

Futureproofing an Inclusive Urban Economy

Redefining education policy in our towns and cities

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Futureproofing an Inclusive Urban Economy: Redefining education policy in our towns and cities

In Summary

1. Education is key in the evolution of inclusive urban economies, but there is a need for towns and cities to do things differently. The link between education and the development of inclusive urban places goes beyond policy approaches focused on improving and measuring examination results and employment outcomes. High academic achievements alone will not futureproof an inclusive economy.
2. If we want inclusive future towns and cities and more equitable urban economies that are based on solidarity and co-operation, urban education policy needs to move beyond a focus on individual academic achievement. Towns and cities can redefine approaches to education policy, developing a systematic approach to build stronger, more democratic learning and decision-making relationships with children and young people from urban communities.
3. Strategies to develop inclusive economic policy and practice must hone in on the vital role that education has to play in building the skills, knowledge and relationships that enable children and young people not only to have the right to be heard but to be respected and taken seriously by those in power – to be young urban decision-makers.
4. Education for an inclusive urban economy should set out to connect children and young people to the information they need – and the people they need to know – in order to participate in informed democratic decision-making in the place where they live.

In Detail

1. Introduction

Towns and cities are increasingly looking for new ways of addressing issues of inequality and urban poverty by setting out to build more inclusive urban places and economies.

Evidence of this can be seen in initiatives such as the [OECD's Champion Mayors for Inclusive Growth](#), launched in March 2016; the development of [inclusive growth strategies in city regions](#) like Greater Manchester; and the widening impact of the [Cleveland Model](#) in the UK. The best-known example of this change in economic approach is the [city of Preston](#), which in 2011, influenced by the success of the Cleveland Model, committed to an alternative approach to economic development by supporting co-operatives and is [now one of 32 co-operative councils](#) in the UK.

Instead of following individualistic, market driven approaches that serve private concerns, the initiatives outlined above **prioritise economic relationships based on solidarity and co-operation, relationships that are considered to be fundamental in the development of sustainable and inclusive economic activities and policies.**

2. Background: Traditional approaches to education and inclusive urban economies

There is no doubt that education is seen as key in developing more socially equitable, inclusive towns and cities. Engagement relationships between urban education institutions and the communities in which they are situated have long

been seen to offer the potential to have a positive effect on a wide range of socio-economic indicators.

However, economists and urban policymakers tend to discuss education and inclusive towns and cities in one of two ways:

- The need to improve academic outcomes for sustainable and inclusive growth through education interventions.
- A focus on projects that teach children, young people and adults about inclusive growth, the social solidarity economy, fair trade, how to form a co-operative etc.

There is a lack of emphasis on **how a town or city's approach to education policy and practice can build strong relationships between and among children and young people in urban communities** – and between communities and policymakers.

This gap in policy discussions on the role of education in the development of inclusive urban economies means that there is a tendency to concentrate efforts on relationships between groups of *professionals*, who then make collaborative decisions about what is best on behalf of children and young people, their schools and communities.

Through [my research](#), I have found that policy and research on education and inclusive economies does not make the correlations between education policy and practice and the development of the characteristics, relationships, skills and knowledge required by a socially just, democratic urban economy.

3. Redefining approaches to education: Beyond exam results

Redefining a town or city's education policies and practices can help to lay the foundations for more inclusive urban places and economies. There is a [need to go beyond traditional, professionally driven approaches](#) that focus on issues of socio-economic disadvantage and educational attainment problems, and enable the perspectives of children and young people to be central in discourses of what it means to be an inclusive town or city.

Education has a vital role to play in developing the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that enable people to contribute to and benefit from an inclusive and sustainable future. Learning to form clear and purposeful goals, work with others with different perspectives, find untapped opportunities and identify multiple solutions to big problems will be essential in the coming years. Education needs to aim to do more than prepare young people for the world of work; it needs to equip students with the skills they need to become active, responsible and engaged citizens.

[OECD 2018](#)

Urban policymakers need to ask the following questions:

- What characteristics, relationships, skills and knowledge do today's children and young people need in order to develop the agency, sense of purpose and competencies required to shape an inclusive town or city?
- What type of education policies can help to nurture these characteristics, relationships, skills and knowledge?

This first briefing note starts to address these questions, providing examples of policy change informed by the study's urban case studies.

4. Who makes a town/city?

Community: a [feeling of belongingness within a group](#). A [sense of communal being-ness](#).

By providing children and young people with opportunities to interact with a range of other citizens, and participate in urban decision-making processes, [towns and cities can develop the long-lasting trusting relationships](#) that are needed to [get things done collectively](#). All citizens, no matter what age, have a shared interest in advancing the place where they live. Including, rather than excluding our youngest citizens, in urban change-making leads to a shared, inter-generational sense of the possibilities that such engagement can achieve, as opposed to disillusionment at adult-dominated decision-making on the behalf of children and young people.

Children and young people are often overlooked as community partners in towns' and cities' democratic decision-making processes.

- Education policy needs to engage and connect children and young people across the town or city as active citizens and change agents, who have a fundamental role in futureproofing their inclusive town/city.
- It is vital that the future town/city is imagined from the perspective of children and young people and that urban education policy is developed accordingly.

5. Redefining education policy for an inclusive urban community

Towns and cities can change their policy perceptions of:

1. **Children and young people:** if urban education policymakers [only view children as students](#), they are likely to see them as school-based and separate from other spheres of life – and policy will reflect this. Instead, cities' education and economic policies could be designed to heighten the visibility of the role of children and young people as citizens with growing capabilities and as agents of change.
2. **Sites of education:** look beyond the school gates. Develop policies that make children and young people see the town or city itself as a place of learning.
3. **Urban areas of socio-economic disadvantage:** set out to understand the town/city in its diversity by developing policies that enable policymakers to learn from and with the youngest residents, recognising and facilitating their democratic right to experience the city as active citizens and change agents.

We can look to other urban places for examples of how to redefine education policies to include children and young people as valued citizens, who are actively engaged in urban democratic decision-making processes to develop an inclusive town/city.

Example 1: Barcelona City Council

Barcelona's approach to urban policymaking is [explicitly designed to heighten the visibility of the role of children and young people](#) as citizens with growing capabilities and as agents of change for the city.

Barcelona City Council considers its youngest citizens as key to achieving collective urban improvements in the present and the future, as shown in the core priorities below.

Three core policy priorities from Barcelona

1. Develop urban policies that set out to generate children and young people's knowledge related to the political agenda and urban decision-making processes.
2. Put into place processes that enable children and young people to share their knowledge and enrich social debates.
3. [Design systems so that a wide range of children and young people from all areas can contribute to improving local policies.](#)

Example 2: Instituto Maria e João Aleixo (IMJA), Rio de Janeiro

[IMJA's UNIperiferias](#) (University of the Peripheries) challenges a city's traditional way of structuring knowledge and knowledge production. It deliberately shifts knowledge production around issues of urban socio-economic disadvantage away from city centre academics in universities to sites of learning situated in the areas themselves. The aim is to co-produce training, research and social action that values and helps to develop the expertise of community members as city change agents for social justice. The following suggested policy priorities have emerged from IMJA's work:

Three core policy priorities from IMJA, Rio de Janeiro

1. Redefine education policy to develop collaborative learning networks among children in different urban neighbourhoods – and between

children, neighbourhood decision-makers and town/city centre policymakers.

2. See learning opportunities as situated in and arising from urban communities, rather than prioritizing professional knowledge from town or city centre institutions. To develop an inclusive town or city, it is essential for children and young people to experience and understand the town/city in its many dimensions; to have the 'right to the city'.
3. Change how policymakers learn about the realities of life in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. Invite children and young people from these areas to act as urban experts and educators capable of shaping public policies in their communities and beyond.

Alongside the core priorities above, this briefing note concludes by suggesting that towns and cities could also consider two further ideas for redefining urban education policy:

1. **Urban learning labs:** identify previously overlooked urban areas as sites of possibility for collaborative urban learning labs, where our youngest citizens and urban policymakers can develop ideas together for a shared inclusive town/city, generating children and young people's knowledge of the urban political agenda and decision-making processes.
2. **Urban apprenticeships:** develop an urban apprenticeship programme, where the aim is to give children and young people the 'Right to the Town/City' – in its entirety. Urban education policy should set out to develop learning opportunities that promote the exploration of diverse areas of the town/city beyond the museums, art galleries of traditional school visits. Instead, develop a programme that enables children and young people to contribute to improving policies for the benefit of all

citizens. Local children and young people should be viewed as urban experts and educators, teaching others about the area where they live, its possibilities and its challenges.

6. About the project

The research, funded by The Leverhulme Trust, is a three-year international comparative project with case studies in Barcelona, Berlin, New York City and Rio de Janeiro. The project emerged from a desire to imagine the inclusive urban economy from an education perspective.

International thinking in the field of social justice and the economy calls for education “[to focus on learning environments and on new approaches to learning for greater justice, social equity and global solidarity](#)” – to [empower young people](#) to help build flourishing, [sustainable and inclusive communities](#) that foster notions of social justice and solidarity.

Cities need to provide a context in which such learning environments and approaches can flourish. However, at present, urban economic policy, practice and research provides few opportunities to consider how the lived realities of everyday practices in education – and the impact of policy upon these practices – can help or hinder the development of a more inclusive and socially just place.

This first report builds on desk research and one-to-one interviews with city policymakers and educators to outline how a city’s approach to education policy can be designed to build a sense of [urban relatedness and collectivity](#) to equip young citizens with the skills, knowledge and relationships they will need to futureproof the inclusive city.

The second policy briefing in this series will outline further examples from the study, focusing on how changing a city’s approach to education practice –

teaching, learning and the curriculum – can help to futureproof an inclusive urban economy.

Author



Dr Deborah Ralls is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in the [Manchester Institute of Education](#) and the [Manchester Urban Institute](#) at The University of Manchester. She is the Principal Investigator working on an international comparative research project funded by the Leverhulme Trust: Redefining Education for an Urban Social Solidarity Economy: Becoming Relational.

Deborah is currently planning her next research project, which will work with city partners to put the findings from this study into practice and give children and young people the opportunities to develop the relationships, skills and knowledge that they need to become active and engaged change agents for an inclusive city.

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