



Education and Skills Committee: Poverty and attainment inquiry

Response from the Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change

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Introduction

It is widely accepted that pupils from more deprived backgrounds do less well educationally than their more advantaged peers (Francis and Perry 2010, The Sutton Trust, 2009, Wedge and Prosser 1973). There is evidence to suggest that particular interventions can have a short-term impact but sustaining and widening the impact is less well demonstrated (Greaves et al., 2014). Teacher quality/effectiveness has been shown to be a crucial element in promoting positive educational outcomes irrespective of social/economic background (Ko *et al.*, 2013) and in the classrooms of the most effective teachers, 'at risk' students learn at the same rate as those from advantaged backgrounds (Hamre & Pianta 2005).

The key message is that for improvement in academic outcomes for young people to occur there must be a focus on improvements in the quality of learning and teaching. This will involve the development of teachers' knowledge, skills and commitment and of their 'distributed, instructional and inquiry-minded leadership' (Mincu, 2013). Evidence from the Sutton Trust, and other work such as that of Hattie (2008), suggests that effective learning strategies to tackle education inequity include: High quality feedback to pupils; peer-tutoring; developing thinking skills (meta-cognition) and a focus on Early Years.

However, it is also clear that while schools can and do make a difference to the outcomes of young people, with schools accounting for around 18-50% of the variance after background factors have been taken into account (cf. Sammons, 2007), as Basil Berntein (1970) reminds us education alone cannot compensate for society and that we need to tackle structural factors that have a powerful and often critical impact on outcomes of some students.

The framework of within-, between- and beyond- was initially developed for new models of school leadership (Chapman *et al.*, 2008); we now apply it within the context of improvement to provide an overview of key themes from research and supplement this with some specific examples of practice. Taking each in turn:

(i) Within-school Improvement

First, schools should invest in teachers' professional development so that teachers develop a wide repertoire of teaching skills that can reflect the range of needs of their learners. Second, a focus on building leadership capacity at all levels within the school is key to success, as is leaders promoting a culture underpinned by high expectations and positive norms in staff and pupils. One strategy for achieving the above is to use collaborative action research (CAR) and other forms of structured enquiry to identify priorities for change, implement improvement strategies and track and monitor the impact of these interventions. This process can also inform the school's planning and strategic

action. This type of approach is exemplified in the School Improvement Partnership Programme (SIPP), Raising Attainment for All (RAFA) and Network for Social and Educational Equity (NSEE).

In terms of teaching and learning, policies designed to close the attainment gap should balance promoting curricula interventions such as literacy and mathematics programmes with developing the highest quality learning and teaching in classrooms. An over-reliance on specific curriculum interventions and “off-the shelf” resources is misguided unless teachers understand how these work, how they can be adapted to suit the context and most importantly that the intervention is underpinned by the highest quality teaching methods. This is a risk for the Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC) where, quite rightly, schools are eager to demonstrate an impact on learning outcomes quickly and can be tempted to ‘buy in a solution’ by adopting an intervention that is seen to work elsewhere without framing it within their own context, relevance to their curriculum, learner needs or capacity or capability for effective implementation. In addition to focusing on the learning level schools should also invest in building leadership capacity and promoting authentic relationships between schools and families and communities.

In terms of building leadership capacity, international educational research and practice demonstrates that the most effective school/ system improvement efforts are locally owned and led by practitioners and leaders working in partnership and collaboration with like-minded professionals and other stakeholders (e.g. Fullan 2013, Chapman et al. 2012, Chapman and Hadfield 2010, Donaldson 2012, Ainscow et al., 2012, OFSTED, 2000; Harris et al, 2005, Hadfield and Chapman 2009; Kerr et al. 2003). They align their change processes with curriculum development, teacher development and school self-evaluation (Menter et al., 2010). Potter and colleagues’ (2002) review of the literature on ‘what works’ in school improvement in challenging circumstances again highlights the importance of school organisation, culture, leadership and ethos, to improve the levels of effectiveness.

The research literature and our own evidence, particularly from the SIPP and NSEE programmes, have highlighted that school improvement strategies that promote new ways of working for learning and teaching and building leadership capacity across classrooms, schools and local authorities that have a positive impact on tackling poverty related attainment are framed by the following principles, in that they:

- Adopt partnership working with a focus on exploring specific issues relating to educational inequity
- Use Collaborative Action Research (CAR) and a range of evidence to identify key challenges, frame key questions experiment and monitor developments to inform practice and understand impact
- Create leadership opportunities and promote professional learning of staff at all levels.
- Ensure efforts are locally owned and led with opportunities for staff at all levels to participate and contribute to the direction and leadership of the activity
- Understand that activity is tailored to individual needs and is context specific
- Invest time and space to build positive relationships and have a commitment to reciprocity and mutual benefit for all involved
- Develop arrangements to support long-term collaboration and new approaches to capacity building, so sustaining and building in effective approaches
- Have explicit links to strategic improvement planning in schools and local authorities
- Involve a range of relevant partners and draw on external expertise where necessary.

Evidence and experience suggests there is no single magic bullet that will close the attainment gap, or more broadly 'deliver' school improvement. Rather, adherence to the above principles with a focus on a small number of priorities, targeted at individuals and small groups, are key. For example, the evaluation of the Extra Mile programme found that there was a significant positive difference in GCSE points between students in receipt of free school meals involved in the programme and a matched sample of students not on the programme. This difference also equated to a 22% reduction on the IDACI scale or an 8% attendance rate (Chapman *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, to ensure effective implementation, and ultimately impact on outcomes, strategies also need to be matched to the specific context, capacity and capability of the school.

(ii) Between-school Improvement

This domain builds on and extends the within-school approaches and principles to involve partner schools and organisations in order to promote professional learning and coordination of systems to tackle inequality. By bringing together other schools and partners to the collaborative, there is greater scope for mutual support, innovation and sharing of ideas and evidence of 'what works' (Chapman, 2018). There can be benefits from economies of scale and the coordination of effort can also enhance collective motivation across teachers and partners. Movement of key staff around the collaborative helps to identify issues and support capacity building, succession planning and career management.

Structured collaboration between schools helps raise attainment. The evidence suggests that Federations involving higher and lower attaining schools significantly outperform non-federated counterparts, although this takes two to four years to impact on student outcomes and there is a positive impact on student attainment in both the higher and lower attaining schools. Also, secondary school federations outperform 'loose' collaboratives and executive leadership arrangements outperform traditional leadership arrangements. Effective leadership by the headteacher and senior leadership team has been found to be the single most critical feature that helps to generate improvements and build capacity for such federations to be sustained (Chapman and Muijs, 2013).

Between-school partnerships can also involve a process of collaborative inquiry which supports and informs experimentation with practice and evaluating impact, but also creates leadership and professional learning opportunities. Such joint practice development can be a key feature of 'Research Schools' acting as a hub to move knowledge, expertise and evidence around the system. Having a number of partners also tends to improve schools' access to support, advice and expertise regarding CAR methods, use of data, pedagogy and assessment.

In addition to the principles and characteristics stated previously, it is important that there is sufficient time allocated to foster clear understanding of goals and to build relationships and promote an ethos of reciprocal learning and improvement. While this process can be strategically informed, it is important that the teachers in the partner schools have the commitment to collaborate with their partners and can see a rationale for this. School improvement that tackles inequality is much more likely to emerge as a result of collective capacity building across schools than through centrally driven top-down mandates underpinned by accountability mechanisms.

Meta reviews of the research evidence such as that by Mincu (2016) have found that the approaches adopted by SIPP and NSEE feature in successful strategies to tackle the achievement gap and educational inequity. For example, they have a strong focus on collaboratively developed and evaluated learning and teaching approaches and this shared professional knowledge is key to ensuring both effective learning processes and whole school improvement.

(iii) Beyond-school Improvement

Our research and support for collaborative networks of schools together with insights from our international networks confirms that while there is encouraging evidence for within- and between-school improvement as mechanisms to tackle educational inequity and attainment, this is a necessary but insufficient ingredient for success. A more coordinated holistic approach is required if we are to tackle poverty and the attainment gap. There is evidence that to make a greater and sustained impact on the poverty related attainment gap these education collaborations need to extend to include other partners and services beyond education to provide a more holistic approach. For example, research (e.g. Egan, 2013; Carter-Wall and Whitfield, 2012) has also highlighted that we also need to look beyond learning and teaching to address issues of pupil wellbeing; enrichment experiences; engaging parents and families in their children's learning; and strengthening links with communities. Indeed, this research shows that parental and family engagement is the most important factor, outside of schools, in influencing the achievement of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. This activity can also have positive outcomes for the parents, including promoting their skills and facilitating access to support networks.

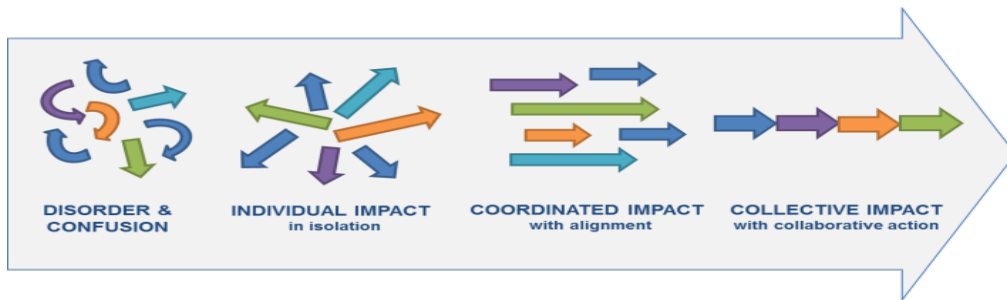
Therefore, effective multi-agency partnership working is crucial to tackle educational inequity. Such partnerships enable schools to support school-family links, out-of-hours learning and mentoring interventions. Grayson (2013) found that such holistic interventions involving strong engagement between parents, schools and the wider community are necessary to narrow the attainment gap. Partnership working between a range of local services offers more opportunities to reach the most vulnerable families, as any service with which they are in contact can refer those families to supportive interventions. Schools have a key role to play here, often as network coordinators and co-deliverers of services to improve outcomes.

Partnership working between a range of local services offers more opportunities to reach the most vulnerable families and, if necessary, refer to other services. This can offer a co-ordinated approach to public service provision and integration of health, social and education services. Building such partnerships takes time but we have found that the benefits to local people in challenging high poverty circumstances are clear. This includes supporting parents and carers with fundamental needs so that their children can access and thrive in education. Co-location of services facilities, more reliable channels of communication and effective partnerships allow earlier intervention and a 'pipe-line of support across transition stages', with more effective access to resources. This was demonstrated in our research evaluating the Renfrewshire Family First initiative (Hall *et al* 2017).

Taking a place-based perspective is a key dimension of beyond school improvement and there is growing evidence that this approach is an important lever for tackling intergenerational poverty and promoting a broad range of positive outcomes in a range of international contexts. For example, *City Connects* in Boston, MA works across 84 schools. The model brings together education, health, welfare and other services and has erased two-thirds of the achievement gap in math and half the achievement gap in English. The model adopts a whole child approach drawing on research that shows that students achieve better in school and in life when they are "educated across multiple dimensions—intellectual, social, emotional, spiritual, and physical". An independent evaluation has also demonstrated that the model provides significant financial savings. (City Connects 2014).

In their review of 'collective impact' Henig and colleagues (2015) argue that collective impact involves all services are working together so that the totality of impact is greater than the sum of the parts (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Service provision and collective impact



(Henig *et al.*, 2015)

Five key principles underpin the concept of collective impact:

- **Common agenda:** All members of the collaborative need a shared understanding of the issue and an agreed approach to tackling it.
- **Shared data and accountability systems:** For alignment and accountability purposes, those involved need to have common indicators of success.
- **Mutually reinforcing agendas and activities:** Action needs to be co-ordinated to avoid overlap and gaps.
- **Clear and consistent communication:** In order to build relationships and trust, establish common objectives, and build shared purpose and a guiding.
- **Backbone support organisation:** A separate organisation is required to provide the administrative, logistical, and coordinating support necessary to create and sustain a successful partnership.

Our research and development work for Children’s Neighbourhood Scotland (CNS) presents a significant opportunity for tackling child poverty and improving outcomes. CNS is a Scottish example of taking a place-based approach to tackle child poverty and improve outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. To date, this approach has involved ROC, Policy Scotland and What Works Scotland at the University of Glasgow and the Glasgow Centre for Population Health (GCPH) working in partnership with Glasgow City Council, Clyde Gateway and other local and national third sector and private organisations in the Bridgeton and Dalmarnock areas to harness the power of local networks and help bring together people, resources and organisations in the neighbourhood area, so that all can work together to promote better lives for the children living there. There is a strong focus on supporting young people’s transitions over the long term with an emphasis on local voices. This work is complex and, given the diversity of stakeholders, has required significant investment in building and sustaining trusting relationships to deliver the intended outcomes. This work has provided a strong foundation for moving forward as we enter the next phase of CNS as the model is embedded and extended across Scotland. For further details please see <https://childrensneighbourhoodscotland.com>

Concluding remarks

It is clear that many of the features of within-, between- and beyond- school improvement align with the best available research evidence and are key to closing the attainment gap. Whilst this is encouraging, in order to justify the allocation of public funds, policies and programmes in Scotland need to move to a position where they can establish the extent of their impact from independent sources sooner rather than later.

More broadly, each domain of the framework cannot be taken in isolation, nor can it be thought about as a linear or hierarchical framework for change and improvement. All three areas: within-, between- and beyond- must be worked on together, complimenting and reinforcing each other to create synergies and additionality rather than contradicting or competing with each other, and in doing so undermining efforts. Ultimately, the success of pulling all parts of this framework together and optimizing impact requires clear, consistent, collaborative leadership within and between services. When this is achieved then we will have successfully operationalised the intent of the Christie Commission (2011) across Scotland and gone some way to creating a more equitable education system where all can achieve despite where they come from.

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