Moving knowledge around: a strategy for promoting inclusion and equity within education systems

Mel Ainscow, 2025

'The evidence is conclusive: equity in education pays off. The highest performing education systems across OECD countries are those that combine high quality and equity.' (OECD 2012)

Throughout the world children enter schools from different backgrounds, have different experiences of education, and leave with very different results. In many countries the poorest children tend to lose out most starkly, achieve the worst results and attend the lowest performing schools. There are, however, countries that have made progress in reducing this gap whilst at the same time having high overall standards. The implication is that it *is* possible for countries to develop education systems that are both excellent and equitable.

The challenge for practitioners is, therefore, to find ways of breaking the links between disadvantage and educational failure. This paper summarises what research has to say about this agenda, drawing in particular on evidence generated through a programme of studies I have carried out with colleagues in the UK and internationally over the last 25 years.

Factors to be addressed

In trying to make sense of the complex processes involved it is useful to see them in relation to an *'ecology of equity'*. By this I mean that the extent to which pupils' experiences and outcomes are equitable is not dependent only on the educational practices of their schools. Instead, it depends on a whole range of interacting processes that reach into the school from outside. These include the demographics of the areas served by schools, the histories and cultures of the populations who send (or fail to send) their children to the school, and the economic realities faced by those populations.

This suggests that it is necessary to address three interlinked sets of factors that impact on the learning of pupils. These relate to: *within-school factors* to do with existing policies and practices; *between-school factors* that arise from the characteristics of local school systems; and *beyond-school factors*, including the demographics, economics, cultures and histories of local areas. Focusing on these factors can create the conditions for 'moving knowledge around'.

Within school factors: Our research suggests that 'schools know more than they use'. This means 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 pupils.

The use of evidence to study teaching within a school can help to foster the development of practices that are more effective in reaching hard to reach learners. Specifically, this can create space for rethinking by interrupting existing discourses. Particularly effective techniques in this respect involve the use of mutual lesson observation, sometimes through video recordings, and evidence collected from pupils 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. Our recent research in Australia suggests that this process requires ethical leadership: specifically, an ethic of care, justice and critique.

Between school factors: Moving beyond what happens within individual schools, research suggests that collaboration between differently performing schools can reduce polarisation within education systems, to the particular benefit of learners who are performing relatively poorly. It does this by both transferring existing knowledge and, more importantly, generating context specific new knowledge.

In terms of schools working in highly disadvantaged contexts, evidence from City Challenge in London and Greater Manchester, and Schools Challenge Cymru in Wales, suggests that school-to-school partnerships can be a powerful means of fostering improvements. Most notably, we have seen how they led to striking improvements in the performance of some schools facing the most challenging circumstances. Significantly, we found that such collaborative arrangements can have a positive impact on the learning of pupils in all of the participating schools.

This is an important finding in that it draws attention to a way of strengthening relatively low performing schools that can, at the same time, help to foster wider improvements in the system. It also offers a convincing argument as to why relatively strong schools should support other schools. Put simply, the evidence is that by helping others you help yourself.

Beyond school factors: Our research also leads me to conclude 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 schools change. This means changing how families and communities work, and enriching what they offer to children. In this respect we have seen 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.

Implications

All of this has 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, not just those that attend their own schools. They also have to develop patterns of internal organization that enable them to have the flexibility to cooperate with other schools and with stakeholders beyond the school gate. 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.

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Background reading

Ainscow, M. (2015) *Towards self-improving school systems: lessons from a city challenge.* London: Routledge

Ainscow, M. (2015) *Struggles for equity in education: The selected works of Mel Ainscow.* London: Routledge World Library of Educationalists series

Ainscow, M. (2016) Collaboration as a strategy for promoting equity in education: possibilities and barriers. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community,* 1 (2), 159 – 172

Ainscow, M. (2024) *Developing Inclusive Schools: Pathways to Success.* Routledge (also available in Spanish from NARCEA)

Ainscow, M. (2025) *Reforming education systems for inclusion and equity.* London: Routledge

Ainscow, M. (2024) *Every learner matters and matters equally: Making education inclusive.* Paper commissioned by UNESCO for the celebration of the 30th Anniversary of the Salamanca Statement. Paris: UNESCO (https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000388991)

Ainscow, M., Armstrong, P., Hughes, B. C. & Rayner, S. M. (2023) *Turning the Tide: a study of place-based partnerships*. The Staff College (https://thestaffcollege.uk/publications/turning-the-tide/)

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

Ainscow, M., Dyson, A., Goldrick, S. and West, M. (2012) *Developing Equitable Education Systems.* London: Routledge

Ainscow, M., Dyson, A., Hopwood, L., and Thomson, S. (2016) *Primary Schools Responding to Diversity: barriers and possibilities.* York: Cambridge Primary Review Trust.

Ainscow, M. and Messiou, K. (2017) Engaging with the views of students to promote inclusion in education. *Journal of Educational Change*, 19(1), 1-17

Harris, J., Carrington, S. and Ainscow, M. (2017) *Promoting equity in schools: collaboration, inquiry and ethical leadership*. London: Routledge

Kerr, K. & Ainscow, M (2023) The development of a methodology for enhancing equity within education systems. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education,* DOI: 10.1080/1743727X.2023.2231862

UNESCO (2017) *Guide for Ensuring Inclusion and Equity in Education.* Paris: UNESCO

Links to relevant professional development resources

'Inclusion and Education: All Means All'. This short animation video is particularly useful as an introduction to the importance of inclusion and equity in education: https://youtu.be/kEyjlqixq9c

'Empowerment, equity and excellence'. This presentation by Mel Ainscow addresses the theme of changing education systems in relation to inclusion and equity: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ir058B2_Z1A

'Promoting inclusion and equity in education: Lessons from international research' A short talk by Mel Ainscow at the Atlantic Rim Collaboratory Summit, Oslo, May 2023: https://youtu.be/9E9fawfkHWk

'The Index for Inclusion'. This review and development framework has been used in many countries across the world to promote inclusion in schools: https://www.eenet.org.uk/resources/docs/Index%20English.pdf

'Reaching Out to All Learners'. A resource pack of professional developed by the International Bureau of Education-UNESCO. Available free at: https://www.ibe.unesco.org/en/node/103?hub=41

'The Universal Design for Learning'. A framework that is widely used internationally to make learning inclusive and transformative for everyone: https://www.cast.org/impact/universal-design-for-learning-udl

'Every school is inclusive: to some degree'. During this interview, Mel Ainscow explains international developments over the last 30 years in relation to inclusion and equity in education: https://youtu.be/oKz09ngdNcA

'Reaching the Hard to Reach'. These professional development materials focus on teacher/student dialogue as a strategy for promoting inclusive classrooms (available in five languages): https://reachingthehardtoreach.eu/

'The UNESCO Open File on Inclusive Education'. An introduction for policy-makers and managers who have an important role to play in bringing about the change needed to make inclusive education a reality: https://www.eenet.org.uk/resources/docs/132164e.pdf

'The Harlem Children's Zone'. Attempts to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty, with on-the-ground, all-around programming that builds up opportunities for children and families to thrive in school and work: *https://hcz.org/*

'Developing children's zones for England: What's the evidence?'
https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/13661/pdf/developing_childrens_zones1.pdf

'***Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland***'. Takes a place-based approach to improving outcomes for children, young people and their communities: *Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland*

'Time for an inclusive turn'. This blog considers developments in Portugal, one of the most inclusive education systems:
https://internationalednews.com/2022/03/30/time-for-an-inclusive-turn-mel-ainscow-on-inclusion-as-a-guiding-principle-for-educational-reform-in-portugal/