RESEARCH-PRACTICE PARTNERSHIPS: A STRATEGY FOR PROMOTING EDUCATIONAL RECOVERY

ALIANZAS DE INVESTIGACIÓN Y PRÁCTICA: UNA ESTRATEGIA PARA PROMOVER LA RECUPERACIÓN EDUCACIONAL

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Abstract

This paper argues that efforts to help education systems recover following the recent global pandemic should involve collaboration amongst schools, and partnerships between practitioners and academic researchers. Drawing on a series of projects carried out over the last three decades, this approach is defined as a process of knowledge-generation that occurs when researcher and practitioner knowledge meet in particular sites. Underlying these collaborations is a common pattern. Most importantly, they involve an engagement with evidence collected by practitioners with support from university researchers. The paper points to the potential benefits of the approach, whilst also throwing light on some of the challenges involved.

Keywords: Educational recovery; collaboration; inquiry; ecology of equity.

Resumen

El presente artículo propone que los esfuerzos de recuperación de los sistemas educacionales después de la reciente pandemia global deberán suponer la colaboración entre las escuelas, docentes e investigadores. A partir de una serie de proyectos realizados durante las últimas tres décadas, esta estrategia se define como un proceso de generación de conocimiento que ocurre cuando los saberes de investigadores y docentes se conectan en una instancia determinada. Existe un patrón que subyace a estas colaboraciones que involucra a la evidencia recolectada por docentes con el apoyo de investigadores universitarios. El artículo apunta a los potenciales beneficios de esta estrategia, al mismo tiempo que arroja luz sobre algunos desafíos encontrados.

Palabras clave: Recuperación educacional; colaboración; indagación; ecología de equidad.

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1. Introduction

Schools are often seen as being rather rigid organisations. For understandable reasons, they need routines to guide their work. Over the last two years, however schools around the world have demonstrated remarkable flexibility in response to the unprecedented challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2020). In particular, teachers have had to develop and apply a range of new digital learning skills, in order to find ways of engaging students in learning.

Where families have had little or no access to technology, or insufficient physical space for learning to take place in the home, this shift has been an enormous challenge. It has meant that schools have had to find different ways of carrying out their core business of teaching and learning. As a result, many schools have developed new ways of supporting families and local communities.

The logical implication of these developments is that much of the best expertise regarding ways of providing support in the new context lies amongst practitioners. In moving forward with the strengthening of education systems, use must be made of this largely untapped knowledge. In this paper I argue that research has significant contributions to finding ways of untapping this potential. To make this happen, however, there is a need to develop partnerships between practitioners and researchers.

In what follows I reflect on my own experiences of developing such partnerships in various parts of the world over the last thirty years in order to suggest ways forward. These experiences have all focused on the promotion of inclusion and equity, summed up by UNESCO guidance published in 2017 as, *'Every learner matters and matters equally'.*

2. Inquiry-based developments

The development of the approach I am recommending began with the 'Improving the Quality of Education for All' (IQEA) project in the early 1990s. Initially this involved a small group of researchers at the University of Cambridge working with schools in and around London (Ainscow & Hopkins, 1992). Subsequently, IQEA led to developments in other parts of the world (see Ainscow, 1999; Hopkins, 2007; Hopkins, Ainscow & West, 1994; and West & Ainscow, 2010 for more detailed accounts of some of these projects). All of these activities involved teams of researchers working in partnership with networks of schools to identify ways in which the

learning of all members of a school community - students, parents and staff - could be enhanced.

Work with schools in the IQEA projects was based upon a contract that attempted to define the parameters for our involvement, and the obligations those involved owed to one another. It emphasised that all staff be consulted; that an in-school team of coordinators be appointed to carry the work forward; that a critical mass of staff were to be actively involved; and that sufficient time would be made available for necessary classroom and staff development activities. Meanwhile, we committed ourselves to supporting the school's developments, usually in the first place for one year. Often the arrangement continued, however, and, in some instances, we were involved for periods as long as seven years. We provided training for the school coordinators, made regular school visits and contributed to school-based staff development activities. In addition, we attempted to work with the schools in recording and analysing their experiences in a way that also provided data relevant to our own on-going research agendas.

As a result of such engagements with schools involved in the IQEA project, we evolved a style of collaboration that was to influence later initiatives, which we referred to as 'working with, rather than working on' (Ainscow & Southworth, 1996). This phrase attempted to sum up an approach that deliberately allowed each project school considerable autonomy to determine its own priorities for development and, indeed, its methods for achieving these priorities. In attempting to work in this way, we found ourselves confronted with staggering complexity, and by a bewildering array of policy and strategy options. It was our belief that only through a regular engagement with these complexities could a greater understanding of school change be achieved.

These ideas were taken forward and developed through a series of further studies, including:

- *Understanding and Developing Inclusive Practices in Schools*. This collaborative action research study occurred between 2000 and 2004, and involved a network of 25 urban schools in three English local education authorities and three partner universities. Within the network schools, we saw how the use of evidence to study teaching can help to foster the development of more inclusive forms of teaching (see: Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2006; Dyson, Gallannaugh & Millward, 2003; Howes, Booth, Dyson & Frankham, 2005; Howes, Frankham, Ainscow & Farrell, 2004).

- *An Equity Research Network.* Between 2006 and 2011 we had a chance to explore these ideas in more detail through our involvement in another network of schools in England (see Ainscow, Dyson, Goldrick & West 2012a and 2012b). This initiative was located in a local authority, which we called 'Stockborough', characterised by socio-economic disadvantage, and social and ethnic segregation. It involved staff inquiry groups in the participating schools, usually consisting of five or six members representing different perspectives within their school communities.

- *Ethical Leadership: A collaborative investigation of equity-driven evidence-based school reform*. This study involved a research network of schools, spread across the geographically spread State of Queensland, Australia, and a team of eight university researchers. Together, we explored how ethical leadership could promote ways of interpreting and using various forms of evidence to promote learning and equity (see: Harris, Carrington & Ainscow, 2017; Spina, Harris, Carrington & Ainscow, 2019).

- *Inclusive Inquiry.* Carried out between 2012 and 2020 in five European countries, this research focused more specifically on how students can themselves contribute to the development of inclusive teaching and learning. It involved the development of a strategy in which children and young people becoming researchers who learn how to use research techniques to gather the views of their classmates, as well as observing lessons (see: Messiou & Ainscow, 2015, 2020; Messiou et al., 2016).

All of these studies involved teams of university researchers in supporting, recording and analysing collaborative action research as it occurred in project schools. As a result, we came to define this as a process of knowledge-generation that occurs when researcher and practitioner knowledge meet in particular sites and is aimed at producing new knowledge about ways in which broad values might better be realised in future practice.

3. A family of approaches

The studies adopted different terms to describe their efforts, such as collaborative inquiry, practitioner action research, action learning and lesson study. Recently Yurkofsky, Peterson,

Mehta, Horwitz-Willis and Frumin (2020) have labeled approaches such as these collectively as 'continuous improvement' methods, noting that they share four characteristics:

1. Grounding improvement efforts in local problems or needs;
2. Empowering practitioners to take an active role in research and improvement;
3. Engaging in iteration, which involves a cyclical process of action, assessment, reflection, and adjustment; and
4. Striving to encourage change across schools and systems, not just individual classrooms.

They can be seen as being part of a 'family' of approaches within the overall tradition of action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2001) that developed out of the action research tradition of Kurt Lewin (1946) and the work of many other academics (*e. g.*, Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Elliot, 1991; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Schön, 1983; Stenhouse, 1975). They emphasise an engagement in inquiry to inform and improve practice, and the intentional combining of knowing and doing for achieving positive social change (Kemmis, 2010).

Since the focus of the inquiry is usually defined by the engagement of the participants, careful consideration is required in determining who is included, and how and who will speak for whom, and who sets the research agenda. Therefore, negotiating power issues and the relationships between collaborating practitioners, stakeholders and academics 'requires ethical probity where each party recognizes, understands and respects mutual responsibilities' (Campbell & Groundwater-Smith, 2007, p. 2).

The preoccupation with equity means that it also requires a particular concern to giving voice to those who may be powerless or unheard in the decision-making processes (Groundwater-Smith, 2011). Moreover, actively engaging participants in inquiry 'problematises the question of who is researcher and who is researched, raising issues around anonymity, the 'ownership' of findings and dissemination' (Locke, Alcorn & O'Neill, 2013, p. 107).

Related considerations concern decision-making around how outcomes will be evaluated in order to determine whether the inquiry processes have led to positive change. Questions to be considered include:

- What forms of evidence will be used to determine the outcomes for those who have participated in the process and those who are the intended beneficiaries of the change efforts that were the focus of the project?

- How far did processes improve the social and professional practices in the contexts in which they were conducted?

- How will the outcomes from the inquiry be used?

Participatory and collaborative inquiry processes, although not set on achieving consensus, do provide opportunities for negotiation of multiple perspectives around shared agendas, rather than producing evidence from a single viewpoint or source. A helpful strategy in this respect is what Wasser and Bresler (1996) refer to as 'group interpretive processes' as a means of analysing and interpreting evidence. This involves an engagement with the different perspectives of practitioners, students and university researchers in ways that are intended to encourage critical reflection, collaborative learning and mutual critique. In these contexts, the varied theoretical perspectives of members of the research teams provide a valuable means of questioning taken-for-granted assumptions and helping practitioners to reconsider neglected possibilities for moving practice forward.

The issue of trustworthiness is a particular challenge to collaborative research of this sort, which involves such a high degree of participation among stakeholders. Commenting on this issue, Schön (1991) argues that without a serious effort to make clear what is meant by rigour, participatory research 'becomes an open sesame to woolly-headedness, a never-never land where anything goes' (p. 10). He goes on to suggest that appropriate rigour in the study of practice should focus on validity (*e .g.* how do we know what we claim to know?) and utility (*e. g.* how useful is the research to practitioners?).

With this in mind, the studies I have described made use of three forms of triangulation, supporting observations and reports from a number of viewpoints. These involved comparing and contrasting evidence about the same actions and activities from different people (*e. g.*, teachers, support staff and students); scrutinising events from different angles by making use of a variety of methods for collecting information; and using 'outsiders' as observers.

Influenced by the ideas of Karl Popper, Schön (1991) argues that the fundamental test for validity in participatory inquiry is through 'competitive resistance to refutation'. This involves juxtaposing alternate plausible accounts of the phenomenon in question. Schon notes: 'In the absence of an alternate hypothesis, one is likely to be overwhelmed by the obviousness of what one already knows' (p. 348).

Guided by this advice, members of our research teams usually discussed with their practitioner

partners, and with one another, written accounts of the work carried out in the schools, including alternative explanations as to what lessons could be drawn from these experiences. In this way, the aim was to draw conclusions that were both valid and relevant.

4. A framework for analysis

As noted earlier, the studies summarised so far were all guided by principles of inclusion and equity. Working with schools in different contexts over many years, those involved in the research became increasingly aware of the complexities this involves. This led to the development of an overall framework to guide the development of the collaborative action research, which we refer to as an 'ecology of equity' (Ainscow et al., 2012a). This formulation involves three interlinked areas within which equity issues arise:

- *Within-schools*. These are issues that arise from school and teacher practices.

- *Between-schools*. These are issues that arise from the characteristics of local school systems.

- *Beyond-schools*. This far-reaching arena includes: the wider policy context within which schools operate; the family processes and resources which shape how children learn and develop; the interests and understandings of the professionals working in schools; and the demographics, economics, cultures and histories of the areas served by schools.

Drawing on the findings of the studies referred to above, in what follows possibilities for linking within-school, between-school and beyond-schools factors in order to develop effective collaborative improvement approaches are explored.

4.1. Within-school factors

My colleagues and I have argued that 'schools know more than they use' (Ainscow et al., 2012a). In other words, schools tend to have overlooked expertise that can be mobilised to address the challenge of equity. This suggests that the starting point for strengthening the work of a school is with the sharing of existing practices through collaboration amongst staff, leading to experimentation with new practices that will reach out to all students. This approach draws on the work of the many scholars who have explored processes of collaborative forms of inquiry as a strategy for professional learning and school improvement.

Much of what teachers do during the intensive encounters that occur is carried out at an automatic, intuitive level. Furthermore, there is little time to stop and think. This is why having the opportunity to see colleagues at work is so crucial to the success of attempts to develop practice. It is through shared experiences that colleagues can help one another to articulate what they currently do and define what they might like to do (Hiebert, Gallimore & Stigler, 2002). It is also the means whereby space is created within which taken-for-granted assumptions about particular groups of learners and what they might achieve can be subjected to mutual critique, a factor that is crucial to the promotion of inclusive practices.

At the heart of the processes in schools where changes in practice do occur is the development of a common language with which colleagues can talk to one another and, indeed, to themselves, about detailed aspects of their practice (Huberman, 1993). Without such a language, teachers find it very difficult to experiment with new possibilities (Ainscow, 1999).

In a recent article, Lefstein, Vedder-Weiss and Segal (2020) point to the importance of the conversations embedded in teachers' day-to-day work, through which they learn from one another what it means to be a teacher and how to perform their duties. The authors explain how professional knowledge and skills, much of which are implicit, are learned on the job, through participation in work practices and informal interactions with colleagues. This means that professional knowledge is intimately related to the practices through which it is constructed and to which it is applied. Given the situated nature of knowledge, ideas constructed with colleagues at school are more likely to be used within a school, whereas ideas constructed within professional development workshops are only likely to be applied in the social practice of participating in such events.

An engagement with evidence of various kinds to study teaching within a school, and discussions with research partners, can help in generating school-based professional learning (Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2004). This, in turn, can help to foster the development of practices that are more effective in engaging hard to reach learners. Specifically, it can create space for rethinking by interrupting existing discourses. The starting point for such processes is often with a consideration of statistical evidence regarding student progress. However, the need to dig deeper into factors that influence progress usually requires an engagement with qualitative forms of evidence. 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 can sometimes lead to a reframing of perceived problems that, in turn, draws the teacher's attention to overlooked possibilities for addressing barriers to participation and learning. In this way, differences amongst students, staff and schools can become a catalyst for improvement.

Here, the concern with the principle of equity means that there also has to be focus on the thinking that is *behind* actions and the impacts of such thinking on practices. In particular, there has to be a concern with the attitudes and assumptions that influence what teachers do, some of which may be unconscious (Sadker, Sadker, Zittleman & Sadker, 2009), and how these can be modified through dialogues with others, especially with learners themselves. All of this points to the importance of forms of leadership that encourages colleagues to challenge one another's assumptions about particular students (Riehl, 2000).

4.2. Between-school factors

The approach outlined so far is based on the idea of those within schools collecting and engaging with various forms of evidence with the support of research partners in order to stimulate moves to create more inclusive practices. The studies I have summarised provide encouraging evidence of the potential of this approach. However, they have also thrown light on the difficulties in putting such thinking into practice, particularly within policy contexts that put pressure on schools to compete. This points to some of the limitations of within-school strategies, suggesting that these should be complemented with efforts to encourage greater cooperation between schools, and between schools and their wider communities.

The projects have generated considerable evidence that school-to-school collaboration can strengthen improvement processes by adding to the range of expertise made available (see: Ainscow, 2010, 2012, 2015; Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2006; Ainscow & Howes, 2007; Ainscow, Muijs & West, 2006; Ainscow et al., 2004; Ainscow & West, 2006; Muijs, Ainscow, Chapman & West, 2011; Muijs, West & Ainscow, 2010). Together with the work of others (*e. g.* Chapman & Hadfield, 2010; Fielding et al., 2005; Hill, 2008), these studies indicate that collaboration between schools has an enormous potential for fostering the capacity of education systems to respond to learner diversity. More specifically, they show how such partnerships can sometimes help to reduce the polarisation of schools within an education system, to the particular benefit of those students who seem marginalised at the edges of the system, and whose performance and attitudes cause concern.

There is also evidence that when schools seek to develop more collaborative ways of working this can have an impact on how teachers perceive themselves and their work (Muijs et al., 2011). Specifically, comparisons of practices in different schools can lead teachers to view underachieving students in a new light. In this way, learners who cannot easily be educated within a school's established routines come to be seen less as 'having problems' but as challenging teachers to re-examine their practices in order to make them more responsive and flexible.

It is important to realise, however, that developing partnerships between schools is not a straightforward process. Too often they can lead to meetings without any significant action. For example, in the networks referred to earlier, schools were encouraged to visit one another in order to generate evidence regarding their shared focus on developing more inclusive practices. However, these visits were not always successful. This seemed to be particularly so when the host teachers interpreted the visits solely as opportunities for the visitors to learn. On these occasions, the hosts positioned themselves as teachers rather than learners. Typically, the visit then consisted of a demonstration of various teaching strategies that had been judged to be successful, usually followed by a short question and answer session. On these occasions, those receiving the visit merely rehearsed what they already knew and responded to questions beyond the procedural as if they were challenges, rather than openings for debate. On the other hand, successful visits were usually characterised by a sense of mutual learning amongst hosts and visitors. It was noticeable, too, that the focus for these visits often took some time to identify and clarify. Indeed, the preliminary negotiations that took place were in themselves a key aspect of the process.

Further convincing evidence of the power of schools working together comes from the City Challenge programmes in London and Greater Manchester. The success of these initiatives has been widely reported, leading to extensive debates as to what were the key factors that led to their impact (*e. g.* Barrs et al., 2014; Claeys, Kempton & Paterson, 2014; Greaves, Macmillan & Sibieta, 2014; Hutchings, Hollingworth, Mansaray, Rose & Greenwood, 2012; Kidson & Norris, 2014).

An important feature of City Challenge was the emphasis placed on contextual analysis as the starting point for developments. This led to the conclusion that plenty of good practice existed across the schools in the two city regions. Consequently, it was decided that collaboration and networking would be the key strategies for strengthening the overall capacity of the system to reach out to vulnerable groups of learners. More specifically this involved a series of inter-connected activities for 'moving knowledge around' (Ainscow, 2015). Once again, an

engagement with evidence and the involvement of members of the research community proved to be important in making this happen.

The powerful impact of the collaborative strategies developed in City Challenge points to ways in which improvement processes used within individual schools can be deepened and, therefore, strengthened. This involves an emphasis on mutual critique, within schools and between schools, based on an engagement with shared data. This, in turn, requires strong collective commitment from senior school staff and a willingness to share responsibility for system change.

4.3. Beyond-school factors

Research 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 (Kerr, Dyson & Raffo, 2014). 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 impacts of each other's efforts. However, experience suggests that the success of such partnerships is dependent upon a common understanding of what they are trying to achieve and, once again, an engagement with various forms of evidence to stimulate collective effort.

This approach draws on the principles underpinning the highly acclaimed Harlem Children's Zone in the USA (Whitehurst & Croft, 2010). These involve efforts to improve outcomes for children and young people in areas of disadvantage through an approach that they characterize as being "doubly holistic". That is to say, they seek to develop coordinated efforts to tackle the factors that disadvantage children and enhance the factors which support them, across all aspects of their lives, and across their life spans, from conception through to adulthood. Dobbie and Fryer (2009) describe the Children's Zone as 'arguably the most ambitious social experiment to alleviate poverty of our time' (p. 1).

Another American initiative, StriveTogether, acts as a central backbone organisation for sites using similar ideas across the country that are locally tailored (Grossman, Lombard & Fisher, 2014). These initiatives are guided by indicators that span young people's loves 'from cradle to career', with progress determined using data at all stages. The challenges involved in applying this thinking are explored in the Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland initiative (Chapman & Ainscow, 2021).

Developments such as these have 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 and young people, not just those that attend their own schools. They also have to develop patterns of working that enable them to have the flexibility to cooperate with other schools and their wider communities. It means, too, that those who administer area school systems have to adjust their priorities and ways of working in response to improvement efforts that are led from within schools.

Some form of local coordination is needed in order to encourage such forms of collaboration (Armstrong & Ainscow, 2018). Indeed, a recent report noted that four of the most successful national education systems – Singapore, Estonia, Finland, and Ontario – each has a coherent 'middle tier', regardless of their differing extents of school autonomy or devolution of decision-making (Bubb, Crossley-Holland, Cordiner, Cousin & Earley, 2019). 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 co-ordinating influence, with local accountability.

5. Making sense of the process

Underlying these ways of using collaboration to promote inclusion and equity within education systems is a common pattern. Most importantly, they involve an engagement with evidence collected by practitioners with support from university researchers. Usually, this begins with a consideration of an established set of practices that are largely taken for granted. An interruption occurs that problematises these practices and provokes consideration of why current practice is the way it is and how it might be improved. This may then lead to actual changes in practice.

Given my focus on the possibilities of developing more equitable ways of working, this pattern begs two important questions:

- What is it that provokes the problematisation of established practice?

- And why does this necessarily lead to more inclusive ways practices?

In addressing these questions, we have found it helpful to draw on a range of theoretical resources. One that has proved to be particularly powerful is the idea of 'communities of practice', as developed by Etienne Wenger (1998), focusing specifically on the way he sees learning as 'a characteristic of practice'.

Wenger explains practice in terms of those things that individuals within a community do, drawing on available resources, to further a set of shared goals. This goes beyond how practitioners complete their tasks, to include, for example, how they make it through the day,

commiserating about the pressures and constraints within which they have to operate. Practices are thus ways of negotiating meaning through social action, which underlines the importance of the conversations embedded in teachers' day-to-day work, referred to earlier in this paper.

In explaining this process, Wenger argues that communities 'reify' their practices by producing concrete representations of them, such as tools, symbols, rules and documents (and even concepts and theories). However, these reifications have to be given meaning through a process of participation, which consists of the shared experiences and negotiations that result from social interaction within a purposive community.

Wenger offers some helpful guidelines for judging whether a particular social collective can be considered as a community of practice. Since such a community involves mutual engagement, a negotiated enterprise, and a repertoire of resources and practices, then its members should be expected to:

- Interact more intensively with, and know more about, others in the group than those outside the group;
- Hold their actions accountable (and be willing for others in the community to hold them accountable) more to the group's joint enterprise than to some other enterprise;
- Be more able to evaluate the actions of other members of the group than the actions of those outside the group; and
- Draw on locally produced resources and artifacts to negotiate meaning, more so than those that are imported from outside the group.

By these criteria the staff teams in the studies reported earlier can, to varying degrees, be seen as communities of practice. Much of the evidence for this assertion rests on what was witnessed of the ongoing and informal interactions between groups of teachers. So, for example, amongst staff inquiry groups, hours of meetings, shared experiences and informal discussions over hurriedly taken lunches were observed. These sometimes involved the development of particular meanings of frequently used phrases, such as 'raising standards', 'equity' and 'inclusion'. These shared meanings help to define a teacher's experience of being a teacher. In the same way it can be assumed that groups of colleagues doing similar work in another school have their own shared histories that give meaning to being a teacher in that particular context.

There is no reason to suppose that teachers are conscious of such processes for the most part, though occasionally they may be able to articulate their importance for developments in their schools. What was significant in some of the project schools, however, was not simply the high level of collaboration that was claimed by the teachers (such claims can, of course, be challenged), but the implication that 'good practice' is defined through such collaborative processes. In these contexts, good practice is defined not by what researchers or policy-makers say, or others do elsewhere, but by what 'we' think 'works here'.

Once again, the notion of communities of practice is important here in that it views practice as being intimately bound up with the norms, values, beliefs and assumptions of a group of teachers, in a particular school context. The implication is that practices cannot be understood - or, more to the point, changed - without also understanding and changing those local patterns. What is needed is something that disturbs existing assumptions and provokes some sort of reformulation, both of practice and of the thinking on which it is based.

In the context of the collaborative research processes I have described, disturbances often come from an engagement with evidence generated within a school that helped to make the familiar unfamiliar. Sometimes, too, they arose from outside the school in the shape of a planned intervention - a report from the university group to the school inquiry team, or a visit to another school. However, the communities of practice idea suggests that meaning-making does not depend on such planned and structured events but is an ongoing process, as groups of teachers come to terms with new situations, new disturbances and new perspectives.

6. Anomalies and organisational learning

This relationship between practice and local meaning-making suggests that external agendas cannot simply be 'imposed' on communities of practice. Specifically, external proposals for change, however powerfully enforced, have to be endowed with meaning within local contexts before they can inform practice. This implies that schools (or, at least, the communities of practice within schools) may well negotiate local meanings for those agendas that are different from those of the formulators themselves or, indeed, of other schools.

The significance of communities of practice is usefully summed up by Wenger when he argues:

> *Communities of practice are not intrinsically beneficial or harmful… Yet they are a force to be reckoned with, for better or for worse. As a locus of engagement in action, interpersonal relationships, shared knowledge, and negotiation of enterprises, such communities hold the key to real transformation - the kind that has real effect on*

> *people's lives… The influence of other forces (e. g. the control of an institution or the authority of an individual) are no less important, but they are mediated by the communities in which their meanings are negotiated in practice.* (Wenger, 1998, p. 85)

There is, however, an important caveat here. Communities of practice 'are not intrinsically beneficial or harmful' precisely because the values and assumptions to which they will subscribe are determined locally. In terms of the development of practices, there is nothing inherent in even the most dynamic community of practice which predisposes it towards generating more equitable outcomes. Indeed, a dynamic community that defends the status quo or moves rapidly in a non-inclusive direction is entirely conceivable. So, for example, Yurkofsky et al. (2020) argue:

> *Educators who believe in supporting equitable schools can still carry implicit biases that affect their practices, and teachers who aspire to improve their pedagogy may in practice have trouble giving up the belief that external factors (e. g., parental and neighbourhood influence) - as opposed to their own actions as teachers - are the primary determinants of students' achievement.* (p. 415)

What, then, makes the difference between instances where collaborative meaning-making create a potential for the development of inclusive practices and those where such practices actually arise? For this, two sets of concepts from the literature on organisational development are helpful: Argyris and Schön's (1996) idea of 'single and double-loop learning'; and Skrtic's (1991) distinction between bureaucracies and adhocracies, together with his notion of the recognition of 'anomalies' as the catalyst for the transition from one to the other.

Argyris and Schön argue that organisations are capable of learning, but to different extents and, indeed, at different levels. What they refer to as single-loop learning takes the form of what in an educational context might be called the improvement of existing practices, but without any fundamental reconsideration of the assumptions upon which those practices are based. On the other hand, double-loop learning asks questions about the underlying aims of practice and about the implicit theories which underpin it.

To take an example, in the first year of the Stockborough Equity Research Network, described above, discussions involving the head teachers led to an agreement that equity was a central issue facing each of the partner schools. It soon became evident, however, that what this meant was different in each context, not least in respect to the groups of students who were seen as a cause for concern. As a result, it was decided that the work of the network would

focus attention on those learners thought to be 'missing out' within existing arrangements. This led to a concern amongst our university team that this might lead to narrowly focused efforts to 'fix' students seen as being in some sense inadequate. However, collecting evidence about these groups eventually led to a process of double-loop learning that re-focused attention on an analysis of contextual factors that were acting as barriers to their participation and learning. In this way, most of the projects gradually became whole school improvement efforts that had the potential to benefit many students.

Skrtic also presupposes a fundamental distinction in the way organisations solve problems. He argues that bureaucratic organisations deal with such problems by creating different sub-units and specialisms to contain them, leaving practice elsewhere in the organisation undisturbed. So, for example, a school may decide to establish a separate unit to deal with the problems of disruptive behaviour, such that it avoids the need to examine ways in which its own practices may have helped to generate these problems. On the other hand, what Skrtic calls adhocratic organisations see such problems as an opportunity to rethink their existing practices in fundamental ways. Moreover, he argues that bureaucratic organisations can become adhocratic if enough of their members recognise 'anomalies' in existing practice.

It seems, then, that faced with some form of disturbance – what I referred to earlier as an interruption - some schools will close the problem down and make largely technical responses. Others may open the problem up and use it as the basis for a critical interrogation, and reformulation of practice and the assumptions on which practice is based. However, as Skrtic argues, someone has to recognise a problem as an anomaly and convince others.

Although the notion of communities of practice would encourage an emphasis on the collaborative nature of such recognition, there is no doubt that individuals can also be powerful inhibitors or facilitators. Here, the leadership style and practices of senior staff are important. So, for example, Lambert (2005) write about the importance of 'constructivist leadership', which can engage colleagues in what was characterised earlier in this chapter as shared meaning-making.

A further important factor appears to be access to evidence and alternative perspectives which lie outside current assumptions and constitute a basis on which they can be problematised. This is where the involvement of external research partners who provide critical interventions can be so important as those in schools come to terms with data they have collected. A similar process can occur through school-to-school collaboration.

Here, again, we are in the territory of communities of practice, where processes of meaning making in a particular community and in the local context of that community are at work. In other words, 'what we see working here' is more important than what others tell us to do. However, in this case, established patterns of practice and meaning are disturbed sufficiently such that distinctly new patterns begin to emerge.

7. Social learning

This way of thinking is based on the idea that schools and their local communities have untapped potential to improve their capacity for improving the achievement of all of their students, not least those from economically poorer and minority backgrounds. The challenge therefore is to mobilise this potential. This reinforces the argument that school improvement is a social process that involves practitioners in learning from one another, from their students, and from others involved in the lives of the young people they teach.

In thinking about how this thinking might be used more widely it is essential to recognise that it does not offer a straight forward recipe that can be lifted and transferred from place to place. Rather, it defines an approach to improvement that uses processes of contextual analysis in order to create strategies that fit particular circumstances. This involves an engagement with various forms of evidence, leading to the development of locally determined improvement pathways. In this way, those involved probe beneath the surface of headline performance indicators to understand how local dynamics shape particular outcomes for students. In so doing, this helps to identify barriers to progress and resources that can inject pace into efforts to move things forward. What is distinctive in the approach is that it is mainly led from within schools, with senior school staff having a central role as 'system leaders' (Hopkins, 2007). And, as I argued earlier, this requires new thinking, practices and relationship across education systems.

It is predictable that such changes will lead to periods of organisational 'turbulence' (Hopkins et al., 1994). The nature of this phenomenon will vary from place to place, but in general it arises as a result of the reactions of individuals to ideas and approaches that disrupt the status quo of their day-to-day lives. It is worth noting, however, that there is research evidence to suggest that without periods of turbulence, successful, long-lasting change is unlikely to occur (Fullan, 2007). In this sense turbulence can be seen as a useful indication that things are on the move.

8. The nature of practice

There is one further factor at work, which may be more fundamental. We are familiar with the notion that professionals operate in arenas characterised by complexity and uncertainty, such that their practices must constantly adjust to new and unique situations (¡Schön, 1991). As Eraut (1994) notes, this creates a significant problem, given the tendency of human actors to routinise their actions:

> *The development of routines is a natural process, essential for coping with the job and responsible for increased efficiency; but the combination of tacit knowledge and intuitive decision-making makes them difficult to monitor and to keep under critical control. As a result, routines tend to become progressively dysfunctional over time; not only do they fail to adjust to new circumstances but 'shortcuts' gradually intrude, some of which only help professionals to cope with pressure at the expense of their clients.* (Eraut, 1994, 111-112)

The 'clients' of teachers are, of course, their students. However, not only are these students active participants in the schooling process - making their views and feelings known, sometimes in no uncertain terms - but the aim of teaching is to elicit some sort of response from them, whether that be in the form of long-term outcomes or immediate classroom behaviours. If, as Eraut suggests, teachers' routines become progressively dysfunctional, then the desired responses from students will fail to materialise. This situation will be exacerbated where students are less reluctant to make their dissatisfaction known to their teachers, and where teachers and schools are held tightly to account for delivering certain sorts of outcomes.

The implication of all this is that there is an in-built dynamic which brings teachers face-to-face with a mismatch between their routinised practice and the actual responses of their students. If inclusion is understood as a process of reducing barriers to learning and participation, then it seems reasonable to suggest that this in-built dynamic also brings teachers face-to-face with the non-inclusive nature of their practices. If we then go on to see school staffs as consisting of communities of practice, we can see how a core task of such groups is to develop shared meanings (and therefore practices) around the recurrent experience of mismatch between established practices and the realities of their students. This does not mean, of course, that every mismatch will be acknowledged as an 'anomaly', or that the shared meanings that are developed around them will lead to more inclusive practices. However, it does mean that fundamental questions about inclusiveness arise and can potentially be made explicit as a matter of course in *every* school, regardless of whether or not those involved espouse a rhetoric of inclusion.

Our work suggests that this is not a merely theoretical possibility. In some of our project schools we saw how a mismatch between established practices and the actual outcomes of that practice became apparent. This might relate to a group of students whose exclusion from classrooms ceases to be taken for granted, or those who 'disrupt' established practices, or students who 'fail' to reach desired targets. We have also worked with schools where shifting demographics produced intakes that responded differently to the schools' traditional population, or classrooms in which individual students seemed to be doing less well than their teachers hoped, or experiences of new practices which suggested to teachers that their students could do better if they abandoned their existing ways of working.

9. The challenge of educational recovery

Moving on to the current situation, I am working with university colleagues to apply the ideas outlined in this paper in two contexts in the United Kingdom. The first of these initiatives is in Greater Manchester, a city region of England that has a long tradition of schools partnerships which involve cooperation with university researchers.

The educational recovery strategy developed in Greater Manchester in response to Covid-19 is called *Pathways to Success*[1]. Its aim is to ensure support for all children and young people, paying particular attention to those who are vulnerable to underachievement, marginalisation and exclusion (Armstrong, Rayner & Ainscow, 2021). This has involved the creation of trios of schools that serve broadly similar communities from different local authorities, coming together to share experiences and ideas.

During the last two years some 150 Greater Manchester schools have participated in this process, with support from researchers at the University of Manchester. Working in their trios, practitioners in these schools held online meetings and then provided a summary of what has emerged from their discussions. This led to a rich resource of information relating to how schools have responded to the crisis that has been shared with all schools across the city region. At the same time, the initiative has further demonstrated the potential benefits of school-to-school support and the impact of researchers in making it happen.

The second initiative, *'Every Dundee Learner Matters'*[2] is being carried out in a Scottish city, where the local authority has created a strategy group to lead a new phase of development aimed at improving the quality of education for all children and young people. The group is

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[1] See: https://www.gmlp.org.uk/The-Greater-Manchester-educational-recovery-strate/
[2] https://nsee.org.uk/every-dundee-learner-matters/

made up of headteachers who are known to have the experience that will enable them to take on the role of system leaders. A team of researchers from the Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change at the University of Glasgow are supporting these developments, whilst at the same time generating evidence to monitor their implementation and impact.

The guiding vision is of a high performing system that is at the forefront of developments to find more effective ways of ensuring the progress of all learners, particularly those whose progress is a cause for concern. Central to this vision is a system that is driven collectively by leaders and involves educators at all levels of the education system, including early years and further education, in taking shared responsibility for improving the quality of education across the city.

Drawing on evidence from the studies reported in this paper, the Dundee strategy involves attempts to make better use of the existing expertise of educators and other stakeholders. The starting point is with the sharing of ideas, knowledge and practices through practitioner collaborative action research. This is also intended to encourage new thinking and experimentation with alternative ways of working.

The introduction of these two system-wide educational recovery strategies has implications for the various key stakeholders within education systems. In particular, they require teachers, especially those in senior positions, to see themselves as having a wider responsibility for all children and young people, not just those that attend their own schools. For those who administer district school systems, it means they must adjust their priorities and ways of working in response to improvement efforts that are led from within schools. And for schools it means aligning what they do with the efforts of other local players – employers, community groups, universities, public services and so on - so that there is a coherent strategy focused on improving the lives of all children and young people.

This approach also has significant implications for the relationship between researchers and practitioners. It requires new forms of partnership, in the way that is outlined helpfully by Hiebert et al. (2002) who suggest that fruitful forms of collaboration require a reorientation of values and goals amongst both groups. So, they argue, teachers need to move away from the dominant view that teaching is a 'personal and private activity'. Rather, teachers have to adopt the 'more risky view' that it is an activity that can be continuously improved, provided it is made public and examined openly. At the same time, they argue that researchers must stop undervaluing the knowledge teachers acquire in their own classrooms. In this way researchers

are able to recognize the potential of personal knowledge as it becomes transformed into professional knowledge.

10. Final thoughts

The research summarised in this paper points to the sorts of conditions that are needed in order to use processes of collaboration between practitioners and researchers to foster educational recovery within education systems. As I have explained, this is based on the idea that schools have untapped potential to improve their capacity for improving the achievement of all of their students, particularly those who are vulnerable to marginalisation or exclusion.

The challenge therefore is to mobilise this potential. This reinforces the argument that school improvement is a social process that involves practitioners in learning from one another, from their students, and from others involved in the lives of the young people they teach. And, as we have seen, an engagement with evidence can be a powerful catalyst for making this happen.

Note: Many colleagues have contributed to the programme of research described in this paper, too many to mention. However, the ideas of Alan Dyson were particularly important to the argument I develop.

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