



University of Glasgow | Robert Owen Centre
for Educational Change

Using partnership working and collaborative action research to tackle educational inequity

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Consider findings from research and development activity conducted by the Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change (ROC), to highlight:

- How evidence-based collaborative networks can empower their members to tackle educational inequality and promote learner attainment, achievement and health and well-being
- The characteristics of effective and sustainable partnerships
- The importance of translating what we know about effective collaboration approaches, with a particular focus on the School Improvement Partnership Program (SIPP), to broaden networks to systematically include colleges and other relevant partners to help learners reach their potential in the current context.

- Over the past decade there has been a growing emphasis on more strategic partnerships between local authorities, schools and colleges
- A key policy driver has been *Developing the Young Workforce* (2014) which, like other policies such as *Opportunities For All* (SG 2012), sees partnership working between colleges, schools, employers, local authorities, universities and other relevant services as crucial for promoting young people's attainment, achievement and pathways for positive destinations
- In response, colleges have developed plans to promote partnerships with schools.

- As these policies have emerged, the education landscape has seen “college mergers, economic challenges, reduced resources and an increased emphasis on positive destinations” (ES 2016)
- This context means that partnership working is all the more important but it also presents challenges
- The various policies and official guidance provide a rationale and encouragement for partnership working
- However, it is arguable that we need to understand more about what promotes effective and sustainable collaborative working.

International educational research and practice demonstrates that the most effective collaborative school/ system improvement efforts:

- Are locally owned and led by practitioners and leaders working in partnership and collaboration with like-minded professionals and other stakeholders

(e.g. Fullan 2013, Chapman et al. 2012, Chapman, C and Hadfield, M 2010, Donaldson 2012, Ainscow et al., 2012, OFSTED, 2000; Harris et al, 2005, Hadfield and Chapman 2009; Kerr et al. 2003),
- Have an alignment of change processes in curriculum development, teacher development and school self-evaluation (Menter et al., 2010: 26).

Drawing on our teams' involvement in the following:

- Manchester and London Challenges (England)
- Extra Mile programme (England)

and developed more recently with the ROC involvement in:

- School Improvement Partnership Programme (Scotland 2013-16)
- On-going support for attainment challenge and PEF innovation (Scotland)
- Making Education Work for All (Scotland)

Shared principles of the interventions:

- School improvement strategies that promote new ways of working across classrooms, schools, colleges, services and local authorities to tackle educational inequity.
- Characterised by use of Data, Collaborative Action Research/Enquiry and Leadership Development to innovate, test and refine new approaches to tackle the attainment gap.

- The School Improvement Partnership Programme (SIPP) was a three year solution-focused approach to Scotland's attainment issues with a focus on innovating to tackle educational inequality.
- The programme aimed to encourage staff to learn from each other, experiment with their practice and monitor and evaluate change.
- School Improvement Partnerships were action research programmes involving a process of *collaborative inquiry* which created leadership opportunities and professional learning
- A key feature of the SIPP was the support provided by the Robert Owen Centre at Glasgow University to evaluate and build practitioners' capacity to conduct collaborative enquiry.

- Education Scotland worked with local authorities and ROC researchers to broker and facilitate partnerships within and across schools and local authorities.
- The approach was underpinned by systematic enquiry and the use of evidence to address Scotland's attainment issues with a focus on tackling educational inequality.
- The SIPP projects encouraged staff to learn from each other, experiment with their practice and monitor and evaluate change.
- Projects were locally owned and led by teachers and school leaders working with like-minded professionals (Ainscow et al. 2012; Chapman 2008, 2014; Chapman et al. 2012; Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009; Earl & Katz, 2006; Hadfield & Chapman 2009; Kerr et al. 2003)

Core principles for the approach

- Partnership working across partners with a focus on exploring specific issues relating to educational inequity.
- The use of Collaborative Action Research (CAR) and evidence to identify key challenges, experiment with innovative practices and monitor developments.
- The creation of leadership opportunities and professional learning of staff at all levels.
- A commitment to reciprocity and mutual benefit for all involved.
- The development of arrangements to support long-term collaboration and new approaches to capacity building.
- Explicit links to strategic improvement planning in schools and local authorities.
- The involvement of a diverse range of relevant partners.

Summary of the range of SIPP projects

	A/SA/E	ER	G & F	I&AB	M&EL	SL	WD&R	F
Aim	To tackle educational inequity							
Approach	Focused projects & collaborative action research							
Councils	3	1	2	2	2	1	2	1
Schools	3	2	>30	2	12	1	13	9
School Phase	S	P	P&S	S	S	S	P	P&S
Main partners	Teachers and Head teachers							CLDW, SfLA, teachers
Positive Impact	Parent. Engag., pupil attendance	Maths	New system of collaboration	Parent. Engag.	Use of data motiv.	Pupil mental well-being, attendance, motiv.	Maths and literacy	Literacy

- 1. Spotlight on educational inequity: awareness and expectations***
 - Focused minds and formalised key issues of inequity within planning processes
 - Supported the development of partnerships that focus on specific issues of inequity within their own context
 - Generated examples of what is possible in challenging contexts with students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

2. Using enquiry and evidence: developed technical expertise and promoted dialogue

- Built capacity and expertise in Collaborative Action Research within schools and LAs
- Used a range of appropriate methods and approaches to collect evidence to inform the development of interventions and then test and refine their impact
- Encouraged the use of improvement data within partnerships to highlight strengths and challenges

3. Roles, responsibilities and relationships

- Promoted collaboration by *providing space* for teachers and leaders to build relational trust and work together on issues of educational inequity
- Provided opportunities for teachers and leaders to take *on new roles and responsibilities* within and across their own schools
- Promoted collaboration to bring different people from different parts of the system together to generate *new relationships* and share expertise

4. Leadership and professional learning

- These collaborations have resulted in leadership development opportunities including leadership of specific workstreams, projects and partnerships - ‘empowered leadership’

And

- Developed new understandings of issues associated with educational inequity, pedagogical and organisational improvement and research methods

5. Selected learner outcomes

Falkirk:

- Increased reading age - 5.9 months greater than peers in control group; Qualitative data - increased learner confidence & interest in reading

Edinburgh, South Ayrshire, Angus:

- All schools in the Partnership had increased attendance. School 1 saw average attendance improvement of 7%. School 2, parent attendance at S4 evening increased from 21% to 43%

West Dunbartonshire:

- 70% of learners improved their ability to interpret questions; increase of 15% in post maths assessment

East Renfrewshire:

- Primary maths learners no longer restricted to using a set procedure or algorithm, but instead developing their own strategies for problem solving.

Successful partnerships:

- Maintain a clear focus on tackling the attainment gap
- Invest time and space to build positive relationships
- Promote a risk-taking culture
- Draw on external expertise where necessary
- Are locally owned and led – empowered leadership at all levels
- Generate and share new ways of working
- Are tailored and context specific
- Make a commitment to using Collaborative Action Research to inform practice and data to understand impact
- Provide structured opportunities for collaboration.

The approach tended to have most traction where

- A group of committed practitioners, supported by school and local authority leaders, is quickly established to drive the project and has then been able to engage other staff and expand the influence of the Programme to affect behaviours more widely across schools and partnerships.
- The partnerships spent time and used data to identify a focus which is specific to their context.

- Use frameworks for change not prescription
- Where educational inequity is the objective - a focus on literacy, numeracy and parental engagement...
- However, in addition to effective learning and teaching there is a need for broader partnerships; including. Colleges, CLD, employability services etc.
- So, focus on working with and empowering families and communities. This is key to making a difference to learners' attainment and wider achievement.
- Embedding the collaborative projects/approaches in school and local planning and ensuring that the programme empowers leadership at all levels to ensure sustainability.

Collaboration at all levels:

- Educational change is technically simple but socially complex, i.e. planning the actions that are needed can be relatively straight forward; the challenge for the team is to find ways of getting everybody involved to implement them – relationships are key.
- Invest in professional dialogue and networks to build the ‘infrastructure’ needed for effective collaborative working and enquiry. Local leaders and managers are crucial in encouraging an ‘inquiring stance’ and to sanction actions that arise from this.

The findings indicate that there are particular strategies and approaches taken by partnership intermediaries that play a fundamental role in the success of the collaborative networks:

- Provided early identification and mobilisation of individuals at different levels who are well placed to lead and manage change and improvement through partnerships/collaboration.
- Facilitated practitioners and managers to transform and extend their professional roles and identities in ways that promote collaborative enquiry to drive innovation and sustained improvement.

- Facilitated and sanctioned practitioners' time and resources for use in collaborative enquiry
- Supported communication and brokering of knowledge exchange across partners and within, between and beyond institutions.
- Encouraged managers to embed in longer-term planning those lessons learned regarding what works to promote effective change.

Key to these activities and approaches are individuals who are:

- Skilled at recognising how strategic plans and objectives can be operationalised locally within particular contexts
- Socially skilled to encourage and enlist the participation of colleagues in schools and partner agencies to develop the plans into action
- Are sufficiently influential in their networks to mobilise knowledge and facilitate and sustain action in local and national systems.

- Local government economic cuts are having a detrimental impact on levels of LA senior staff who would otherwise be playing a key role in the facilitation and development of the necessary ‘infrastructure’ for change and sustaining developments
- This places an emphasis on greater levels of ‘empowered leadership’ at practitioner, institutional and third-sector partner organisation level
- Without key intermediaries there are challenges in fostering cross-organisational and cross-sectoral collaborative change processes.

Meta reviews such as Mincu (2016) have found that approaches adopted by SIPP feature in successful strategies to tackle the achievement gap and educational inequity. Eg:

- Most of the SIPP projects focused on collaboratively developed and evaluated learning and teaching approaches.
- Research-derived and shared professional knowledge is key to ensuring both effective learning processes and whole school improvement
- Learner outcomes are much more likely to emerge as a result of collective capacity building than through the application of a series of ‘external’ accountability measures
- For improvement to take place there needs to be a focus on the development of teachers’ knowledge, skills and commitment and the process to inspired by ‘distributed, instructional and inquiry-minded leadership’

The findings reflect the themes in relevant research and theory:

- Distributed leadership, social interaction and knowledge transfer as drivers of change (Spillane, J. P., Hopkins, M., & Sweet, T. 2015 etc.) and
- Social relations important as a source of resources such as ideas, information, trust, and incentives to innovate.

(e.g. Blau, 1957; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Choo, 1998; Coburn, 2001; Daly & Finnigan, 2010; Elmore, 1996; Eraut & Hirsh, 2007; Frank, Zhao, & Borman, 2004; Hill, 2004; Little, 2002; Smylie, 1995; Spillane, 2004, Spillane et al 2011)

The research highlights the importance of:

- Equitable partnership within and between establishments involving, teachers, learners, families and other relevant stakeholders and organisations
- Focus on helping young people do well at school and beyond
- Meaningful use of data and evidence from numerous sources but particularly from practitioner enquiry
- Key intermediaries, for example, motivated staff, LA managers, College teams, local/regional Advisors, to help facilitate partnership working and knowledge mobilisation across the system
- Embedding the approaches in school, college and local planning and ensuring that the programme empowers leadership at all levels to ensure sustainability
- A focus on working with and empowering families and communities. This is key to making a difference to learners' attainment and wider achievement.

Thank you

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Any questions?