

Tackling issues of social justice; A family case study approach to assessing the impact of an area-based initiative implemented by a partnership between a school and social housing provider.

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Background

Social justice in education implies, at the very least, that children regardless of location should receive the same quality of education. However, in England this is not the case; with children living in 'deprived' neighbourhoods fairing consistently less well than those living in more affluent areas. Furthermore, families living in deprived neighbourhoods typically experience a host of other problems such as increased unemployment, ill-health, illiteracy and innumeracy, welfare dependency, and unfit dwellings (Palmer et al, 2007).

Since the 1960's, the government has sought to address spatial inequality through the use of area-based initiatives (ABIs). When the Labour government came to office in 1997, there was a revival of this type of policy with the introduction of initiatives such as Education Action Zones and Excellence in Cities. Although, the aims of these policies are varied; they all work on the assumption that implementing interventions at a neighbourhood level can help to combat some of the problems associated with deprived neighbourhoods which in turn will positively impact children's educational outcomes.

This paper describes an ongoing research project which focuses on tracking the development of an innovative approach to spatial inequality using area-based interventions. Unusually, the initiative has been implemented by a joint partnership between a school and a social housing provider which serves a deprived suburb in the North West of England. Weston Academy opened in 2008, Weston Housing Trust, set out with a clear vision; aiming to improve the life chances of their pupils, their families and the wider community by not only providing a higher standard of education but also develop a more sustainable community; improving living conditions, opportunities of employment and develop community cohesion.

The fact that Weston Academy's area initiative has been implemented at a local level is significant in a number of ways. Research suggests that typically ABIs have had limited impacts (Rees et al., 2007) often because they have been determined by national priorities rather than local needs (Power et al., 2005). Furthermore, ABIs aims, the actions they take, and the outcomes they anticipate, are often not clearly connected (Dyson et al., 2009). Weston Academy therefore presents an interesting opportunity to assess whether a new approach, where the partners' concerns are rooted in the community they serve, is able to make more of a significant impact.

Research Questions

The research described in this paper involves tracking the lives of twelve families whose children attend Weston Academy. Through recurrent qualitative data collection exercises, the research aims to understand the impact that Weston Academy is having upon their lives, in an effort to assess whether an area-based initiative of this type can combat some of the problems associated with spatial inequality.

Methods

This study uses an exploratory case study design consisting of twelve individual case units representing each family in the sample. Each family was purposively selected to ensure that the sample broadly reflected Weston Academy's intake. Four cycles of data collection are planned to be

conducted over an eighteen month period, by September of 2010, three of these will have been completed. The first two rounds of data collection activities have consisted of individual interviews with each child and a separate interview with one of their parents. I also plan to use other qualitative data collection activities such as observations and focus groups whilst also interviewing other key stakeholders implementing the initiative.

Frame

Area-based initiatives, such as the one implemented by Weston Academy are grounded by a fundamental assumption that such an intervention is purposeful. Therefore, implying that the stakeholders have a more or less implicit theory of how the intervention will work including a rationale, expected outcomes and how certain actions will lead to these outcomes being achieved. To track the development of this process, the research project has used a theory of change framework. This theoretical approach involves 'a systematic and cumulative study of the links between activities, outcomes and context of the initiative' (Connell and Kubisch, 1998: 16). Therefore, by identifying the underpinning rationale, actions and expected outcomes this research will provide a systematic overview of how this initiative has progressed and how certain actions have achieved both intended and (in some cases) unintended outcomes.

Research findings

Despite Weston Academy's hopes to not fall into the traps of other ABIs, the research conducted for this study shows the initiative so far has had limited impact. Although, implemented by local partners who are actively engaged and aware of contextual factors they have found it difficult to not succumb to external policy demands. For example, rather than develop a coherent community engagement strategy the school has focused on traditional school improvement measures such as increasing attainment. Furthermore, stakeholders implementing the strategy have found the task of articulating a coherent theory of how certain actions will lead to intended outcomes increasingly difficult. Overall, there seems to be a difficulty in balancing the demands of improving educational attainment with that of a more holistic approach to children's welfare. This has meant that some families have benefitted in some ways from multi-agency intervention but many are still off the radar. Therefore, this research questions how conducive the current policy context is to such area-based approaches to deprivation and the extent that schools are able to dramatically influence the neighbourhoods which they serve.

References

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