

10 UNDERSTANDING THE CHANGING ROLE OF ENGLISH LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITIES IN PROMOTING INCLUSION

Local Education Authorities (LEAs) in England are accountable to their electorates and to the Secretary of State for maintained schools in their areas. In this sense they can be seen as part of the democratic process by which educational provision is made available for all children and young people within a local area. However, since 1988, a series of national reforms have gradually eroded the power of LEAs. In essence, the stated aim has been to delegate greater responsibility to the level of schools in the belief that this will help to foster improvements in standards.

In this chapter, we consider the implications of these changes for efforts to develop more inclusive forms of education. In particular, we reflect upon our recent experience of working with colleagues in a number of English LEAs as they have attempted to move policy and practice forward. This begins the process of mapping out the issues in order to guide further research and development activities. It also leads us to be concerned about the way in which the erosion of local control of education may make it more difficult to foster inclusive arrangements.

Inclusion is arguably the major issue facing the English education system. Although the Government boasts of apparent improvements in national test and examination results, many pupils still feel marginalised, others are excluded because of their behaviour, and, of course, a significant minority are separated into special education provision. Meanwhile, following the publication of national examination results in the summer of 2002, it was widely reported that some 30,000 youngsters had left school without any qualifications at all.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the two most consistently recurring national policy themes in English education over the last few years have been concerned with 'raising standards' and 'promoting inclusion.' The challenge for Local Education Authorities (LEAs) has been, and continues to be, the pursuit of these twin aims during a period of fundamental reform of the education service.

CONTEXT

The significance of the changes that have occurred, and are continuing to occur, in respect of the role of LEAs can only be understood if they are viewed within the context of the wider developments in the English education service over the last twenty years or so. In particular, there has been an intensification of political interest

in education, especially regarding standards and the management and governance of the state system. This led to a variety of legislative efforts to improve schools during the 1980s, culminating in a series of Acts of Parliament, of which the 1988 Education Reform Act was the most significant. These Acts were consolidated by further legislation in the early 1990s and continued by the Labour Government that came into office in 1997.

Broadly speaking, there are four key elements of government policy that, taken together, provide the context within which LEAs are now required to operate (Ainscow et al, 1999). First of all, they are required to have Educational Development Plans (EDPs) in which they must describe their proposals for approval by the Secretary of State, setting out performance targets, a school improvement programme, and a range of supporting information. Then, the *Code of Practice on LEA-School Relations* makes explicit the principles, expectations, powers and responsibilities that must guide the work of LEAs in relation to schools. In particular, it lays down the principle that LEA intervention in schools must be 'in inverse proportion to success,' and places clear responsibilities on LEAs to intervene in schools found to have serious weaknesses, or placed in special measures, following an inspection. So, as the EDP prescribes what LEAs are required to do, the Code focuses on how it should be done. *Fair Funding* sets out to clear the 'funding fog' surrounding education budgets by requiring resources to be allocated transparently and in line with a clear definition of the respective roles of schools and the LEA. Finally, the *Framework for the Inspection of Local Education Authorities* defines the basis of the inspection framework that, it is argued, will identify the strengths and weaknesses of each LEA inspected. Together, then, these four strands of government policy determine what LEAs address, how they operate, how all of it is funded, and how the whole process is monitored and evaluated.

Over a period of less than twenty years, therefore, the governance of the education service in England has been fundamentally changed. These changes have, perhaps, been reflected most significantly in the evolving relationships between schools, and between schools and their LEA. In particular, schools have become much less dependent on their LEAs. This movement from 'dependency' towards greater 'independence' has been consistently orchestrated through legislation and associated guidance from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). This shift was summarised in the Government's 1997 consultation document, *Excellence in Schools*, which stated that the role of LEAs was not to control schools, but to challenge all schools to improve and support those which need help to raise standards.

The relationship between schools has also changed. Competition between schools is now seen to be one of the keys to 'driving up standards' and further reducing the control of the local authority over provision. This was encouraged through the introduction of grant-maintained status for schools (now referred to as 'foundation schools') and open enrolment, supported by the publication of league tables of school results. All of this was intended to 'liberate' schools from the bureaucracy of local government and establish what has been described as school

quasi-markets, in which effective schools would have an 'arms-length' relationship with the LEA and, indeed, with each other (Thrupp, 2001).

So fundamental has been the reform of the education service, and so significant have been the reductions in the powers of the LEA, that the question may now be asked: 'Do LEAs any longer have the capacity to make a difference?' Our own research indicates that, in terms of the promotion of inclusive policies and practices, significant differences exist between 'similar' LEAs, and that these differences, at least in part, are due to strategic planning and policy decisions taken at the LEA level (Ainscow et al, 2000). Moreover, there is abundant statistical evidence to indicate that some groups of children and young people are most 'at risk' of marginalisation, underachievement or exclusion – particularly in a climate in which schools and LEAs are under such severe pressure to improve test results. What follows, therefore, is based on two assumptions. First of all, we presume that LEAs can and do 'make a difference' to the development of inclusive education; and secondly, we believe that LEAs have a fundamental responsibility to promote inclusion, whilst simultaneously seeking to 'raise standards.'

COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY

The work that we have been doing involves the use of an approach to research that we refer to as 'collaborative inquiry.' This approach advocates practitioner research, carried out in partnership with academics, as a means of developing better understanding of educational processes (Ainscow, 1999). Kurt Lewin's dictum that you cannot understand an organisation until you try to change it is, perhaps, the clearest justification for this approach (Schein, 2001). In practical terms, we believe that such understanding is best developed as a result of 'outsiders,' such as ourselves, working alongside headteachers, local authority staff and other stakeholders as they attempt to move policy and practice forward by seeking practical solutions to complex problems.

We argue that this approach can be used to overcome the traditional gap between research and practice. What is proposed here is an alternative view, in line with Robinson (1998) suggestion that research findings may well be ignored, regardless of how well they are communicated, if they bypass the ways in which practitioners formulate the problems they face and the constraints within which they work. The potential benefits of collaborative inquiry, in which an open dialogue can develop, are considerable. The ideal we aspire to is a process through which critical reflection leads to understandings that can have an immediate and direct impact on the development of thinking and practice in the field. However, it has to be recognised that participatory research of this kind is fraught with difficulties, not least in terms of developing ways of ensuring that the findings have relevance to a wider audience.

A programme of collaborative research that we have undertaken during the last four years forms the basis of this Chapter. This started with a small-scale study, commissioned by the DfES, that led to the publication in 1999 of a report called

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