TURNING THE TIDE

A study of place-based school partnerships

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Executive Summary

1. Recent years have seen an increased policy emphasis in England on the power of market forces as a strategy for educational improvement. Whilst this approach has the potential to create space for innovation and the injection of energy into the system, there is growing evidence that it has also further disadvantaged some learners from economically poorer backgrounds and other vulnerable groups.

2. This situation points to the need for locally coordinated efforts to promote more equitable and socially just forms of education. The research reported in this report set out to explore what form these efforts might take and some of the systemic barriers to such developments. In particular, it provides an independent, evidence-based analysis of a series of existing innovations within the field that are underpinned by locally instigated education partnerships.

3. The study involved a multiple methods approach, generating data through a scoping survey, followed by individual and focus group interviews with key stakeholders in eight partnerships. These examples are from various parts of the country. Some involve groups within local authorities, whilst others are area or regionally focused. To varying degrees, they involve schools with different governance arrangements, including maintained, academy and faith schools. Local authority involvement in the partnerships varies across the sample, with some leading and orchestrating the partnership, others working as joint partners with schools and some having no role whatsoever.

4. The evidence points to the importance of contextual factors in shaping area-based cooperation. In particular, it points to the historical, political, and cultural characteristics of a locality as key to understanding how and why the partnerships evolved, and whether and the extent to which they can be seen as purposeful and sustainable. It is argued that these are crucial factors that need to be acknowledged, understood, and accounted for in addressing social justice within education and wider society.

5. The research identifies several important features in respect to the development of the partnerships. Notably, they tend to rely on key individuals, and the political and social capital that exists within a locality. It is argued that this is both a strength and a weakness of the partnerships, and that there should be a greater focus on building capacity within local education systems in order to address this issue.

6. It is argued that the development of area partnerships should be:

    - Led locally by coordinating groups made up of experienced and credible school leaders and educational professionals working with other community stakeholders;

    - Underpinned by a clear purpose that both informs and drives decision making and action;

- Autonomous in setting their own agenda;
- Evidence-based, leading to an analysis of the local context that identifies barriers experienced by some learners;
- Focused on finding ways of mobilising local expertise to address these barriers;
- Inclusive, by which we mean that all schools and other centres of learning are involved, whatever their governance arrangements; and
- Linked to wider community resources.

7. The report does not argue for a return to a traditional local authority model of governance. However, it does raise concerns about who or what will act as the 'conscience' of a school system. In this sense, some form of area partnership could be responsible for having democratic oversight of all schools and young people within a locality. Such a function would be central to the development of a socially just and equitable school system.

8. It is intended that the report will provoke a national debate about the future of education policy in relation to contextually informed decision making and locally driven action, including future implications for the deployment of local authority resources.

Introduction

All of this points to the need for locally coordinated efforts to promote more equitable and socially just forms of education.

Despite successive government initiatives with the declared intent of addressing equity and social justice within the English education system, significant numbers of children and young people remain marginalised within or excluded from schools[1]. Meanwhile, the increasing trend of placement in various forms of alternative provision adds to the marginalisation of some and often the more vulnerable learners, while placing further pressure on local-authority resources[2].

The coronavirus pandemic has thrown new light on these challenges. In particular, it has shown how, despite the efforts of schools and local authorities, it is the most vulnerable learners who have experienced the greatest impact in relation to their engagement in schools and progress in learning. Many of these pupils are from low-income and minority-ethnic backgrounds, and/or have special educational needs[3].

Data for 2019–2020 suggest that 31 per cent of school-aged children in England were living in poverty. As a cohort, those eligible for free school meals were the equivalent of 18.1 months behind in their learning than their less disadvantaged peers at age 16[4].

England is also typical of many countries in having strong spatial concentrations of poverty and poor educational outcomes[5]. These typically occur in places with weak physical, economic, and service infrastructures for addressing poor educational outcomes. For one of the wealthiest nations on the planet, such facts and figures are a source of national shame. They also serve to remind us that decades of centralised reform, that have weakened local democratic influence and have thereby had the effect of fragmenting the school system, have done much more to reinforce rather than address these concerns.

All of this points to the need for locally coordinated efforts to promote more equitable and socially just forms of education within particular places. The research reported here set out to explore what form these efforts might take and some of the systemic barriers to such cooperative activity. In particular, it provides an independent, evidence-based analysis of a series of existing innovations within the field that are underpinned by locally-instigated partnerships.

1 Nuffield Foundation (2022) 'Disadvantaged pupils in England and Wales are significantly behind other pupils by the time they take their GCSEs' Available at: https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/news/disadvantaged-pupils-in-england-and-wales-are-significantly-behind-other-pupils-by-the-time-they-take-their-gcses

2 Gill, . K., Quilter-Pinner, H. & Swift, D. (2017) Making The Difference: Breaking The Link Between School Exclusion and Social Exclusion. London: institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR)

3 Tucket, S., Hunt, E., Robinson, D. & Cruikshanks, R. (2022) Covid-19 And Disadvantage Gaps in England in 2021. London: Education Policy Institute/Nuffield Foundation

4 Hutchinson, J.; Reader, M.; Akhal, A. (2020) Education in England: Annual Report 2020; Education Policy Institute: London

5 Kerr, K. and Ainscow, M. (2022) Promoting Equity in Market-Driven Education Systems: Lessons from England. Educ. Sci. 2022, 12, 495. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12070495

...those who are nearest to the field need to be empowered to draw on their local intelligence in order to identify barriers that are experienced by some pupils...

It is hoped that the report will inform broader discussion of ways of coordinating local area efforts to promote equity. In regard to this agenda, earlier research has shown that context matters[6]. That is to say, what works in one place may not be transferable elsewhere[7]. Therefore, those who are nearest to the field need to be empowered to draw on their local intelligence in order to identify barriers that are experienced by some pupils and, in so doing, mobilise human resources to address these difficulties.

With all of this in mind, we intend that this report will provoke a national debate about the future of national education policy in relation to contextually informed decision making and locally driven action, including implications for the deployment of local-authority resources.

6 Ainscow, M., Chapman, C. and Hadfield, M. (2020) Changing education systems: a research-based approach. Routledge

7 Cartwright, N., & Hardie, J. (2012). Evidence-based policy: A practical guide to doing it better. Oxford University Press

The research strategy

Building on the findings of earlier research carried out by Christine Gilbert[8], the study analysed developments in eight well-established area school partnership initiatives in order to address the following research questions:

- What are the conditions that facilitate the establishment of area school partnerships?
- What are the features and benefits of these partnerships?
- What barriers do they face and how are these being addressed?
- What are the implications for the creation of effective forms of local coordination within education systems?

The research focused on examples from across England, some of which involve partnerships within local authorities, whilst others are area or regionally focused.

An initial phase of data collection comprised a national survey of senior school leaders and local authority personnel. This informed the design of a second phase involving case studies of eight partnerships in which data were generated via documentary analysis and focused interviews with a sample of stakeholders within each partnership (see Table 1). Interviews were conducted in online and face-to-face settings.

This evidence was then used to produce an account of each partnership. In order to establish the credibility of these accounts, initial drafts were negotiated with respondents during a seminar organised for each partnership. This process of negotiation was also intended to inform thinking within the field so as to help move practice forward.

Field work was carried out by the four members of the research team, all of whom have extensive experience of carrying out research within education systems. They also have a history of working closely with policy makers and practitioners in using research findings to guide strategic decision-making. Recently this has concerned their close involvement in the design and evaluation of the Greater Manchester educational recovery strategy, 'Pathways to Success'[9].

To ensure that the research is relevant to current concerns the Staff College created an advisory group, which contributed to the planning of the study, including responding to interim findings. This was intended to ensure that the report is in a form that speaks directly to key stakeholders in the field. An accompanying policy brief will also be produced in partnership with the Staff College.

8 Gilbert, C. (2018) Optimism of the will: the development of local area-based education partnerships. A think-piece. London; UCL Institute of Education

9 https://gmlp.org.uk/The-Greater-Manchester-educational-recovery-strate/

Once agreed, the case study accounts were further analysed by the research team using the research questions as a framework and linking the findings to relevant international research literature. To strengthen the findings, additional information and intelligence was drawn from existing contacts the research team have with other area partnerships, in this country and elsewhere.

Table 1: Sample of key stakeholders interviewed

Position	Number in sample
Director/Assistant Director of Children's services	3
Head teachers	11
CEOs of MATs	5
Councilors	2
CEO of Partnerships	3
Directors of teaching hubs/Development	4
Other (e.g., Chair of Partnership Board)	2
Total	**30**

The English context

At the same time, there are worries that these policy moves are loosening the links between schools and their local communities, a factor that is known to be crucial to the promotion of equity.

The last 20 years have seen an increased policy emphasis in England on the power of market forces as a strategy for educational improvement[10]. Whilst this approach has the potential to open up possibilities to inject new energy into the improvement of schools, there is growing evidence from a range of countries that it can lead to increased segregation within education systems[11]. In the English context this has further disadvantaged some learners from economically poorer backgrounds and other vulnerable groups, not least those children and young people from black and Asian-heritage backgrounds, and those recently arrived in the UK.

A major strand within the English reforms since 2010 has been the rapid expansion of the academies programme. As a result, the education system has become increasingly fragmented. Furthermore, the introduction of various other types of schools that operate under the academy legislation - such as free schools, studio schools and university technical colleges - has contributed to the complexity of the scene. Indeed, a mapping exercise of schools, based on legal status, curricular specialism, student selection, types of academy and school groupings, identifies as many as 70 or more types of school that are currently operating within the English state system[12].

As academy numbers have grown, the Government has also encouraged the creation of multi-academy trusts (MATs). These are groups of academies with shared governance arrangements operating independently of the local authority. Schools with poor performance on national measures have increasingly been pressured to join MATs, under the assumption that sharing governance arrangements with higher performing schools will support their improvement. Typically, MATs are locally and/or regionally based although a number of larger MATs operate nationally often across several local authorities.

These developments have led to what might be described as an educational market-place where schools compete with each other for pupils, parents exercise (some) choice over where their children go to school often on the basis of inspection grades and student assessment scores.

Coupled with the emphasis on policies fostering greater diversity of schools, this has created a quasi-selective system in which the poorest children tend to attend the lowest-performing schools and make much slower educational progress than their less disadvantaged peers[13]. At the same time, there are worries that these policy moves are loosening the links between schools and their local communities, a factor that is known to be crucial to the promotion of equity. It is also the case, however, that this policy has created a context that is encouraging innovations to improve educational outcomes.

10 Meyland-Smith, D. & Evans, N. (2009) A Guide to School Choice Reforms. London: Policy Exchange

11 Salokangas, M., & Ainscow, M. (2017). Inside the autonomous school: Making sense of a global educational trend. London: Routledge

12 Courtney, S. (2015) Corporatised leadership in English schools, Journal of Educational Administration and History, 47:3, 214-231

13 Farquharson, C., McNally, S., Tahir, I. (2022), 'Education Inequalities', IFS Deaton Review of Inequalities [online]. Available at: https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/education-inequalities/

...recent years have seen a progressively steep and accelerating decline in the power and influence of local authorities...

All of this raises questions regarding the local coordination of the system. Indeed, this is one of the most worrying aspects of the current English policy context, with its emphasis on school autonomy, competition and new governance structures that can discourage schools from working with others. A further factor is that recent years have seen a progressively steep and accelerating decline in the power and influence of local authorities that have traditionally taken on the responsibility of coordination and monitoring of provision. This means that in many parts of the country no single organisation has the oversight that would enable them to orchestrate more collaborative ways of working and to intervene when things go wrong, either within a school or in the performance of its duties towards the local community it serves.

Educational partnerships

No school can meet the challenges it faces alone. This means that to improve outcomes for all the young people they serve, schools must work with other schools and with community partners to address issues lying beyond the school gate. And yet, as explained above, a major concern is that the English school system – already suffering from fragmentation – is now at risk of splintering further at the greatest cost to the most disadvantaged learners.

In response to these concerns, recent years have seen the emergence in England of various forms of area-based partnership that seek to encourage schools to work together and with community partners[14]. These developments build on evidence suggesting that collaboration between schools has an enormous potential for fostering the capacity of education systems to respond to learner diversity[15]. More specifically, there is evidence that shows how such partnerships can help to reduce the polarisation of schools within a local area, to the particular benefit of those pupils who seem marginalised at the edges of the system, and whose performance and attitudes to learning cause concern[16].

No school can meet the challenges it faces alone.

That said, the challenges associated with this kind of work should not be underestimated. School collaboration requires building a shared purpose and common understanding, and not just securing 'buy in'. It involves driving collective work through common interests, despite, and often within, cultures that promote competition, personal incentive, and introspection. In this way it entails confronting the tension between collective responsibility and individual accountability.

There is also research which suggests that the development of education systems that are effective for all children will only happen when what happens outside as well as inside a school changes[17]. Indeed, there is encouraging evidence of what can happen when what schools do is aligned in a coherent strategy with the efforts of other community players – families, 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 impact of each other's efforts.

14 See: https://www.zambezidigital.co.uk/portfolio-items/area-based-education-partnerships-association/

15 Armstrong, P., & Ainscow, M. (2018). School-to-school support within a competitive education system: Views from the inside. School Effectiveness, School Improvement, 29(4), 614–633

16 Muijs, D., Ainscow, M., Chapman, C. and West, M. (2011) Collaboration and networking in education. London: Springer

17 Kerr, K., Dyson, A., & Raffo, C. (2014). Education, disadvantage and place: Making the local matter. Bristol: Policy Press

It involves driving collective work through common interests, despite, and often within, cultures that promote competition, personal incentive, and introspection.

All of this serves to remind us that context matters. This might be the context of the system, the network, and/or the neighbourhood to which a school belongs, or it might be the institutional context of the school itself. Indeed, it is likely to be a combination of all these elements.

Acknowledging the importance of context is necessary but not sufficient. It is also important to understand the ways in which context matters, by which we mean the challenges and opportunities, culture(s), histories, beliefs and values, the demographics, and geographies in a particular setting, and the 'niches of possibility' within these settings, where purposeful activity is most likely to happen[18].

18 Hatch, T., Corson, J. and van den Berg, S.G. (2021). The Education We Need for a Future We Can't Predict. California: Corwin

Lessons from the field

Our sample of area partnerships included a remarkably diverse range of formats and styles of working that we have categorised, somewhat crudely, in Table 2. There are many ways in which we might have developed this typology given the range of interesting and overlapping features of the partnerships. However, we decided to focus our attention on the role of the local authority, given our concern with the 'area-based' nature of the partnerships and what we see as the importance of democratic oversight in addressing issues of inequity and social justice in education.

Table 2: A typology of area-based partnerships

Type of partnership	Lead
Schools, with no local authority involvement	Schools
Schools and local authority working together	Local authority and schools
Local authority coordinating school cooperation	Local authority

Some partnerships have been instigated by a local authority, which continues to take on a key coordinating role. For example, one city-wide partnership was described by the CEO *"as the brainchild of the then children's services director"*. Others involved a local authority in commissioning a separate entity to coordinate the partnership, as well as providing support services to schools. This was described by the lead of this rural partnership as *"a joint enterprise between [our] schools and the council'*, whereas another smaller borough-wide partnership is referred to as a *"family of schools"*, that allows the local authority to delegate key functions and accountabilities. In two cases, there was no evidence of local authority involvement.

At the same time there are notable commonalities between the different cases. For example, all the partnerships have been instigated 'on the ground' without a central government mandate and in response to a perceived need for such a structure to support the local school system. For example, we heard how partnerships were established *"in the face of shrinking local government"* (CEO, Local Partnership), or to create a "culture of collaboration and mutual support amongst [our] schools to ensure the best possible outcomes for all of our region's young people" (CEO, Regional Partnership). Another was described as a *"partnership vehicle"*: that is, *"more than just a casual or loosely framed arrangement"* but involves *"real accountability, real structure"* (CEO, City-wide Partnership).

Partnerships were rooted in a culture of collaboration and mutual support amongst schools to ensure the best possible outcomes for all of our region's young people. (CEO, Regional Partnership).

The eight partnerships within the study have different precursors. Each partnership has emerged from a complex policy context, a fragmented education system and the seeming decline of the role of local government in educational matters. It is important to note that they all have significant involvement of experienced school leaders.

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In terms of governance, all of the partnership in our study have some form of executive officer, overseen by a board made up of school leaders, local authority officers and other (often high profile) educational stakeholders from the region. In some cases, there is an independent chair, a factor that is seen as being of significance.

The partnerships are typically funded through a combination of income generated from membership and subscription fees, and specific commissions sourced either from the Government or through focused strategies commissioned by the local authority.

Key features

Across the sample a number of features are noticeable in respect to the development of the partnerships. In summary, these are as follows:

(i) Contexts. What is most striking about all the partnerships is the importance of particular local factors in shaping the ways in which patterns of engagement have developed. In this respect, size is a factor: in some cases, the partnerships began with a small group of schools and then gradually grew.

Other partnerships involve schools from more than one local authority, whilst some are clearly focused within the boundaries of particular local authorities. Their perceived strengths were illustrated by one school leader who commented that members recognised:

"It was their network, you know: What is it that we are interested in? And what is it that we want us to work on?" (CEO, Regional Partnership)

For many colleagues, all of this was seen to involve sharing a moral purpose.

Context matters

A partnership serving an urban authority has an impressive range of collaborative structures, including primary consortia and secondary networks. It was created some ten years ago by a small group of heads who were dissatisfied with the support they were receiving. Over the years, however, there have been occasional tensions in the Partnership's relationship with the local authority. It is reported that these have been made worse by the fact that there has been a series of directors, some of who did not stay long in post.

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There is also evidence of how earlier national time-limited initiatives, such as Excellence in Cities, the Leadership Incentive Grant, City Challenge and the Network Learning Communities established by the National College for School Leadership, have influenced the developments, not least through the continuation of well-established professional and social links between school leaders. This reminds us of how such developments can sometimes have a longer-term impact.

More recently, some of the partnerships have been strategic in drawing on national policy developments - such as the creation of teaching school hubs - in order to mobilise additional resources to support their activities. For example, in one case the teaching school hub is *"... seen as the 'delivery arm' of the partnership's improvement efforts"* (Headteacher, Rural Partnership). In some instances, the active involvement of senior staff of MATs is seen to add value to partnership programmes.

(ii) Relationships. Across the examples, relationships between partners are clearly of importance. A useful theoretical interpretation that can be made of this factor is that it seeks to strengthen "social capital", a factor that is known to be a feature of education systems that are more able to foster greater equity[19].

Here, again, local factors are seen to be significant. In particular, we heard how particular individuals or groups of colleagues have taken on leadership roles. It is noticeable, too, that these relationships are linked to contextual factors. In one partnership, a headteacher from a rural partnership explained that the fact that housing in the area was relatively cheap acted as "a trap", such that many of the senior people involved in the partnership had worked together over many years.

Strengthening social capital

Despite the spread-out geography of the county in which this partnership is located and the diversity of its schools it serves, a sense of common purpose, driven by well-articulated values, appears to have been maintained. In this context, senior local authority staff have taken important roles, not directing the process but acting as facilitators of cooperation amongst a wide range of stakeholders. In carrying out this challenging and labour-intensive work, they have brought together partners of the sort that, elsewhere in the country, are working in parallel or, even worse, in opposition to one another. It may be significant that the senior local authority staff have worked within the county for many years. Indeed, the apparent stability amongst senior people across the education system might, in itself, have been a significant factor in holding the partnership together.

The pattern of long-serving local headteachers, including senior staff from MATs, getting involved in the development of the partnerships is particularly noticeable. Going forwards, this points to a factor that could be encouraged by national policy. That is to say, incentives could be provided to encourage experienced school leaders to take on a wider role of facilitating efforts to coordinate collaboration across local education systems to address challenges in relation to equity, as happened earlier through the designation of some headteachers as system leaders.

19 Mulford, B. (2007) Building social capital in professional learning communities: Importance, challenges and a way forward. In L. Stoll, and K. Seashore Louis (Eds), Professional learning communities: Divergence, depth and dilemmas. London: Open University Press

(iii) Key individuals. We were struck, too, by the way that particular people have developed significant leadership roles within their partnerships. Usually these are long-serving school leaders. However, in a few instances, senior local authority staff are seen as the key figures.

As well as providing leadership within their partnerships, some of these individuals have established strong links with significant regional and national officials. This sometimes enables them to access additional support for their partnerships. Talking about these links, one senior local authority officer explained that her regular contact with Government colleagues helped her to coordinate an interpretation of national policy changes that was relevant to her local context.

At the same time, these key individuals are sometimes consulted about possible national policy developments. In these ways, they seem to be creating useful networks within a policy context in which national policy makers and those in the field have tended to become largely disconnected. This means that these key players can be seen as taking on the roles of what has been defined as 'policy entrepreneurs'[20].

(iv) Values. It is noticeable that all the partnerships have established some form of statement of principles to guide their efforts. These are often articulated through their websites. The purpose of these statements varies from place to place. In some instances, they seemed to be mainly there as a form of background rhetoric, rarely mentioned in relation to what the partnerships are doing. However, within other partnerships it was clear that they express a common purpose, as this participant points out:

It is noticeable that all the partnerships have established some form of statement of principles to guide their efforts.

"...our work is underpinned by collaboration, with the understanding that much of the improvement capacity in an education system is already within schools themselves; where this is facilitated and curated by the partnership and supported. This approach not only helps address a particular issue, but it develops the practitioners who are part of that collaborative learning. And therefore, it benefits all parts of the system." (Council Member)

In these instances, those involved made frequent reference to the value statements as they addressed particular decisions regarding actions to be taken about priorities and how resources were to be mobilized. In one instance, we were told how representatives from prospective new partner schools were interviewed in relation to their commitment to the values agreed within the partnership. Another interviewee referred frequently to their partnership having a *"shared moral purpose"* (Research Manager, Local Partnership).

The statements, plus other publicity regarding the work of a partnership, can also help to encourage schools to join. Interestingly, one headteacher of a school facing challenging circumstances explained that some of his "middle class parents" had encouraged him to get involved in the partnership. He went to describe the way that the partners had provided tangible efforts to *"turn the school round"* through sharing improvement strategies, such as staff coaching.

20 Hughes, B. C. (2020). Investigating the CEO of a MAT: Examining practices and positions on 'the street.' Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 48(3), 478–495

Developing a common purpose

A county wide partnership involves a wide range of school types, including selective schools and academies. Bringing coherence to what is potentially a fragmented local education system is seen as being a major achievement over recent years. Positive relationships amongst the stakeholder groups has been vital in this respect. Communication and consistency of message across the system are seen as being crucial factors in making this happen. Despite the spread-out geography of the county and the diversity of its schools, a sense of common purpose, driven by well-articulated values, appears to have been maintained. In this context, particular senior local authority staff have taken important roles, not so much directing the process but acting as facilitators of cooperation amongst a wide range of stakeholders.

(v) The use of evidence. Given our particular focus on addressing the challenge of equity, we saw this as being a crucial agenda for our inquiries. With this in mind, at some point during each of our focus group meetings we asked partners to explain who would know if a school was getting into difficulty in some way and what actions would be taken. In general, we were surprised at the responses we received, with many partnerships seeming to make limited use of evidence to determine their priorities.

In some cases, however, it is clear that the groups coordinating the partnerships have established ways of addressing this agenda, not least through their engagement with evidence. Where difficulties are seen to arise, action is then taken to coordinate relevant support from within the partnership, or by mobilising external support. In some of these situations, the involvement of local authority officers and their knowledge of the local school system is significant in facilitating these interventions.

Data driven decision making

This partnership is majority owned by all the schools, with the council holding a smaller stake. It predominantly focuses on school improvement, with input and support from the local authority for the other services it provides (e.g., governance, finance). A particular feature is the partnership's commitment to having an oversight of all the schools within their area so as to be able to step in and offer support when and where it is required. Their sophisticated use of data, supported by the local authority's data analysis service, allows them to monitor and analysis school performance and progress across the city. This compliments a system of peer review in which schools' self-assessments are appraised and scrutinized (and challenged) by their partners as a means of promoting improvements.

In the small number of cases where evidence was being used effectively, statistical patterns in relation to factors such as student outcomes, attendance and exclusions, interpreted through local intelligence, are seen to focus planning and action within the partnership. This affords such partnerships the kind of oversight that is necessary to ensure no school goes without support when it is required, as this interviewee explains: *"The partnership has a handle, pretty much, on most of the schools in the city in understanding where their improvement challenges and priorities are"* (Board Member, City-wide Partnership).

Challenges

Whilst we were not in a position to evaluate the impact of the partnerships systematically, we did gain a sense of the degree to which they are effective from our discussions with stakeholders. In some cases, we were also provided with data that pointed to impacts in relation to indicators such as pupil progress, attendance, exclusions and inspection outcomes.

In those examples that seemed to be working particularly well, we saw evidence of the impact of the factors reported in the previous section of this report. At the same time, we became aware of the barriers that make effective partnerships more difficult to achieve. Once again, these factors tend to be context specific. However, the following features were evident to varying degrees across our sample:

(i) School diversity. In all cases, the issue of school diversity was seen as a challenge and, in some contexts, a significant barrier to progress. For example, we were given accounts of where MATs were said to have discouraged their academies from joining a partnership on the basis that necessary support was already being provided. As these interviewees, explained:

"MATs appear to have created their own fiefdom's, which they are unwilling to relinquish or allow others to move into...". (CEO, Local Partnership)

"The truth is that academisation is the deal breaker. In that, you know that we've got some great academies [in the city region] that completely buy into locality and see part of their function as serving the city ... but the groups that I've begun to find most problematic are the regional trusts that have got just one or two schools in the city, and don't really engage with [our] schools." (CEO, City Partnership)

In some instances, too, partnerships have been seen as competing for 'business' with local authorities in relation to the provision of support, particularly in relation to school improvement.

In another example, however, a partnership seems to have been strengthened by the fact that some of the member schools have formed a MAT, whilst some of the partners within this particular group belong to other trusts. Interestingly, the chief executive of one of these trusts referred to the pressures she was under to expand her MAT. Despite this, she continues to have a significant role in the coordination of the area partnership.

Some partnerships have been successful in overcoming the difficulties created by school diversity. For example, a headteacher member of one partnership explained that it served a local authority that had "one of everything". That is to say, in addition to maintained schools, there are selective schools, faith schools, single academies and MATs, and a range of specialist provision. Despite this diversity, the partnership has been successful over many years in maintaining an inclusive stance.

Meanwhile, in another partnership, located within one local authority, its apparent success has been one factor that has led to very few schools choosing to take the academy route:

"It has perhaps helped that there are few academies in this authority. No school has converted to Academy status, and none of the schools are in large Multi-Academy Trusts." (Local Authority Lead)

(ii) Relationships with local authorities. Across the sample, there is a surprisingly mixed pattern in relation to this factor. Where relationships with senior officers are positive, this helps to position partnerships as having a central role in strengthening local provision. On the other hand, we heard accounts of where breakdowns in these relationships had led those involved in coordinating partnerships to go through periods of uncertainty as to their future. In one case, frequent changes of education directors have acted as a significant barrier to long term planning.

A missing partner?

A multi-phase partnership of over 40 schools drawn from four closely located local authorities was instigated and is led by the CEO of a medium-sized MAT, to which some of the schools belong. A notable feature of this partnership is the absence of involvement of any of the four local authorities. The reason for this appears to be a historically negative perception of local authorities, spoken through experience of what schools have previously had from them. The current school improvement offer from the partnership is seen as being superior to that being offered by the local authorities. However, despite holding them at 'arm's length', there is an acknowledgement and understanding of the important role that the local authority still plays in respect of the statutory duties it holds for the education and welfare of young people in this area.

... frequent changes of education directors have acted as a significant barrier to long term planning.

In some instances, too, partnerships have been seen as competing for 'business' with local authorities in relation to the provision of support, particularly in relation to school improvement. Furthermore, our conversations with colleagues in various partnerships indicated that this is an area they are increasingly keen to lead on given the school-based expertise within their memberships. As this board member of one partnership explains:

"We have that ability to get insight from individual schools then triangulate this with the other intelligence that our CEO is picking up from the ground. This gives a us a better view than local authorities are able to provide."

He went on to add:

"Traditionally, local authorities have concentrated very much on those schools at risk of poor outcomes, or poor Ofsted judgements, but they were not always able to see where the next set of challenges are going to come. Whereas, our team is able to predict those accurately in advance because they know the schools."

The challenges and tensions associated with this matter are significant. Local authorities are responsible for having oversight of all schools within their region, whereas these partnerships cannot necessarily guarantee, or may not even be set up to provide such coverage.

Where the partnerships have strong support from key partners, this allows them to act quickly to address particular concerns.

(iii) Availability of resources. Predictably, all of those involved with the coordination of the partnerships see resources as a constant challenge. Indeed, some expressed concern that their partnership could cease to exist in the near future because of the loss of funding from national government. As this board member explains:

"We have recognized as a board that you know the 'game is up' really on local authority funding. We need to diversify our income and we need to grow as an organization in order to be sustainable. So, that I think is one of our biggest challenges."

Most of the partnerships in our sample involved schools in paying a membership fee, or are planning to move towards this model.

In some instances, partnerships have recently been able to access resources from a local teaching school hub, although it was also noted that this was sometimes contingent on a willingness to focus on centrally driven priorities and recommended teaching practices. This, of course, is something of a distraction from the idea of locally defined improvement strategies determined by contextual analysis.

(iv) Lack of mandate. A more subtle barrier that we detected relates to the somewhat ambiguous status of the partnerships. This is not all bad news, of course, in that it allows well-managed, local-coordinated partnerships that are relatively independent to occupy a crucial space in relation to the challenge of equity.

Where the partnerships have strong support from key partners, this allows them to act quickly to address particular concerns. It is hardly surprising that, where this is seen to be effective, regional and national officials are willing to cooperate with locally led efforts in ways that strengthen their efforts.

That said, area partnerships have no formal status that they can use to intervene where challenges exist. As we argue later in this report, providing a formal mandate to these structures, whilst at the same time allowing them discretion to act in relation to locally determined priorities, could be a major step forward in addressing the problems created by the current levels of fragmentation within local and regional education systems.

Implications

The evidence of this small-scale study builds on the earlier report prepared by Christine Gilbert in which she argued that local area partnerships can provide the opportunity to *'shape a different model of professional accountability that motivates and inspires teachers, as well as incentivising system-wide collaboration.'* [8]

With this in mind, by focusing on a relatively small sample, we were able to get closer to these partnerships in order to develop a greater understanding of what makes them work and what factors inhibit their efforts.

In this sense the 'soft power' that underpins these partnerships is both a strength and a weakness.

In reflecting on these examples, it is important to acknowledge that they each remain fragile and imperfect, with their own limitations, difficulties and risks. Moreover, it would be naive to underestimate the political complexities entailed. Much still depends on maintaining goodwill, sufficient stability and resourcing, and favourable inspection outcomes, among many other factors.

As far as we have been able to ascertain, the schools that make up the membership of the partnerships are involved of their own free will, because they see a benefit to the young people and communities they serve. In this sense the 'soft power' that underpins these partnerships is both a strength and a weakness.

In a marketised and increasingly academised system the partnerships must compete with other providers for 'business', as this school leader told us:

"As a MAT, we pay a lot into this partnership. There might come a time when we, and say two or three other MATs, suddenly decide 'You know what, we're better off clumping together', or 'We can find something better somewhere else … I'm passionate about this area and the children in this area, but there also comes a time where I've got to think about the MAT." (MAT CEO)

This is based on the idea that, in working together, schools can access untapped potential to improve their capacity for improving the achievement of all of their pupils…

Despite these potentially unfavourable circumstances, the examples nonetheless indicate that professionals working in and around schools can influence local educational arrangements in order to make them more equitable. The evidence we have summarised also points to the sorts of conditions that are needed in order to use processes of collaboration between schools to foster equity within education systems. This is based on the idea that, in working together, schools can access untapped potential to improve their capacity for improving the achievement of all of their pupils, particularly those who are vulnerable to marginalisation or exclusion.

The challenge therefore is to mobilise this potential in order to develop a school-led strategy that works for all children and young people. This reminds us that educational improvement is, in essence, a social process that involves practitioners learning from one another, from their students, and from others involved in the lives of the young people they teach. To quote an oft-mentioned adage, it is *technically simple but socially complex*.

Looking to the future

… for these partnerships to be effective, there will need to be strong political support for such a move, at both the national and local levels.

Reflecting on the evidence presented in this report, in this section we offer some tentative suggestions on the possible implications for future policy and practice within the English education system. In particular, we consider what our findings mean in relation to the greatest challenge it faces, that of addressing equity. Put simply, the aim is to help turn the tide of English education policy based on the principle suggested by UNESCO that *'every learner matters and matters equally'*[21].

It is important to recognize that current national policy, with its emphasis on school autonomy, competition and choice, has injected new energy into the English education system. In so doing, it has also provided incentives, encouragement, and the space for innovations of the sort that we have described to occur. At the same time, however, it has generated further barriers that are limiting the presence, participation and progress of some children and young people. It is also evident that these barriers are context specific. That is to say, they arise from the way that particular local education 'market places' privilege some learners at the expense of others. The implication is that there has to be some form of locally developed form of coordination and regulation.

Our proposal is that this could be achieved by the creation and strengthening of the sorts of area partnerships that we have described in this report. However, for these partnerships to be effective, there will need to be strong political support for such a move, at both the national and local levels. Importantly, this must not involve the imposition of externally defined responses of the sort that have tended to be a feature of recent national initiatives, such as occurred in the Opportunity Areas[22]. Rather, it should involve an organic process that is developed with respect for local circumstances.

Given current national policy, such an approach will require the mixing of an unusual cocktail of competition and cooperation, sometimes referred to as 'coopetition'[23]. This concept requires the following organizational conditions in order for it to be effective: partners who see *clear and tangible benefits* from collaboration; *trust between partners*, established through the careful development of relationships between key stakeholders; *clear goals and agreements* between partners; and *forms of leadership that are skilful* in managing tensions.

Informed by these ideas and the evidence that we have generated through this study, we argue that the development of area partnerships should be:

- Led locally by coordinating groups made up of experienced and credible practitioners;
- Underpinned by a clear purpose that both informs and drives decision making and action

21 UNESCO (2017) A guide for ensuring inclusion and equity in education. Paris: UNESCO.

22 https://schoolsweek.co.uk/pm-announces-18m-opportunity-areas-expansion-and-10m-to-boost-quality-of-teaching/

23 Muijs and Rumyantseva (2014), Coopetition in education: Collaborating in a competitive environment. Journal of Educational Change, 15, 1-18.

- Autonomous in setting their own agenda
- Evidence-based, leading to an analysis of the local context that identifies barriers experienced by some learners;
- Focused on finding ways of mobilising local expertise to address these barriers;
- Inclusive, in the sense that all schools and other centres of learning are involved, whatever their governance arrangements; and
- Linked to wider community resources.

Local support is needed in order to encourage and sustain such forms of area-based collaboration. Indeed, a recent report noted that four of the most successful national education systems – Singapore, Estonia, Finland, and Ontario – each have a coherent 'middle tier', regardless of their differing extents of school autonomy or devolution of decision-making[24]. In particular, they all have district level structures that offer a consistent view that, to maintain equity as well as excellence, there needs to be an authoritative coordinating influence with local accountability.

All of this has important implications for the various key stakeholders within the education system. In particular, it requires teachers, especially those in senior positions, to see themselves as having a wider responsibility for all local children and young people, not just those that attend their own schools. For schools, this means aligning what they do with the efforts of other local players; not only partner schools, but also employers, community groups, universities, public services and so on.

... it requires teachers, especially those in senior positions, to see themselves as having a wider responsibility for all local children and young people, not just those that attend their own schools.

The role of MATs is of particular significance here given the clear objectives set out for them within the Academies Handbook[25]. This sets out an obligation that they have to promote the advancement of an equitable and socially just education for all children within their local area and not just those that attend the schools that are members of their trust. In this way, we should see the emergence of a coherent strategy focused on improving the lives of all children and young people.

For local authorities, it means adjusting their priorities and ways of working in response to improvement efforts that are led from within schools. At the same time, their role must be to act as the 'conscience of the system'[26], ensuring that all children and families are getting a fair deal.

Finally, all of this has significant implications for national policy makers. In order to create the conditions within which this form of collaborative improvement can occur, they need to foster greater flexibility at the local level so that practitioners and their community partners have the space to work together in addressing the barriers faced by some children and young people. This means that policy makers must recognise that the details of policy implementation are not amenable to central regulation. Rather, they have to be dealt with by those who are close to and, therefore, in a better position to understand their local contexts.

24 Bubb, S, Crossley-Holland, J, Cordiner, J, Cousin, S and Earley, P (2019) Understanding the middle tier: Comparative costs of academy and LA-maintained school systems. London: Sara Bubb Associates

25 https://www.gov.uk/guidance/academy-trust-handbook

26 Ainscow, M. (2013) Developing more equitable education systems: reflections on a three-year improvement initiative. In V, Farnsworth and Y. Solomon (Eds.), What works in education? Bridging theory and practice in research. London: Routledge

Final reflections

By way of an afterthought, in this final section we step out of our roles as detached researchers in order to offer our own thinking on what this study might mean for future policy and practice. We hope that these reflections will further stimulate discussion within the field during a period that will lead up to a general election.

First of all, it is important to stress that the report offers reasons to be optimistic. Despite the competitive atmosphere that permeates the English education system and the fragmentation that this has encouraged, it is clear that there are many in the field whose instincts are to seek ways to work in partnerships. Indeed, we have recently become aware of new partnerships across the country that have emerged in recent months[27]. It is interesting, too, that many experienced school leaders, including some of those who manage trusts, are motivated to take on leadership roles that take them beyond their duties within their own institutions.

In order to create the conditions within which this form of collaborative improvement can occur, they need to foster greater flexibility at the local level so that practitioners and their community partners have the space to work together in addressing the barriers faced by some children and young people.

That said, although the examples we have examined are fulfilling an important means of encouraging mutual support, there is much less evidence that they are making direct contributions to changes in practice that address the barriers faced by some learners. Where we saw evidence of this beginning to happen a common set of factors were in place. Most important of these was the use of available statistical evidence to identify worrying patterns in relation to factors such poor attendance, increased level of exclusions, and dips in outcomes as determined by results in test and examinations. What made these data more powerful, however, was when, as a result of the partnership structures, local practitioners were able to provide an informed interpretation to guide actions that were taken.

So, for example, in a few cases such processes pointed to responses that local authority staff could orchestrate in order to address worrying contexts. Such responses might include carefully brokered school-to-school partnerships, or additional support from another agency, such as a teaching school hub.

Other examples involved the generation of new data to investigate areas of growing concern. So, for example, a detailed investigation carried out by one partnership identified a significant increase in the numbers of children and young people being put forward for additional support through an Education, Health and Care Plan, a trend that was putting enormous pressure on local authority funding. This led the partnership to work with local university staff in establishing an action research project to address this trend.

Examples such as these were not common across our eight cases. However, they illustrate the ways in which evidence-based interventions can be introduced in order to help strengthen equity within a local area. They also indicate how the existence of an area partnership can help to make this happen.

27 See: https://aepa.org.uk/about-us/

Just to add, our experience tells us that research and researchers can sometimes make a useful contribution to such inquiry-based approaches to educational change. Acting as consultants to partnerships as they seek to generate and engage with evidence, members of the research community can help to encourage an inquiring stance[28].

Our view is that this thinking should be the basis of a significant structural change in national policy. Such a change would be based on an understanding that the factors that limit educational opportunities for some learners are, to a large extent, locally determined. The implication is that local area partnerships of the sort we have described should be given much more status and authority to take action in moving practice forward. And, as we have argued, such arrangements have to be led by schools and, where they exist, trusts.

All of which points towards what may be seen as our most radical proposal. Put simply, such partnerships have to be enabled, supported and held accountable. Here again, our examples point to possible ways forward.

In the more effective of our eight partnerships, local authority staff have key roles. This does not involve them in leading or managing the partnerships, but acting as their critical friends - encouraging their development, occasionally facilitating their work and, where necessary, stepping in where there was concern that a partnership was not staying true to its stated values.

The implication is that local area partnerships of the sort we have described should be given much more status and authority to take action in moving practice forward.

To be clear, we are not proposing a return to earlier arrangements where schools were controlled by their local authority. Rather, we are proposing the design of a new kind of local authority, one that acts on behalf of all children and their families within their area. In this way the undoubted impetus that comes from greater school autonomy will lead to improvements that will benefit all children and young people.

All of this is based on an assumption that education systems have further potential to improve themselves, provided policy makers allow the space for practitioners to make use of the expertise and creativity that lies trapped within individual classrooms. The aim must be to move this knowledge around and, as we have previously argued, the best way to do this is through strengthening collaboration within schools, between schools and beyond schools[29]. We have also suggested that an engagement with evidence can act as a catalyst for such developments, as well as being a means of encouraging shared accountability.

There are important implications here for the national accountability system. What we are proposing is a system of evidence-based professional accountability, coordinated at the local level. This implies a move away from a heavy reliance on external accountability towards an investment in the professional capital of teachers and school leaders. However, this has to be challenging and credible[30]. In other words, it must not involve forms of collusion within which partners endorse one another in an acceptance of mediocrity. Consequently, the national system

28 Chapman, C. and Ainscow, M. (2019) Using research to promote equity within education systems: possibilities and barriers. British Education Research Journal 45(3), 899-917 https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3544

29 Ainscow, M., Dyson, A., Goldrick, S. and West, M. (2012) Developing equitable education systems. London: Routledge

30 Fullan, M., Rincon-Gallardo, S. & Hargreaves, A. (2015) Professional capital as accountability. Education Policy Analysis Archives, 23(15) https://epaa.asu.edu/index.php/epaa/article/view/1998/1511view/1998/1511

of inspections would need to be redesigned as a means of moderating local accountability procedures and orchestrating pathways to help partnerships learn from one another's experiences.

Finally, as we argued, this means that local authority administrators and support staff have to adjust their ways of working in response to the development of improvement strategies that are led from within schools. Specifically, they must monitor and challenge schools in relation to the agreed goals of collaborative activities, whilst headteachers share responsibility for the overall management of improvement efforts within schools. In taking on such roles, local authority staff can position themselves as guardians of improved outcomes for all young people and their families - protectors of a more collegiate approach but not as directors of day-to-day activities.

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