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Building communities for the future

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Abstract

While partnerships, in England, between schools and their communities are encouraged, 'authentic' engagement in these partnerships is constrained by a number of factors. This article explores some of these factors and puts forward some suggestions as to how a community-orientated approach, operating through Place-Based Education, could impact positively on the educational environment and wider issues of regeneration.

Keywords: Community; Regeneration; Place-Based Education; Curriculum; Engagement; Localism.

Introduction

Previous UK governments and iterations of departments responsible for education have explored the linkage between schools, communities and regeneration (DCSF 2007; DfES 2006). While the UK Government and the acronyms have changed, the imperative for schools to 'engage with their wider community... is inherent in the direction of public sector reform and localism' (Thomas 2012, p. 10). This imperative exists within a complex relationship between schools, communities and curricula. This article explores some of these complexities, looking at the way in which place, community and the nature of public space interact with, and indeed shape, the educational environment.

School approaches to community engagement

The relationship between school and community is complex (Bertotti et al. 2011; Coomber 2009; Lavia & Moore 2009; Thomas 2012). This complexity flows from the dynamic nature of communities as sites of engagement (Coomber 2009; Lavia & Moore 2009) and from the difficulty in defining 'community'. For a school, the community is likely to include students, their parents and carers, and their teachers. One also needs to consider other school staff, and the school's wider stakeholders (however these are defined). However, the definition could, or possibly should, include those who might not have a direct link to the school, but who are geographically close to the building. The community is, therefore, not homogeneous, and one cannot assume that an individual's perceptions and experiences of a community are necessarily shared across the community's population (Christiansen & O'Brien 2003; Orellana 1999; Pink 2008). This differential experience is important if, as some commentators (Habermas 1991; Lefebvre 1991) believe, public and community space is created through social interaction rather than being introduced as a fully formed entity. There is a need to explore how these differential perceptions play out in the formation of practice.

Taking these complexities as a given, there are, broadly speaking, two competing understandings of the relationship between school and community (Cummings et al. 2007). The first is a school-orientated understanding where communities are framed as resources contributing to the school's own tasks of, for example, raising achievement (Cummings et al. 2007). Seeing this as a task of enabling young people to gain qualifications to leave the community, the school becomes instrumental in the destruction of the community (Cummings et al. 2007). From this perspective, schools are often seen as a source of problems and this has some resonance with ideas that see formal curricula and professional education as undermining a community's confidence in their own knowledge and experience (Freire 2000; Illich 1996). The contrasting approach is a community-orientated understanding, seeing schools as a resource for the community where students are educated into the community rather than as a means to leave it.

The community-orientated understanding (Cummings et al. 2007) is manifest in a number of educational practices which are rooted in the generation of concrete knowledge about the local environment

for community use – an engagement which seeks to diversify the types and sources of knowledge considered to form the basis for valid exploration in the classroom (Facer 2009). This can be located in the field of Place-Based Education (Gruenewald & Smith 2008; Hutchinson 2004; Sobel 2005;) where a collaborative process of inquiry is used to develop curricula in response to the needs and concerns of the local community. The 'archaeological model of learning' (Jaros & Deakin-Crick, 2007) also flows from a community-orientated perspective, beginning with an inquiry into a context and utilising a process of researching and implementing projects related to that context in order to both make a difference in the environment and to develop values, attitudes and dispositions that interact with the living place under examination.

Developing school/community engagement through curriculum design

Both Place-Based Education and the archaeological model of learning offer up ways of building authentic relationships between the school and the community. There are, however, issues to be considered here about the extent to which the nexus of teacher perceptions are rooted in the community within which the school sits and of the ability of the school to engage with that community. For example, Crozier & Reay (2005) have indicated that distances in class and educational level between teachers and the communities that they serve might be a factor in constraining engagement while Higham & Yeomans (2009) state that partnership working in local settings is 'highly locally contingent... as much a product of happenstance and improvisation as it is of strategy and tactics' (p. 20).

There are clearly difficulties in adopting such a community-orientated approach. Morgan & Williamson (2008) talk of how some subject-centred teachers struggle with inquiry-based approaches that are rooted in their students' experience while their students are sometimes reticent, expressing some concern as to the purpose of such enquiry. Ruddock & Flutter (2000) question whether such an approach is intended to empower the students or to use their interests to serve the 'narrow ends of a grade obsessed society' (p. 82). These difficulties point out the fundamentally political nature of this approach:

> *'A curriculum that tells tales of its local communities, then, is not a neutral representation of that environment... [One] cannot assume the rights of one group to name and represent the area for all other groups' (Facer 2009, p. 5).*

The stories that have been told of communities have been used to blame communities themselves for educational problems experienced by the community (Winkley 1987). This can be counterbalanced through tools and approaches that enable dialogue between communities and schools and make visible community resources. As Riley (2008) argues, this is a complex process that requires a rethinking of the assumptions that educators have about their communities, requiring an expenditure of 'time, resources, energies and compassion beyond the classroom walls to not only alleviate some of the impediments that might block the success of their charges but also and perhaps more importantly to understand the sources of frustration, attitudes and actions' (Gordon 2008, p. 191) of their students.

Schools and area development

A number of studies carried out on behalf of the Joseph Rowntree Trust (Carley et al. 2000; Cattell & Evans 1999; Forrest & Kearns 1999) detailed some of these sources of frustration: the characteristic lack of facilities in inner city areas; the way in which young people were not consulted about the deployment of the resources available; and the low standards and poor state of repair of schools. A case could be made that these issues are addressed through regeneration efforts and the capital spend on schools that was a feature of programmes such as Building Schools for the Future. However, issues around consultation and local decision-making remain problematic. In pointing out central government's intention to use community participation to improve strategic planning, service delivery and social cohesion within the Thames Gateway, Sampson (2008) draws our attention to the fact that community participation has 'always been difficult to achieve and successive policies have been unable to involve the local communities, particularly in disadvantaged areas, in any meaningful sense and with tangible benefits' (Sampson 2008, p. 261). This would seem to be particularly marked for those residents who were not already active within the community. The question for educators is how to encourage this activism. The aim of a number of the community-orientated educational initiatives described above is to address these issues through working within the nexus of school, community and curriculum.

Conclusion

Much of regeneration effort originates in a neoliberal analysis of the problems of low-income neighbourhoods (Bridge 2006; Lupton & Tunstall 2008), categorising them in terms of economic capital, placing the problem within the neighbourhood and individualising a structural problem. This belies the fact that local communities are complex and dynamic, acting, to varying degrees, as sites of social networks, services and economic opportunities. 'Historical and cultural assets of place, common situational circumstances of residents and external perceptions of the place are amongst the factors shaping attachment to territorial communities at small area level' (Humphreys 2007, p. 72). Education has a role in shaping this attachment; in order to do so successfully, educators need to understand the communities they serve and the places that these communities occupy.

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