Schools Challenge Cymru: A Catalyst for Change?

PROFESSOR MEL AINSCOW[1]
Centre for Equity in Education, University of Manchester

ABSTRACT

This paper provides an account of the first phase of Schools Challenge Cymru, the Welsh Government's flagship initiative to promote equity. Broadly stated, Schools Challenge Cymru aims to bring about rapid improvements in the performance of schools serving the more disadvantaged communities, and to use lessons from these developments to strengthen the capacity of the education system to improve itself. The design of the initiative is informed by lessons from the highly acclaimed City Challenge programme in England. It 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. Therefore, the aim is to 'move knowledge around' and, it is argued, the best way to do this is through strengthening collaboration within schools, between schools and beyond schools. The paper contrasts this approach with current international trends, which place an emphasis on the power of market forces to improve educational standards.

Key words: equity, school autonomy, collaboration

These are interesting times for education in Wales. Following a period of national review, an extensive programme of policy changes is currently being implemented, including the introduction of a new curriculum, efforts to strengthen professional development amongst practitioners, and reforms to the way that teachers are trained.

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In this paper I focus on another element of this reform programme, Schools Challenge Cymru, an initiative that focuses specifically on the challenge of equity, which I take to involve a concern with inclusion and fairness (OECD, 2012). In so doing, I explore ways in which education systems can be improved that emphasise partnerships and collaboration between the various stakeholders involved. I argue that whilst this swims against the tide of current international trends, it reflects the approaches that have led to the improvement of systems in some of the most successful countries of the world. At the same time, their introduction requires efforts to overcome barriers to progress, many of which relate to existing ways of working.

International trends

Since 1990, the United Nation's Education for All movement has worked to make quality basic education available to all learners across the world (Opertti, Walker and Zhang, 2014). Reflecting on progress over the twenty-five years that followed, a recent Global Monitoring Report points out that, despite improvements, there are still 58 million children out of school globally and around 100 million children who do not complete primary education (UNESCO, 2015). The report goes on to conclude that inequality in education has increased, with the poorest and most disadvantaged shouldering the heaviest burden.

Whilst this situation is most acute in the developing world, there are similar concerns in many wealthier countries, including the UK, as noted by the OECD (2012: 9):

> Across OECD countries, almost one of every five students does not reach a basic minimum level of skills to function in today's societies (indicating lack of inclusion). Students from low socio-economic background are twice as likely to be low performers, implying that personal or social circumstances are obstacles to achieving their educational potential (indicating lack of fairness).

In responding to these challenges there is increasing interest internationally in the use of strategies that place an emphasis on the power of market forces to improve educational standards (Lubienski, 2003). In particular, a growing number of national education policies are encouraging schools to become autonomous; for example, in Australia, the independent public schools; academies in England; charter schools in the USA; schools

involved in the voucher reforms in Chile; *concertado* schools in Spain; and free schools in Sweden.

Alongside this emphasis on school autonomy is a focus on parental choice. This usually takes place within education systems where high-stakes testing systems are intended to inform decision-making, whilst at the same time driving improvement efforts (Au, 2009). In addition, narrowly defined measures of effectiveness are used for purposes of accountability (Schildkamp, Ehren and Kuin Lai, 2012), implying that education is a private good rather than a public good.

Such developments have the potential to open up possibilities to inject new energy into the improvement of education systems. On the other hand, there is growing evidence from a range of countries that they are leading to increased segregation that further disadvantages some learners, particularly those from economically poorer backgrounds (Pickett and Vanderbloemen, 2015). So, for example, talking about the development of charter schools in the USA, Kahlenberg and Potter (2014) suggest that they have led to increased segregation in school systems across the country. Other research points to similar patterns in England (Ainscow, Dyson and Hopwood, 2016), Chile (McEwan and Carnoy, 2000) and in Sweden (Wiborg, 2010). Meanwhile, recent developments in England's second city, Birmingham, have illustrated the potential dangers of so-called independent state schools being taken over by extremist elements within a community (Kershaw, 2014).

There are, however, countries that have made progress in addressing the challenge of equity using a much more collaborative and inclusive way of thinking, rather than relying on market forces:

> the highest performing education systems across OECD countries are those that combine quality with equity. Equity in education means that personal or social circumstances such as gender, ethnic origin or family background, are not obstacles to achieving educational potential (fairness) and that all individuals reach at least a basic minimum level of skills (inclusion). In these education systems, the vast majority of students have the opportunity to attain high level skills, regardless of their own personal and socio-economic circumstances.' (OECD, 2012: 3)

To take an example, in Finland – the country that regularly outperforms most other countries in terms of educational outcomes – success is partly explained by the progress of the lowest performing quintile of students who out-perform those in other countries, thus raising the mean scores overall on the PISA tests (Sabel et al., 2011). This has also involved a much

greater emphasis on providing support for vulnerable students within mainstream schools, as opposed to in segregated provision (Takala, Pirttimaa and Tormane, 2009). The implication is, therefore, that it is possible for countries to develop education systems that are both excellent and equitable (Schleicher, 2010). The challenge for practitioners and policy-makers is to find ways of breaking the link between disadvantage and educational failure.

Lessons from research

Within the international research community there is a division of opinion regarding how to address educational equity. Some argue that what is required is a school-focused approach, with better implementation of the knowledge base that has been created through school effectiveness and improvement research (e.g. Hopkins et al., 2005; Sammons, 2007); others suggest that such school-focused approaches can never address fundamental inequalities in societies that make it difficult for some young people to break with the restrictions imposed by their home circumstances (e.g. Dyson and Kerr, 2013).

Such arguments point to the danger of separating the challenge of school improvement from a consideration of the impact of wider social and political factors. This danger is referred to by those who recommend more holistic reforms that connect schools, communities, and external political and economic institutions (e.g. Levin, 2005; Lipman, 2004). These authors conclude that it is insufficient to focus solely on the improvement of individual schools. Rather, such efforts must be part of a larger overarching plan for system reform that must include all stakeholders, at the national, district, institutional and community levels. An obvious possibility is to combine the two perspectives, linking attempts to change the internal conditions of schools with efforts to encourage greater collaboration across local areas.

Evidence about the potential of system-wide collaboration comes from my recent involvement in the Greater Manchester Challenge. This three-year initiative, which involved over 1,100 schools in ten local authorities, had a government investment of around £50 million (see Ainscow, 2015, for a detailed account of this initiative). The decision to invest this large amount reflected a concern regarding educational standards in the city region, particularly amongst children and young people from disadvantaged

backgrounds. The approach adopted was influenced by an earlier initiative, the London Challenge, the success of which has been widely reported, leading to extensive debates as to what were the key factors that led to its impact (e.g. Barrs et al., 2014; Claeys et al., 2014; Greaves, Macmillan and Sibieta, 2014; Hutchings et al., 2012; Kidson and Norris, 2014). Relevant to developments in Wales, with its strong inclusive ethos, there is evidence that its success can be explained, at least in part, by the ways in which schools have responded to increased diversity within the pupil population (Blanden et al., 2015; Burgess, 2014).

A detailed analysis of the context led to the conclusion that plenty of good practice existed across Greater Manchester schools. 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. More specifically this involved a series of inter-connected activities for 'moving knowledge around' (Ainscow, 2012), facilitated by a team of expert Advisers.

Families of Schools were set up, using a data system that grouped between twelve and twenty schools on the basis of students' prior attainment and socio-economic background. This approach partnered schools that serve similar populations whilst, at the same time, encouraging links amongst schools that were not in direct competition with one another because they did not serve the same neighbourhoods. Led by head teachers, the Families of Schools proved to be successful in strengthening collaborative processes within the city region, although the impact was varied.

In terms of schools working in the most disadvantaged contexts, evidence from the challenge suggests that school partnerships were the most powerful means of fostering improvements (Hutchings et al., 2012). Most notably, what we called the Keys to Success programme led to striking improvements in the performance of some 200 schools facing the most challenging circumstances. A common feature of almost all of these interventions was that progress was achieved through carefully matched pairings (or, sometimes, trios) of schools that cut across social 'boundaries' of various kinds, including those that separate schools that are in different local authorities. In this way, expertise that was previously trapped in particular contexts was made more widely available.

Another effective strategy to facilitate the movement of expertise was provided through the creation of various types of hub schools. So, for example, some of the hubs provided support for other schools regarding

ways of supporting students with English as an additional language. Similarly, so-called 'teaching schools' providing professional development programmes focused on bringing about improvements in classroom practice. Other hub schools offered support in relation to particular subject areas, and in responding to groups of potentially vulnerable groups, such as those categorised as having special educational needs. In this latter context, a further significant strategy involved new roles for special schools in supporting developments in the mainstream.

The Greater Manchester strategy recognised that closing the gap in outcomes between those from more and less advantaged backgrounds will only happen when what happens to children outside as well as inside school changes (Ainscow et al., 2012). This means changing how families and communities work, seeing them as partners in the process of education and enriching what they can offer to children. In this respect we saw encouraging examples of what can happen when what schools do is aligned in a coherent strategy with the efforts of other local players – employers, community groups, universities and public services. This does not necessarily mean schools doing more, but it does imply partnerships beyond the school, where partners multiply the impacts of each other's efforts.

An independent evaluation of the London and City Challenge programmes concluded that they had been largely successful in achieving their objectives (Hutchings et al., 2012). The evaluators argued that the strategic factors contributing to their success were: the timescale; the focus on specific urban areas; flexibility of approach; use of expert advisers and bespoke solutions; school staff learning from practice in other schools; and the programme ethos of trust, support and encouragement. These, then, were the lessons used to formulate a strategy for the initiative in Wales.

Schools Challenge Cymru

Wales is a particularly interesting context for addressing educational equity. Like many successful school systems (e.g. Alberta, Finland, Hong Kong, Singapore), it is small. Despite its size, however, the performance of its school system is a cause for concern (Evans, 2015), and outcomes for learners from low-income families are a particular worry, as noted in a country review conducted by OECD (2014). Most significantly, the review argued that whilst the pace of reform has been high, it lacks a long-term vision, an adequate school improvement infrastructure and a clear

implementation strategy that all stakeholders share. Concern was also expressed that Wales had struggled to strike a balance between accountability and improvement.

The OECD review suggested a number of concrete policy options that would strengthen Wales's education system over the long term. In particular, it argued for the development of a long-term vision, the development of a culture of collective responsibility and the raising of the status of teachers. Building on lessons from the City Challenge experiences, Schools Challenge Cymru is intended to act as a catalyst for the implementation of these suggestions. Specifically, it sets out to accelerate progress across the Welsh education system, focusing in particular on improving outcomes for young people from low-income families. Broadly stated, its aims are:

- to bring about rapid improvements in the performance of schools serving the more disadvantaged communities; and
- to use lessons from these developments to strengthen the capacity of the education system to improve itself.

Alongside the other national reforms currently being implemented in relation to the curriculum, professional learning, teacher education and educational leadership, Schools Challenge Cymru is expected to contribute to the development of a world-class education system.

The programme was launched in the summer of 2014, with a budget of approximately £20 million for its first year. It is working initially with forty secondary schools that, to varying degrees, serve disadvantaged communities (designated as the 'Pathways to Success') and their local primary school partners. The schools were chosen on the basis of a robust set of data that focused on a range of deprivation related factors. Further advice on the choice of schools was provided by local authorities and the four regional consortia, set up to coordinate improvements in the performance of schools.

The expectation is that innovations involving the Pathways to Success schools will eventually have a wider impact on the way that the Welsh education system works. In particular, the programme sets out to make better use of resources, most importantly the expertise that exists within the system. With this in mind, it aims to foster new, more fruitful working relationships: within and between schools; between schools and their local communities; and between national and local government. A national

coordinated team of Advisers is involved in facilitating such relationships. There is also a small team of Champions that advise on the overall strategic direction of the initiative. The Advisers and Champions are directly accountable to the minister for education and skills.

Analysing the impact

The results of an independent evaluation of Schools Challenge Cymru will be published in 2017. In the meantime, the evidence we have after eighteen months suggests that the programme has already led to significant progress in the performance of schools in some of the most challenging areas of the country. It is encouraging that these developments have begun to have a ripple effect across the education system in ways that are raising expectations and promoting the idea of a self-improving system, as outlined in the Welsh Government's overall strategic plan, *Qualified for Life* (Welsh Government, 2014).

Most of the schools taking part had previously experienced considerable difficulties in bringing about improvements in their performance. It is therefore good to see the progress that has been made in a relatively short time, as indicated in their GCSE results and more generally in terms of teaching, learning and leadership. Indeed, the overall rate of improvement in examination results across the Pathways to Success schools is greater than that of the highest performing schools in Wales. To put this in a wider context, neither the London nor Greater Manchester Challenges had made the same progress after just one year (Hutchings et al., 2012).

This initial progress provides a strong foundation for efforts to have a wider impact across the education system during the current school year and beyond. In this respect there are already promising developments, as local authorities and the regional consortia draw lessons that are supporting capacity building across the education system.

Whilst it is essential to look at the progress of each of the Pathways to Success schools individually, there are certain patterns emerging in relation to the challenges they face. For example, there are:

- **Isolated schools**. These are schools that, despite the range of policies in place, seem to have previously had limited access to wider support for their improvement efforts. In a few instances, too, there is evidence of difficulties that are similar to those facing schools serving coastal towns

across the UK. In response to this, Advisers have encouraging schools to set up partnerships with other schools in order to widen the human resources available to support their improvement efforts. Progress in most cases is already encouraging as a result of these arrangements and it is anticipated that this will be even greater during the second year.

- **Schools working against the odds**. These schools face a range of barriers to progress in relation to their standing within their local 'education market place'. Usually they are not full and, therefore, have to admit students excluded from other schools. They also have difficulty in attracting suitably qualified teachers, particularly in subjects where there is a dearth of specialists. Given their poor local reputations, they are less likely to attract more aspirational families. Nevertheless, it is pleasing to report that there has already been notable progress in these schools as a result of the work of Advisers in helping to strengthen confidence, raise expectations and promote a faster pace of learning.
- **Schools in crisis**. A small number of the schools present considerable challenges in that their previous histories have left them with a legacy of severe difficulties that block their progress. During the first year of the challenge it was necessary to work with local authority colleagues in addressing these structural problems, which were mainly about aspects of management, leadership and governance. Unsurprisingly, progress in these schools in relation to examination results at the end of the first year was limited. However, given the structural changes that have now been instigated, it is anticipated that significant gains will be seen in the 2016 examination results. In each case, a partnership has been brokered with a high-performing school.
- **Schools needing a lift**. A significant number of the schools appear to have plateaued over a number of years, although in a few cases things had started to pick up prior to Schools Challenge Cymru. The Advisers have worked with these schools to strengthen various aspects of their work – usually related to student tracking systems, and senior and middle leadership. Considerable attention has also been placed on the improvement of classroom practice through the use of powerful forms of school-based professional development. In most cases, too, there are partnerships with other schools in relation to these developments. Many of these schools have already seen significant improvements in examination results, in some cases dramatically so.

It should be noted that some of the schools can be associated with more than one of these descriptors.

An intervention strategy

The progress that has been made so far is helping to shape a high leverage intervention strategy, the elements of which are beginning to influence practice more widely. This strategy builds on evidence of what works from both the London and Greater Manchester Challenge programmes.

The key features of the intervention strategy can be summed up as follows:

- **Advisers who have appropriate expertise and experience**. All members of the team have an impressive track record of success as school leaders. In addition, many bring other experiences to the team, including involvement in local authorities, leadership of projects in different parts of the world and involvement in national inspections. Importantly these days, their professional credibility can, in many instances, be traced through the internet. Advisers are appointed on temporary, part-time contracts.
- **Breaking through barriers that slow down processes of school improvement**. The Advisers are, to a large extent, allowed to work independently of existing arrangements in local authorities and their regional consortia, whilst cooperating with them as necessary. This has enabled the team to work with much greater pace and intensity, in ways that are clearly appreciated by those in the schools. The fact that they act on behalf of the minister means that they can, where necessary, recommend that a local authority uses its legal powers of intervention. This has led to some significant changes in leadership, or in a school's governing body.
- **Strategies that fit particular contexts**. The emphasis is on 'high trust, high accountability'. This means that team members have considerable autonomy to analyse particular contexts and get behind those within the schools in implementing changes. This requires them to spend much time in understanding the policies, practices and cultures of the schools they support. Whilst this starts with a thorough scrutiny of statistical data, it has to go much deeper. Specifically, it requires the Challenge Advisers to work with head teachers in reviewing their schools, through the observation of practice, scrutiny of pupils' work and by listening to the views of different stakeholders. Additional resources are used strategically to support developments in the schools, focusing particular attention on the strengthening of classroom practice, and senior and middle leadership.

- **Teamwork, sharing expertise and solving problems together**. Each member of the team brings different skills and experiences to this work. The monthly team meetings are an important context for the sharing of this expertise. During the meetings there is much emphasis on Advisers thinking aloud with their colleagues about the situations they are facing in their schools. Increasingly, too, members of the team call on their colleagues to provide a 'second opinion', particularly in those schools where progress remains a matter of concern.
- **Connections between schools and other partners**. The collective knowledge of the Advisers (and the Champions) is enabling them to help broker appropriate partnerships between schools, such that the best practices are made available to a wider number of learners. These partnerships, which take many forms, often involve crossing the borders between local authorities. In some cases, they involve two schools, where the strength of one is used to provide support in addressing concerns in another. Other schools have multiple partners for different purposes. Meanwhile, in many instances, emphasis is placed on strengthening links within local primary school clusters. As such partnerships develop, Challenge Advisers continue monitoring what happens, since, too often, they can lead to the proliferation of meetings that result in no actions being taken.
- **Strong accountability arrangements**. Advisers are well aware that they are directly accountable to the minister for the progress of the schools that they support. In practice, this requires regular discussions with members of the Champions group. Whilst much of this relationship is about providing back up support to Advisers, it is also a means of ensuring that their work is making a difference in the schools. Further accountability occurs through the involvement of Advisers in each school's Accelerated Improvement Board, where those involved hold one another to account for carrying out agreed tasks. The notes of the monthly meetings of these boards provide an efficient means of keeping other stakeholders informed in ways that avoid time-wasting reporting arrangements.

In addition to the use of this intervention strategy, the programme encourages the Pathways to Success schools to explore new ways of working with partners from outside the school sector, such as universities, voluntary organisations and businesses. Known as the Pupil Offer, this approach is now being spread nationally.

Moving forward

As Schools Challenge Cymru moves forward into its third year, it is intended that it will be increasingly focusing on using the lessons learnt to change the way the Welsh education system does its business, such that it has a much greater capacity to improve itself through collaboration and innovation. In this way, programme activities will need to be increasingly integrated into the wider reform agenda, not least those related to the new curriculum and professional development.

An important difference, therefore, will be the focus on 'going to scale', using the four regional consortia as the lead agents for achieving sustainable system-level change. In this respect, it is encouraging that the programme has begun to have a wider impact effect across the education system in ways that are raising expectations and promoting the idea of a self-improving system, as outlined in Qualified for Life. It is anticipated that this progress will be even greater if the lifetime of the initiative is extended. Indeed, international research suggests that sustainable system-level reform requires a minimum of at least five years to achieve (e.g. Fullan, 2009; Levin, 2008). In thinking about how the approach I have described might be used more widely it is essential to recognise that it does not offer a simple recipe that can be lifted and transferred between contexts. Rather, it defines an approach to improvement that uses processes of contextual analysis in order to create strategies that fit particular circumstances. In so doing this helps to identify resources that can inject pace into efforts to push things forward. Echoing the mantra from City Challenge, the aim is to 'move knowledge around' through strengthening collaboration within, between and beyond schools. What is also distinctive in the approach is that it is mainly led from within schools, with head teachers and other senior school staff having a central role as 'system leaders' (Hopkins, 2007). This, in turn, requires new thinking, practices and relationship across education systems.

It is predictable that such changes will lead to periods of 'turbulence' (Hopkins, Ainscow and West, 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 within an education system 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.

Elsewhere I have argued that an engagement with evidence of various kinds can act as a catalyst for such developments (Ainscow, 2016). This leads me to propose that it is now time for school evaluation to be carried out *by schools for schools* through processes of peer review, in ways that can act as a stimulus for improvement (Fullan, Rincón-Gallardo and Hargreaves, 2015). In relation to Wales, this would provide a means of addressing the concern raised in the OECD report regarding the imbalance between accountability and improvement. However, such approaches have to be challenging and credible. In other words, they must not involve forms of collusion within which partner schools endorse one another in an acceptance of mediocrity.

In reflecting on all of this, I am reminded of Robert Bales's theory of group systems that we used in earlier research (see Ainscow, Hargreaves and Hopkins, 1995). Bales predicts that attempts to get different stakeholders to pull together around a common purpose are likely to provoke tensions between the need to establish cohesion amongst groups, whilst, at the same time, taking actions to achieve these goals. Put simply, it is relatively easy to maintain cooperation until the moments when hard decisions have to be made, most particularly regarding the setting of priorities and the allocation of resources.

Policy implications

There are important implications in all of this for the future roles of local authorities. They 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 senior staff within schools share responsibility for the overall management of improvement efforts. 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 custodians of day-to-day activities.

Having analysed two relatively successful large-scale improvement initiatives, Andy Hargreaves and I recently suggested a way of supporting local authorities in responding to these new demands (Hargreaves and Ainscow, 2015). We argue that, in taking on new roles, local authorities can provide a valuable focus for school improvement; be a means for

efficient and effective use of research evidence and data analysis across schools; support schools in responding coherently to multiple external reform demands; and be champions for families and students, making sure everybody gets a fair deal.

The problem is, of course, that local authorities are not equally strong. A way to reduce this variation is to promote collaboration among them so that they share resources, ideas and expertise, and exercise collective responsibility for student success. In adopting this 'leading from the middle' approach, local authorities can become the collective drivers of change and improvement together. The ways in which groups of Welsh local authorities are collaborating in the development of the regional consortia are, I feel, evidence of significant progress in this respect.

Finally, of course, all of this has significant implications for national policy makers. In order to make use of the power of collaboration as a means of achieving both excellence and equity in schools, they need to foster greater flexibility at the local level in order that practitioners have the space to analyse their particular circumstances and determine priorities accordingly. This means that policy makers must recognise that the details of policy implementation are not amenable to central regulation. Rather, these have to be dealt with by those who are close to and, therefore, in a better position to understand local contexts.

Final thoughts

It is still early days for Schools Challenge Cymru. Nevertheless, I believe that the progress made so far is acting as a catalyst for change in relation to the policy concerns described in this paper. Furthermore, I have a growing sense that it is helping to create an increased sense of optimism within the education system that things can change for the better. In so doing, it is demonstrating that the Welsh education system has massive untapped potential to improve itself. Strengthening partnerships and leadership at all levels of the system through the approaches outlined in this paper is, I argue, the most effective way of mobilising this potential. The powerful intervention strategy that has been developed through the work of Schools Challenge Cymru provides a means of making this happen.

Finally, it is important to add that the strong political mandate for the efforts of Schools Challenge Cymru has been a vital factor in the progress that has been achieved so far. With continuing government and local

authority support, there is good reason to believe that the strategies I have outlined can add further impetus to the current process of system-wide reform in ways that will enable the Welsh education system to become world class. In so doing, it will demonstrate that there is a credible alternative to market forces as a strategy for educational improvement.

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Note

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