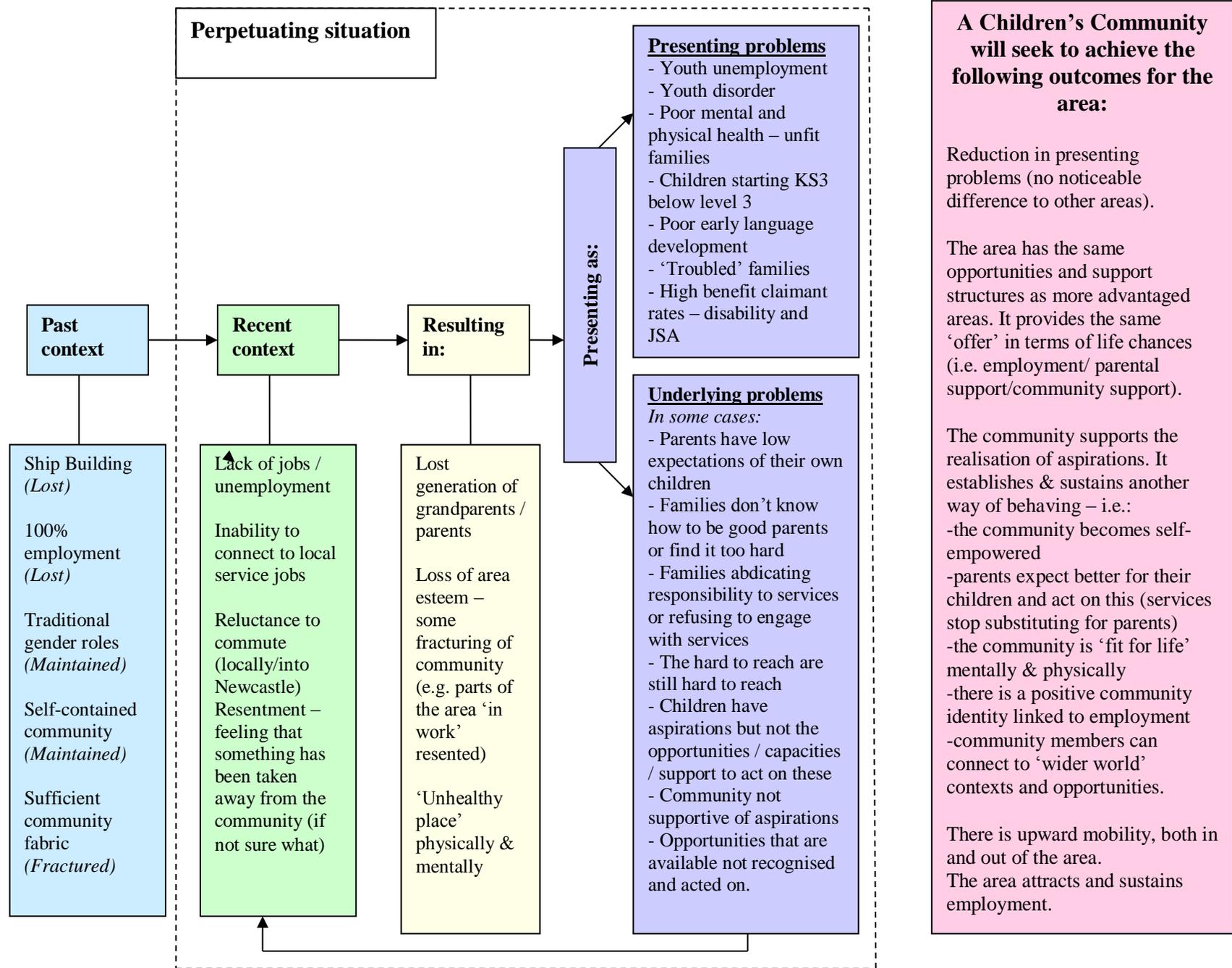
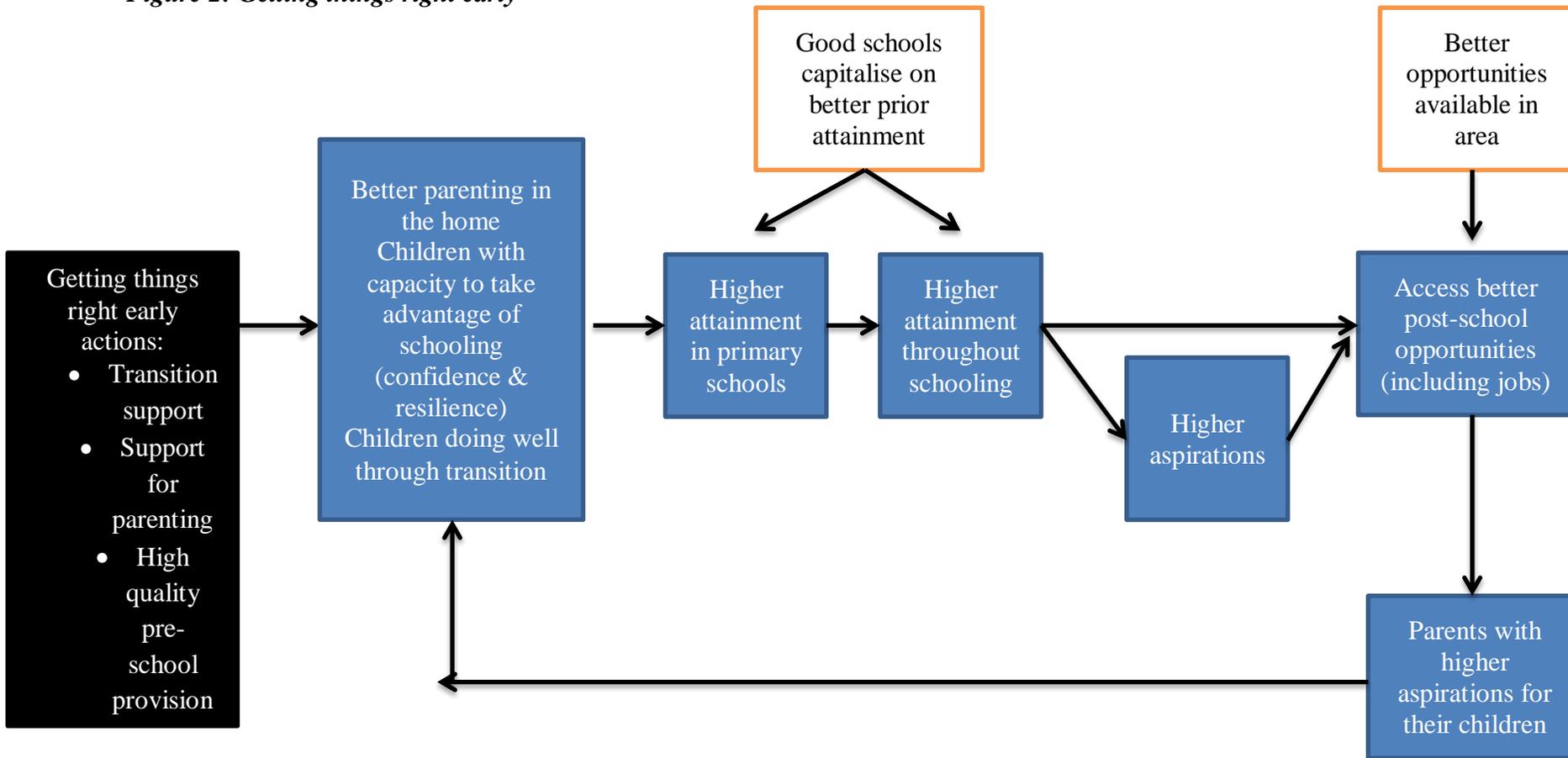
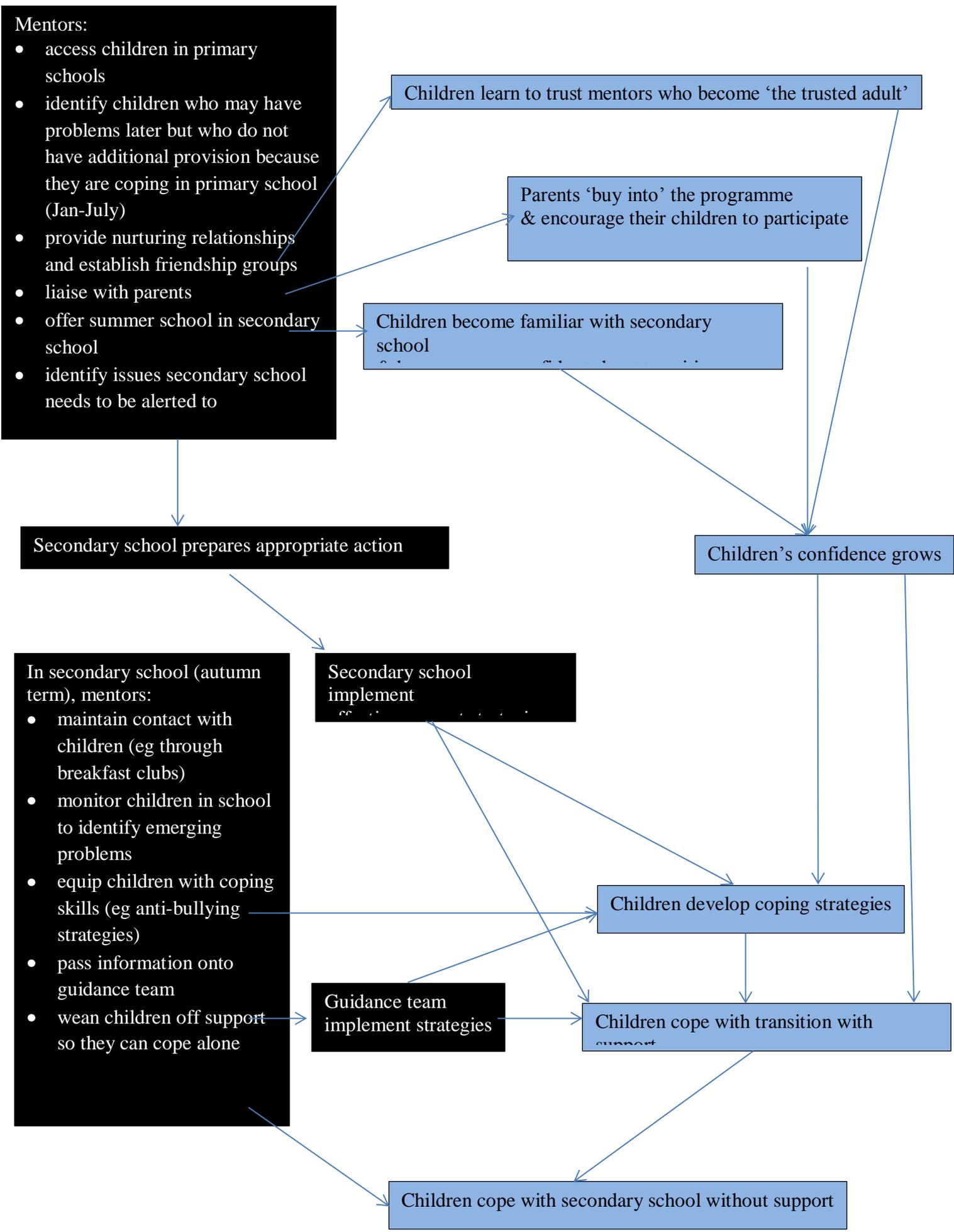


Figure 2: Getting things right early





**Figure 3: Transition mentors**