Learning from what works

Proposals for the reform of the English education system from the Centre for Equity in Education at The University of Manchester

Contents

Executive Summary

1. Successive governments have failed to deliver an education system that offers better opportunities for all children and young people. Drawing on research carried out by the Centre for Equity in Education, we outline a new way of thinking about how this can be achieved – one that is based on practices that already exist within the school system. These are focused on what happens within school, what happens between schools, and what happens beyond schools in the rest of children's lives.

2. We argue that such practices can provide the basis of a system which is much more capable of thinking about and responding to the real complexities of schooling than the one we currently have. Our research shows that:

   • Teachers and other school staff can be supported to understand the complexities of the situations in which they practise. By exploring how their students experience school, the challenges those students face, and the ways in which changes in their practices help or hinder students, teachers can learn how to develop more effective practices based on 'what works here and for these learners'.

   • Schools can be helped to develop through the critical friendship of other schools. This creates a supportive dialogue between schools, and, crucially, it supports the imperative to improve with resources – most importantly, human resources – to make improvement possible.

   • Schools can also play an important role in tackling the wider social issues that impact on their students' learning. Schools can be supported in understanding the complex contexts within which education takes place and in tackling the challenges which students face in their home and community backgrounds. A focus on these issues recognizes the interdependence of educational and other outcomes for children and young people, and so the crucial importance of schools working closely with other child, family and community agencies.

   • The wider use of these practices will require:

     - Policy makers who can shift their thinking away from simplification towards a recognition of complexity

     - Accountability mechanisms that avoid blaming schools for what they cannot control, but that reward them for contributing to a wider range of outcomes

     - Governance frameworks that offer schools both leadership and developmental support, and that actively promote a common purpose

     - The creation of local networks that enable schools to play a wider social role and draw on wider resources to support their educational mission.

3. We need an education system that is based on what works. But children's lives are complex, and changing them for the better is more complex still. Finding what works is not a matter of simplistic mantras and quick solutions introduced on a one-size fits-all basis. Rather, it demands the kind of deep educational thinking that has been driven out of the education system. The good news is that, despite the most unpromising of circumstances, there are encouraging practices going on. This suggests that there is more wisdom within the education system than amongst those who have sought to lead it. It is therefore time to learn from what *really* works.

1. Another fine mess

The English school system is in a mess. After nearly three decades of relentless reform, it finds itself becalmed in terms of overall improvement and stranded in mid-table in terms of international comparisons. Student achievement is strongly linked to social background, and gaps in achievement between those who do well and those who do badly are large and growing. If there have been gains in achievement over those three decades, they have been bought at the cost of narrowing the meaning of education, and there are real doubts about whether students know and can do more, or whether schools have simply got better at drilling them through tests.

The governance of the system is also a mess. It is not clear how the system is being led, much less how it is being developed. Schools look in a range of directions for leadership – to governors, to sponsors, to local authorities, to other schools, to the Secretary of State. Some of these bodies are democratically accountable and have a public purpose. Others operate with no obvious concern for the wider public good. Meanwhile, the Secretary of State runs increasing numbers of schools from Whitehall. That is not surprising since, for the past thirty years, ministers have taken increasing control of the minutiae of the school system. As a result, the convictions, whims and ideologies of successive Secretaries of State have been transmitted almost instantly through the school system, regardless of whether they are supported by evidence, or are consistent with previous policy, or whether there is any real chance that they will help the system improve.

This control is exercised most strongly through a perverse set of accountability measures. Schools are accountable not for improving the skills, knowledge, well-being or life chances of their students, but for following centrally-determined procedures and getting their students through tests and examinations. If necessary, they do this by gaming the system, while policy makers play catch-up, outlawing 'easy' examinations, devising new forms of league table, and seeking arbitrary ways of 'raising the bar'. At the same time, Ofsted has become more and more powerful, sometimes seeming to be the Secretary of State's attack dog, and sometimes seeking to establish its own, independent power base. As a result, schools are held accountable by an unpredictable and unstable organisation, changing its focus and expectations at a moment's notice, and resolutely refusing to engage in dialogue or understand the contexts within which the schools it judges operate.

How did we get here?

The post-war settlement in education rested heavily on the professional judgement of teachers and the influence of local authorities. For much of this period, schools were rarely inspected and there were only the most limited measures of student achievement – which in any case tended to be seen as the result of 'ability' rather than the efforts of teachers. There was no national curriculum. What was taught and how were matters for teachers to decide. In practice, curriculum and pedagogy were more often than not determined on Sunday evenings at teachers' kitchen tables. In principle, local education authorities led and managed the system – and in practice some of them did it very well for some of the time. However LEAs had a vested interest in not judging their schools too harshly, and in any case, the officers who were making those judgements were usually themselves ex-teachers, often drawn from the very schools they were now judging.

In 1976, Prime Minister Jim Callaghan famously called for a 'Great Debate' on how this imperfect system could be reformed. His idea was that the strengths of the system would be retained, its weaknesses would be eliminated, and the role of schools in a changing world would be rethought. What happened was very different. There was no Great Debate. Instead, there was a relentless polemic about the ineffectiveness of schools, the erosion of standards, and the untrustworthiness of education professionals. What followed in the 1988 Education Reform Act was a lurch to a very different kind of system. Gone was the reliance on unfettered professional judgement. In its place were central control, high-stakes accountability and competition between schools to encourage them to better their position in performance league tables.

We have no quarrel with the proposition that schools should teach what the nation agrees is valuable. We also think they should be accountable for what they do, that students should learn things that matter, and that their achievements in this sense should be matters of public knowledge and concern. However, since 1988, policy makers' desire to control schools has led them to simplify what schools are expected to do and how they are expected to do it. Valuable knowledge has been turned into a narrowly-conceived curriculum. What children know and can do has been reduced to test results. The complex educational practices which enable children to learn have been reduced to matters for quick-fire judgements by inspectors based on the most minimal of evidence.

This simplification makes the school system much more manageable from the centre. However, it hollows out the meaning of education – and at the same time, it removes almost all educational considerations from the way the system is led and managed. Secretaries of State and Chief Inspectors can reshape the system at a whim. Head teachers and teachers, in turn, have to set aside what they know about education to chase the latest target or obey the latest policy imperative.

These proposals are about putting this situation right. In the run-up to the May 2015 general election, all manner of organisations and pressure groups have produced their manifestos. That is not our intention here. In our view, we have had quite enough of quick fixes dreamt up on the basis of little experience and less evidence. Our belief is that we actually need to have the Great Debate that James Callaghan promised, but which never materialised. We need to think seriously and deeply about the purposes and practices of schooling. Our thinking needs to be based on what we know, an acknowledgement of what we do not know, and a recognition that education is ultimately a matter of values. Policy needs to grow out of such thinking, not take its place.

What follows is therefore a contribution to the Great Debate we never had. It outlines some promising directions for the school system to take. It does so on the basis of what we know – of our own research and our own experience in working with the school system for many years. It is therefore not intended to be comprehensive. Others may be in a position to find solutions for all the system's ills. We are not – but we can outline some principles on which the system could and should develop.

Some assumptions

Underpinning our position are four fundamental assumptions about schooling:

1. Education is an inherently complex venture. Attainments in tests and examinations matter. But they matter less than we suppose because they are indicators of just one of a range of outcomes from education. If education is about passing tests, it is also about knowing things that matter, and developing skills that are useful in employment and in other aspects of individual's lives. It is about personal development and psychological well-being. It is about social skills and relationships. It makes a contribution to health both in childhood and throughout life. It is about developing young people's abilities to contribute to society, to understand how society works, and to change society for the better.

2. The processes of education are inherently complex. Children and young people learn in ways that can be facilitated, but cannot, ultimately, be controlled and managed. Relationships between students and teachers are crucial to learning but are also too complex to control easily. The way that schools as organisations work to support (or undermine) teaching and learning are understood in general terms, and can be supported through partially-understood processes, but the subtle interactions between school, teachers and students remain impossible fully to control.

3. **Equity matters.** Compulsory schooling is perhaps the single most significant intervention by the state in the lives of individuals. Its justification is that it improves the lives of all. The reality is, however, that some benefit more than others. Quite apart from the economic costs of the gaps that open up, it is morally indefensible for the state to intervene in ways which benefit those who already have most at the expense of those who have least.

4. **Education is bound up with all aspects of learners' lives.** Although the process of simplification has created the impression that high-quality education can overcome whatever disadvantaging factors may lie in learners' backgrounds, the reality is different. Students will not do well without good teachers and good schools. But neither will they do well if they and their families struggle against poverty or discrimination, if families do not know how best to support their children's learning, if their communities are not safe, or if they have health problems. This means that education policy has to be part of much wider policy efforts to improve the lives of individuals and families, and that schools have to be part of a much wider network of services.

We said earlier that the school system is in a mess. However, it is our contention that we can find practices built on assumptions such as these every day, somewhere in the school system. Whatever the failings of policy makers, not every policy has been wrong, and in any case, teachers, head teachers, local authorities and other education stakeholders have tended to salvage something positive from even the most unpromising situations.

In what follows, therefore, we outline examples of practices in which one or other of these four assumptions is embedded. They are drawn from our own work with schools and the school system – so we can vouch for the fact that these represent what is the case somewhere in the country, rather than what might be the case in an ideal world. This is important, because it seems to us much more likely that educational change will come from building on what is already happening, rather than engaging in yet another wholesale system reform.

2. Promising directions

The three examples we cite are drawn from different levels of the school system – from the internal practices of schools and classrooms, from the relationships between schools, and from the relationships between schools and other services. This is no accident. On the basis of our research, we have argued elsewhere that if we are to have a genuinely developmental and equitable school system, we need to think about what happens within school, what happens between schools, and what happens beyond schools in the rest of children's lives[1].

What unites the three examples is that they show how it is possible to develop approaches to schooling that do not exhibit the kinds of simplistic thinking which undermine the system currently. Crucially, each example is based on the availability of some kind of facilitation for schools and teachers. In the final section, therefore, we will consider what kinds of facilitation are necessary, and what structures might support this.

Within school factors

For many years, we have worked with schools to embed processes of teacher inquiry into their development processes[2]. Schools set up inquiry groups of staff members – senior leaders, teachers and teaching assistants. Sometimes students are also involved. The groups work with us to identify an issue in the school which they regard as problematic in relation to the equity of their current practices. This may be to do with learners who are under-achieving, or who are marginalized in some way. Instead of reaching for ready-made solutions drawn from the school's existing set of 'interventions' or from compendiums of 'what works', we support teachers to understand the issue better, to think how they might change their practices, and to monitor the impacts of those changes.

This approach has shown how the use of evidence to study practice within a school can help to foster such developments. Specifically, it can create space for rethinking by interrupting existing discourses. Particularly powerful techniques in this respect involve the use of mutual lesson observation, sometimes through video recordings, and evidence collected from students about teaching and learning arrangements within a school. 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 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 research also draws attention to the importance of creating the context for such practitioner-led activities. It has shown how schools that are able to respond effectively to diversity develop a respect for learner differences and a commitment among the teaching staff to finding ways of ensuring all students participate in learning opportunities. In addition, there is likely to be an emphasis on staff collaboration and joint problem solving. Therefore, a key role for senior staff is to encourage such features within their school communities.

Between school factors

Moving beyond what happens within individual schools, our 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.

However, the effective use of such approaches is far from easy, particularly in a policy context that promotes competition between schools. These approaches can also lead to a proliferation of time-consuming meetings that have little or no impact on students' experiences.

The most convincing evidence about the power of school-to-school collaboration comes from our recent involvement in the Greater Manchester Challenge, a three-year improvement project which involved over 1,100 schools, in ten local authorities[3]. Informed by what had happened in the London Challenge, the overall approach emerged from a detailed analysis of the local context. This drew attention to areas of concern and also helped to pinpoint a range of human resources that could be mobilised in order to support improvement efforts. Recognising the potential of these resources, it was decided that networking and collaboration should be the key strategies for strengthening the overall improvement capacity of the system.

In terms of schools working in highly disadvantaged contexts, our evidence suggests that school-to-school partnerships are the most powerful means of fostering improvements. In Greater Manchester we saw how they led to striking improvements in the performance of some 200 schools facing the most challenging circumstances. There is also evidence that the progress that these schools made helped to trigger improvement across the system. A common feature of almost all of these interventions was that progress was achieved through carefully matched pairings (or, sometimes, trios) of schools that cut across 'boundaries' of various kinds, including those that separate schools that are in different local authorities. In this way, expertise that was previously trapped in particular contexts was made more widely available.

Significantly, we found that such collaborative arrangements can have a positive impact on the learning of students 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 leads us to conclude that closing the gap in outcomes between those from more and less advantaged backgrounds will only take place when what happens to children outside as well as inside schools changes[4]. 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 organisation that give them the flexibility to cooperate with other schools and with stakeholders beyond the school gates.

To do this, it is necessary to engage in contextual analysis in order to understand how local dynamics shape particular outcomes and what can be done, by whom, to change those dynamics. Such approaches are a feature of the highly acclaimed Harlem Children's Zone, a neighbourhood-based system of education and social services for children of low-income families in New York[5].

Currently we are involved in a series of initiatives to explore how the thinking that informs the Harlem project might be used in the English context[6]. In so doing, we have set out to combine a focus on a more or less tightly bounded geographical area within which there are concentrations of people facing marked disadvantages, and the assembly of a range of partners to try to tackle those challenges. Within these efforts, the aim is to improve a wide range of outcomes, rather than simply to tackle one or other perceived problem, such as high levels of placement in care, or low educational attainment. Building on lessons from Harlem, such initiatives must develop strategies that are doubly holistic in the sense that they should operate both across the childhood and adolescent years, and across all relevant aspects of children's lives.

3. Building a thinking school system

If we put these three examples together, we can see the outlines of an education system which is much more capable of responding to the real complexities of schooling than the current one.

In particular, the examples show us that:

- Teachers and other school staff can be supported to understand the complexities of the situations in which they practise. They can explore how their students experience school, the challenges those students face, and the ways in which changes in their practices help or hinder students. This is not an alternative to knowing what research evidence says about 'what works'. However, it recognizes that 'what works in general' has to be translated into 'what works here and for these learners'. It also recognizes that there may not be ready-made interventions to address every issue and values the creativity that teachers can bring to bear on the situations they face.

- Schools can be helped to develop through the critical friendship of other schools. Again, this is not an alternative to holding schools to account for their results or to rigorous external inspection. However, it brings to bear 'insider' views of how schools work and can improve. It creates a supportive dialogue between schools, and, crucially, it supports the imperative to improve with the resources – most importantly, human resources – that make improvement more possible.

- Schools can play a part in tackling the wider social issues that impact on their students' learning. Again, this is not an alternative to an intensive focus on learning within the classroom. However, it supports schools in understanding the complex contexts within which schooling takes place and the complex challenges which students face in their home and community backgrounds. It also recognizes the interdependence of educational and other outcomes for children and young people, and so the crucial importance of schools working closely with other child, family and community agencies.

We are fortunate in that we are able to bring to our involvement in the school system the intellectual and informational resources of a university. This has clear implications for the role that universities might play in a thinking school system. At the same time, however, we recognize that not every school can have access to such support. How else, then, might the processes we have outlined be embedded in the school system?
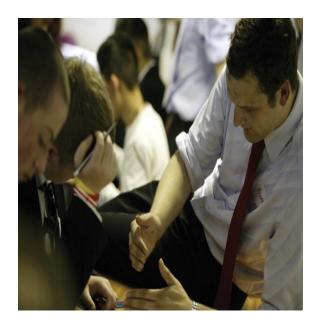
While it is for others to propose detailed system designs, we suggest that the following implications are clear:

- Policy makers need to shift their discourse away from simplification towards a recognition of complexity. Our view is that what policy makers say matters just as much as what they do. The stories policy makers – both ministers and chief inspectors – have told over recent decades about how education is simply a matter of test and exam results, how poor results are straightforwardly the fault of the school, and how improving the system is simply a matter of getting better head teachers and teachers, have undermined the system. It would not be difficult for policy makers to acknowledge that matters are more complex than this. This might involve them in getting themselves off the treadmill of having to produce constantly improving results, but it would free the system to think more creatively about the real problems it faces.

- Accountability mechanisms need to hold schools to account only for what they can control, but to do so across a wider range of outcomes. This means broadening the range of outcomes measures by which schools are judged beyond a narrow focus on attainment, but also making sure that judgements are based on a deeper understanding of the processes that shape those outcomes. We have argued previously for accountability based on dialogue, in which an analysis of performance data is simply the first step in a dialogue between inspectors and schools which aims to explore what actually underlies the data, and what is capable of being changed[7]. The 'critical friend' role that we often play in relation to schools, or that schools in the Greater Manchester Challenge played in relation to each other, is a starting point for thinking what this form of accountability might look like.

- Schools need to sit within governance frameworks that offer them leadership and developmental support, and that actively promote a common purpose. We agree that school autonomy is often positive. However, if all we have are autonomous schools and a central government desperate to control the system, the kinds of simplification we described earlier are inevitable. Governance frameworks need to give all schools a common purpose – aligned with wider social purposes – and provide them with access to a range of developmental support. There are many alternatives to the current fragmented system. The idea of some kind of regional coordinating mechanism seems to be gaining favour, and there are intriguing possibilities in the current agenda of the devolution of budgets and policy responsibilities to major cities. Our view is that different forms of governance will be necessary for different purposes – for accountability, for resourcing, for sustaining developmental networks and so on.

- Schools need to be locked into local networks which enable them to play a wider social role and draw on wider resources to support their educational mission. Amongst the various governance arrangements we believe to be necessary are ones that enable schools to work together and work with other agencies to tackle the complex challenges which beset children and families, particularly in areas of disadvantage. In the field of public health, it is common to think in terms of the 'social determinants' of health inequalities. This means recognizing that health inequalities arise less from variations in the quality of health care, than from the circumstances under which people live their lives, and that any attempt to tackle inequalities means changing those circumstances. In education, the opposite line has been taken, focusing overwhelmingly on improving schools, and turning away from the challenges which they and their students face. We need a view of the 'social determinants of educational inequalities'. From this flows the need to integrate policies across government departments, but, more immediately, the need to take coordinated action locally.

The bad news is that we are currently a long way from the kind of thinking system outlined here. Deep educational thinking has been driven out of the education system for the past three decades and replaced by simplistic mantras about what works and what needs to be done. The good news, however, is that the examples we have provided are happening here and now, in the most unpromising of circumstances. There is a real sense in which there is more wisdom within the education system than amongst those who have sought to lead it. It is time to learn from what really works.

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