Connected Communities

Conceptualising school-community relations in disadvantaged areas

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Executive Summary
Taking state-funded schools as an exemplar of public services, this study has explored the role of schools in relation to geographical communities which experience economic deprivation and associated disadvantages. Reviewing literature primarily from the U.K. and U.S., it has been particularly interested in how activities linking schools and communities have been conceptualised, and what this suggests about how the self-reliance, sustainability and well-being of disadvantaged communities might be developed.

A mapping framework for organising and analysing the literature is presented. It focuses attention on:

i. the sorts of actions which have purposefully been taken to link schools and communities and tackle disadvantage at a community-level

ii. what the literature says about the purposes of these actions and who has the power to act.

The literature indicates that professionals working within existing societal arrangements and structures appear best placed to have impacts on communities’ experiences of disadvantage in terms of tangible outcomes relating to public services.

This has implications for the emerging agenda of localism. Promoting local action is likely to reinforce a focus on ameliorative actions within existing arrangements, and policy makers must be cautious about anticipating transformative outcomes which local actions cannot realistically achieve. Strengthening local actions will require greater dialogue between professionals and communities, leading, at least, to shared agendas. Research is needed into the best mechanisms for achieving this.

A more transformative social agenda will require some long-term alignment of local, regional and national activities, in order to impact on wider societal structures.

Researchers and Project Partners
The analysis presented here has been informed through discussions with Helen Gunter and Carlo Raffo. The authors would also like to thank the following people for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper: Michael Apple, Sam Baars, Dennis Beach, Michael Bradford, Gillian Evans, Alan Harding, Ben Levin, Ruth Lupton, Chris Power, Dolf van Veen, John Smyth and Chris Taylor.

Key words
Schools, communities, relationships, disadvantage, power, social stance, action.
1. Introduction

This literature-based scoping study forms part of AHRC’s Connected Communities programme. Taking state-funded schools as an exemplar of public services, it has explored the role of schools in relation to geographical communities which experience economic deprivation and associated disadvantages. Reviewing literature primarily from the U.K. and U.S., the study has been particularly interested in how activities linking schools and communities have been conceptualised in the literature, and what this suggests about how the self-reliance, sustainability and well-being of disadvantaged communities might be developed.

This short discussion paper presents a mapping framework for organising and analysing the literature. In doing so, it focuses attention on:

i. the sorts of actions which have purposefully been taken to link schools and communities, and in doing so, tackle disadvantage at a community-level

ii. what the literature says about the understandings embedded in these actions – both about the purposes of the actions being taken, and who has the power to act.

At the outset, it is important to be clear that the framework’s purpose is to help readers to navigate the literature by bringing some clarity to complex, wide-ranging, interrelated ideas. Inevitably this requires some simplification, but this is also what gives the framework its utility. The review has also worked with the understandings of community embedded in the literature, which have tended to treat communities as homogenous and geographically-located. While recognising this to be problematic, other reviews within the Connected Communities programme have specifically explored notions of ‘community’.

The paper concludes by considering some of the central implications for research and policy.

2. Mapping the field of school-community relations in disadvantaged areas

The mapping framework presented here has been tested with experts in the field. It has two components. The first identifies the range of substantive actions taken to link schools and communities to tackle disadvantage at a community-level. The second presents an analytical framework which poses two broad questions of the literature:
1. Where does the literature suggest the impetus for action comes from and who holds the power in school-community engagement activities?

2. What does it suggest are the purposes of action, and what social stances does it embody?

The framework is explained in detail below.

**2.1 Substantive actions to engage schools and communities**

In very simple terms, actions to engage schools and communities fall into two broad categories – school-led actions and community-led actions. The situation is, of course, much more fluid and complex than this simple binary suggests, but it nonetheless serves the useful purpose of helping to organise the variety of activities reported in the literature.

**2.1.1 School-led actions**

The literature points to four broad types of action:

**i. Schools as providers of services and facilities**

In addition to their education function, there is a substantial international literature about the role of schools in providing or acting as a base for the provision of a wide range of services and facilities to disadvantaged communities. These can include parenting support and childcare; access to health care, benefits advice and housing services; adult learning; and access to community leisure, library and I.T. facilities. Such schools are frequently termed ‘full-service’, ‘extended’ or ‘community’ schools.

**ii. Schools developing communities’ social and civic capacity**

There is an established, though smaller body of literature, about schools actively working to build positive relationships, social networks, and a sense of cohesion and pride within communities – both between community members, and communities and professionals. Such actions can go beyond the building of interpersonal, ‘social capital’. They can also have an explicitly ‘civic’ dimension which seeks to make communities aware of their relationships to wider social and political contexts, and to develop the knowledge and skills to act within these. In both instances, there is an emphasis on schools helping communities to become better able to solve their own problems.

**iii. Schools as engines of area regeneration**

Although much more limited, there is a strand in the literature which suggests that schools can play an integral role in the development of community infrastructures. For instance, they may be actively involved in local economic development planning, ensuring that curriculum development is attuned to the needs of local economic growth sectors. Schools may also act independently to stimulate economic growth. One emerging model is of schools establishing their own for-profit businesses (e.g. hotels, restaurants) which provide local employment and vocational education. The development of affordable housing and mixed income communities has also been linked to schools.
For example, affordable housing can be concentrated near schools with the intention of creating a market for housing, developing mixed income communities and school populations, and reducing high student mobility rates.

### iv. Schools developing community-responsive curricula and pedagogy

There is a growing body of literature about area-based curricula and pedagogy. In this approach, community is understood in terms of the history and experience of people living in the area served by a school or group of schools, and of the future opportunities available there. Schools integrate this history, experience, and range of opportunities into their curricula and pedagogical approaches. In doing so, they draw on communities’ resources and connect with forms of knowledge that exist outside schools. The aim is to develop schooling which is meaningful to the lives of people in the community.

### 2.1.2 Community-led actions

The literature points to four broad types of action:

#### i. Parents exercising choice

There is a literature around the marketisation of education and the role parental choice plays in this. This anticipates that schools, in marketing themselves to parents, will be responsive to their expectations.

#### ii. Communities’ involvement in school governance

There is a literature (though little is specifically on disadvantaged communities) about the formal involvement of community members in the leadership and management of schools, and about formal mechanisms through which community members can hold schools to account.

#### iii. Community organising

There is a small but very specific body of literature, almost exclusive to the U.S., on community organising. This is a mechanism, often led by trade unions and professional advocacy organisations, to mobilise the interests and power of community members to make community groups the primary agents for educational reform.

#### iv. Communities establishing schools

Policies which have allowed communities to found new schools, lying outside existing educational arrangements, have received some attention in the literature. This is most substantial with regard to the Charter School movement in the U.S., where Charter Schools have been established in disadvantaged communities, often with the support of trade unions, employers, or other external organisations.
2.2 A framework for analysing substantive actions

Figure 1 (below) presents a framework for analysing the range of actions set out above. For clarity, this takes the form of a set of intersecting dimensions against which literatures can be situated. The first dimension is ‘power and control’. This explores whose interests the literature reports as driving efforts to link schools and communities. The second dimension is ‘social stance’. This explores the purposes the literature attributes to actions linking schools and communities.

**Figure 1. A framework for analysing the literature**

![Diagram showing the framework with intersecting dimensions: Power and control and Social stance.]

**2.2.1 The dimensions explained**

**i. Power and control**

- This dimension invites questions about: Who sets the agenda for efforts to link schools and communities? Whose interests are being served? Who has the power to take action, and who has the power to stop these actions working as anticipated?

- This dimension is suggested to have two poles. At one end are ‘exogenous agendas’ – i.e. those which are determined outside communities. These represent the understandings of policy makers or other ‘external agents’ or professionals, rather than understandings from within communities which reflect the ‘lived experiences’ of community members. These ‘lived experiences’ are at the other pole, labelled ‘endogenous agendas’. This refers to ‘grass roots’, ‘community-generated’ agendas, determined by the needs and interests of community members.
The implication is that ‘exogenous’ and ‘endogenous’ agendas are opposing – and indeed, they may conflict. But even at the extremes, this is not necessarily so. Even if separately formulated and clearly located at either end of the continuum, professional and community agendas may be complementary. Similarly, professional agendas may present a response to community concerns, or vice versa.

In moving increasingly towards the centre of the continuum, professionals would be working more closely with communities to develop agendas for action, and vice versa. Agendas located at the centre would be jointly developed and truly shared by professionals and community members.

Importantly, agendas coming from one direction or the other must not be thought of in simple binary terms – ‘good’ or ‘bad’; ‘including’ or ‘excluding’. In some instances professionals may be better able to determine a feasible agenda, and in others this is true of community groups.

ii. Social stance

This dimension is about how disadvantage is understood and is to be responded to. At one end of the continuum are broadly conservative responses – i.e. those which are content to operate within existing societal arrangements by ‘improving’ schools, or offering ‘compensatory education’ or additional services or resources. Moving down the continuum, responses may be more progressive in seeking to involve schools in ameliorating some of the barriers to learning which arise from living in disadvantaged circumstances – e.g. ill-health and poor housing. At the other pole, actions are concerned with transforming wider societal arrangements, the argument being that schools alone cannot overcome the disadvantage experienced by communities in any fundamental way.

Again, while these are presented as opposing stances along a continuum, the situation is more nuanced. Indeed, there are many authors who argue that tackling community disadvantage requires a range of actions across this continuum; schools need to offer high quality teaching and learning, and to ameliorate barriers to learning in the community, and to act to challenge wider societal arrangements (for instance, by lobbying government).

It is important to think about the poles of each dimension as representing ‘pulls’ rather than fixed points. What this means is that any set of interactions between schools and communities needs to be considered as a tendency in a particular direction rather than as a clearly fixed position. Different ways of conceptualising school-community links are likely to extend beyond simple positions, to cover areas of the quadrants in Figure 1. For instance, community organising is always towards the ‘grass roots’ community-end of the power and control dimension, but may ‘seep’ towards external and professional agendas where there is a high level of professional support for organising. Similarly, community organising may be seen as a way of producing societal change – but it may equally be focused on a single issue (e.g. replacing a school principal) without any broader change agenda.
3. Locating the literature

Conceptually, the research literature is mainly located towards the exogenous side of the power and control dimension, with researchers tending to align themselves with educational professionals. Even if critiquing professionals’ actions or studying mechanisms for community involvement such as school governing bodies, their focus has typically been on how professionals might act more effectively. There are far fewer studies which can be located towards the endogenous end of the continuum, and even then, they often focus on instances of community organising which have some professional involvement and leadership.

In terms of social stance, the research literature can be overwhelmingly located in the upper quadrants of Figure 1, being concerned with working within existing arrangements. This reflects the fact that both professionals and community members tend to act on those factors affecting local communities which they can directly impact upon. Schools may, for instance, be able to engineer more efficient service provision in disadvantaged communities, but it is much harder for them to change existing arrangements in more fundamental ways. Similarly, even actions which can be considered radical for communities (for example, establishing a new school) are not fundamentally transformative in respective of wider societal arrangements.

Overall, this indicates some of the limits of actions to link schools and communities, which are created by their very (geographically-situated) local nature. Simply, it is extremely difficult for schools or disadvantaged communities to influence wider societal structures, as their primary influence is in the neighbourhood contexts where they are embedded. Schools acting as engines of area regeneration are perhaps working as far towards a transformative agenda as is possible in a local context – and even then, some studies suggest that disadvantaged communities have been further marginalised by efforts to change community structures. For example, mixed income communities are not always well integrated with equal access to services and facilities for families from different backgrounds.

That the research is weighted towards professional concerns is also likely to reflect the comparative ease researchers have in gaining access to professionals compared to community members, and that professionals have more direct opportunities to reform local services. Communities can oppose professionals, but if they want to influence schools or services, they still need professionals to act on their views.
4. Some implications for policy and research

1. Research is needed to populate those areas of the framework where there is little literature available. For example, very little research has sought to develop in-depth understandings of how disadvantage is experienced by community members and the roles they think schools could play in responding to this. Addressing this will also be important in ensuring that communities are not simply treated as homogenous entities. Research also needs to develop a deeper awareness of how local actors exercise their power (e.g. to include or exclude certain groups; or to dominate or to work with others), and to understand how multiple agendas and actions play out simultaneously in local areas.

2. The literature is overwhelmingly embedded in particular national and/or local contexts. For instance, community organising literature is confined almost exclusively to the U.S. and linked to a history of civil rights and trade union activism. There is an absence of rigorous comparative research which can identify the extents to which existing knowledge is transferable across contexts.

3. The analysis indicates that professionals working within existing arrangements appear best placed to have impacts on communities’ experiences of disadvantage in terms of tangible, measurable outcomes relating to services. This has implications for the emerging agenda of localism. Promoting local action is likely to reinforce a focus on ameliorative actions within existing arrangements, and policy makers must be cautious about anticipating transformative outcomes which local actions cannot realistically achieve. Strengthening local actions will require greater dialogue between professionals and communities, leading, at least, to shared agendas. Research is needed into the best mechanisms for achieving this. To be more transformative, actions will be needed which can impact on wider social structures, and a transformative social agenda will require some alignment of local, regional and national activity to this end.
References and external links


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The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

“to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities.”

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC’s Connected Communities web pages at:

www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx