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Exceptional Challenges: Schools and Communities on the Edge

The issues raised in the first two chapters are revisited here through the lens of communities and the exceptional challenges which they present to schools on the edge. This chapter examines:

- the new vocabulary of disadvantage;
- how disadvantage translates into quality of life for communities on the edge;
- the contribution of social capital theory to understanding how social exclusion works;
- how staff in schools on the edge have to understand and negotiate two worlds – the intransigent world of educational policy and the turbulent unpredictable world of their local communities.

The discourse of disadvantage

The language used to describe disadvantage has, with each passing decade, been revisited and re-formed, both to provide a more accurate conceptual rendering and also to soften the more abrasive political edge which locates schools as victims of systemic discrimination. In an era when headteachers' bookshelves contain titles such as *Strategic Marketing for Schools* (Davies and Ellison, 1996) and the DfES website offers advice on how to market your school (DfES, 2006), the label a school carries can make all the difference to its chances for survival. The application of terms such as 'Academy' to describe schools serving peculiarly disadvantaged communities appears as a political sleight of hand in what Alterman (2005) characterises as the 'post-truth political environment', a media saturated

society in which the margin between 'truth' and 'untruth' is harder to discern beneath artful spin and judicious presentation.

The terminology of schools 'in challenging circumstances', applied by government to schools with attainment below what is deemed to be the acceptable threshold, may be read as one such euphemism designed to obscure the reality of schools serving poor neighbourhoods. In 2000, secondary schools were set a series of stepped targets for minimum performance at GCSE. The minimum targets were 20% for 2004 and 25% for 2006. Any schools in 2000 with 25% 5 A*-C at GCSE or less, along with some schools with 35% or more eligibility for free school meals, were described as 'facing challenging circumstances', provided with extra funding, resources and support and monitored by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI). In 2000, 480 mainstream secondary schools were judged to fall into this category (DfES, 2001b).

An even newer intensification of the terminology has been developed for schools in which performance levels are judged at first glance to be in a virtually terminal condition. These are 'schools in *exceptionally* challenging circumstances'. This term came into usage with the launch by the DfES of the SFECC Project in 2001, a shorthand for what were originally designated as Schools Facing Extremely Challenging Circumstances. Later on the word 'extremely' was replaced with 'exceptionally', a descriptor perhaps seen as less contentious. These eight schools, chosen for concentrated intervention over a three year period, fell so far outside the normal parameters of achievement that they were therefore seen as 'exceptions' to the rule. The Project was predicated on the notion that one could distinguish between an unsuccessful school and a school for the unsuccessful. The latter, it was assumed could be turned round with good leadership and appropriate forms of external support, encouragement and resourcing. It was an idea put sternly to the test, as what little we know about schools on the edge is that they are defined to a large extent by the communities they serve.

Communities on the edge

What are the challenges facing communities on the edge? As we have argued in the preceding chapters, what happens outside schools is more telling for achievement than what happens within them, a recurring finding of many of the school effectiveness studies outlined in Chapter 1. The evidence has been remarkably consistent over the four decades since Coleman et al. (1966) and Jencks et al. (1972) reported on inequality as rooted in systemic factors which divide families and communities. In England the significance of social background has most recently been demonstrated in data on the attainment gap at GCSE between children with parents in managerial or professional occupations and those with

parents in unskilled manual occupations. The differential has, for a decade, remained stubbornly at a level of around 44 to 45% (National Statistics, 2005).

While child poverty has fallen as a result of the increase in employment since 1997 (Palmer et al., 2005), income in the UK has gone down and is concentrated in communities which are pushed to the outer edge of the economic mainstream. 50% of those on low incomes live in 20% of small local areas and 50% of primary school children who qualify for free school meals are concentrated in 20% of schools. In ex-manufacturing areas, the decrease in the demand for low skilled workers has compounded disadvantages for people, particularly men, with no qualifications. Disadvantaged groups are more likely to be economically inactive than the population as a whole, a situation which then impacts in a cumulative way on every other index of disadvantage. As Brighouse has pointed out, in urban areas 'there is a chronic and acute shortage of permanent jobs for the unskilled and the semi-skilled, especially for those for whom strength and motor skills are important' (1996: 120). Webster et al., in their study of the transitions in life of the poor, similarly comment on the lack of appropriate employment in poor neighbourhoods.

Current policy emphasises supposed deficits in employability and skills among marginalised adults. This is to be rectified by training, advice, incentives and child-care support. However, this marginal redistribution of income and opportunity will not lift people out of poverty, unless they have access to good quality training and rewarding and secure employment. Poor training and poor employment opportunities tend to be synonymous. Income from decent rather than poor work, for those able to work, is the best way of lifting people out of poverty. (2004: 43)

Households in disadvantaged areas have fewer amenities, such as central heating or washing machines, and are less likely to have access to their own form of transport. In 2001–02, 86% of households in Great Britain in the highest income group had access to a home computer, almost six times as many as for households in the lowest income group. The gap was even wider for Internet connections which give access not only to information but to social contacts beyond the immediate neighbourhood (National Statistics, 2005).

Challenges such as these impact on a day-to-day basis on individuals and families in communities on the edge. It is in the interplay of these facets of disadvantage that we see the erosion of people's sense of self worth and self-efficacy and we get some insight into how those perceptions transfer themselves intergenerationally. Physical and mental health on the one hand, and intellectual and emotional disposition on the other, are not simply correlated but causally linked. Health, in turn, is related causally to the quality of housing (space, dampness, sanitation, safety), to the availability of transport and car ownership in emergencies, to information and people's confidence to deal with bureaucracies and

professionals. Kearns and Parke (2003) point out that in relation to amenities and quality of life, the expectations of residents in poor areas are the same as those in more affluent ones. They are equally concerned with poor housing, street noise, crime, vandalism – ‘they just experience those conditions more often than others’ (2003: 23).

Indeed, poor area is a significant predictor of unhappiness with both disorder in the surroundings and with the surrounding environment, which is not surprising given that certain problems such as a poor general appearance and higher levels of vandalism are more prevalent in poor areas. (837)

The influence of social capital

The complex interweave of circumstance is encapsulated in social capital theory which examines the pattern and intensity of networks among people, the support they receive from those networks and the sense of well-being and empowerment that they derive from shared values and the trust they have in their environment. The OECD definition of social capital is ‘networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups’ (Cote and Healy, 2001: 41). The concept is operationalised in three key measures – trust, social membership and access to networks.

Levels of trust are measured by whether individuals trust their neighbours, whether they consider their neighbourhood a place where people help each other or the degree of apprehension about local people who are seen to pose a threat.

Social membership is measured by the number of organisations, clubs, societies or social groups to which an individual belongs.

Access to networks is measured in terms of people’s ability to make and maintain links in informal situations which offer friendship and support outside of formal organisations. These may be casual or short term (‘weak links’) or close personal relationships (‘strong links’) which develop through extended families, neighbourhoods, local associations and in a range of informal and formal meeting places.

National data (National Statistics, 2005) reveal significant differences in membership of organisations, in face-to-face and virtual networks between the most and least privileged. Union affiliation, the most likely organisation for membership among lower income groups has seen a continuous decline in membership over the last decade. Social trust, as measured by perceptions of neighbourhood, violence, crime and casual contacts is also markedly lower in disadvantaged communities. A key discriminator is whether there are people one can turn to in a crisis. While the more privileged frequently enjoy wide networks of support, both

emotionally and economically, many people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods report having few people, and in some cases no one, to turn to who can be of material help. Webster et al. (2004: 30) report the extent to which strong bonds, particularly amongst family members, are critical for coping with life in poor communities but that these strong networks, if they exclude outsiders and the unknown, can severely constrain freedoms and opportunities. Strong social networks can also draw individuals into crime and drug use.

Research has shown that higher levels of social capital are associated with better health, better employment outcomes, lower crime rates and higher educational achievement (see for example Putnam, 2000). Those with extensive networks are more likely not only to be housed, healthy, hired and happier but also more willing and able to access and find success within the educational system.

The frequency and quality of contact, and the strength of bonding between people, is an important discriminator. Social capital theory uses three explanatory concepts which help to deepen insights into the importance of formal and informal networks.

Bonding social capital is characterised by strong bonds, for example among family members or among members of the same ethnic group which help in 'getting by' in life. For many disadvantaged individuals or groups the security of having family to call on is an invaluable social and educational resource. Strong social bonding, whether within the family or in friendship groups, religious sects, clubs or gangs can, however, be an inhibiting factor, cutting people off from wider social contacts which may offer alternative perspectives.

Bridging social capital is the avenue of escape from insular and inward-looking association. Social bridging is seen in the connections made with other people who stand outside the immediate reference group and its value orientations. These are often 'weak links', casual and informal but cutting across social and ethnic affiliations, exposing one to differing lifestyles, value systems and occupational groups. Bridging may also be virtual in nature, in which people establish links with others on a national and international basis via the Internet. These forms of linkage open up new worlds, new ways of seeing, and new ways of relating and learning. While relatively inexpensive they are beyond the budget of the most disenfranchised groups and rely not only on access to relevant technologies but the ability and confidence to use them to advantage.

Linking social capital is a form of bridging that describes a different kind of social network. While social bridging is collegial and 'horizontal' in nature, linking social capital works on the vertical plane, that is, within hierarchies of power and influence. Being able to make, and use, connections with people in positions of power and authority can prove to be the key to accessing vital resources – financial, social, and educational. How these theoretical constructs play out in practice is illustrated in the following critical incident affecting an inner-city

London family. At each point in the story we may stop and ask: what could have been different had there been a stronger legacy of linking and bridging social capital?

CASE STUDY

Anouka

Playing too close and too inquisitively with D-I-Y electrical wiring, Anouka was subject to an intense electric shock and severe burns to her right arm. Her mother, in panic, knocked on a neighbour's door and then on another to see if she could borrow some cream or bandages to put on the child's burn, or perhaps an aspirin to stop the pain. Neither neighbour was willing to open a front door at that time of night. As Mrs Okede's phone had been cut off she was unable to call her estranged husband, now living at the other end of the city. She decided she would take Anouka to the casualty department of the nearest hospital. With Anouka in her arms she walked the quarter mile to the bus stop where she knew there would be late running buses. She was lucky as one came within fifteen minutes and took her quite close to the hospital. The receptionist there was sympathetic to the child's clear distress but advised Mrs Okede that this was the wrong hospital and gave her directions to another hospital two miles away. Two bus rides and an hour later mother and child arrived at the casualty department of the second hospital where they waited patiently in an overcrowded room for Anouka to be seen.

There are many points at which, with knowledge, self confidence, social networks, and taken-for-granted infrastructures a much simpler story could have been told and one that could have been quite easily resolved. Such incidents, all too familiar in life on the edge, may, however, have little connection with schooling, wrapped up in its own concerns. From a community perspective those priorities may be seen as trivial in the wider scheme of things.

Social capital and schooling

The same concepts of bonding, bridging and vertical linking apply powerfully within a school context. School education requires each of these in some balanced measure, and in successful schools young people are helped to achieve a balance among them. School is a place in which social bonding begins to take shape from virtually day one and may grow stronger all the way through primary and secondary school and into adulthood, and even into lifelong partnership. But this

can work either to the school's advantage or to its detriment. The bonding of pro-school groups and anti-school groups has long been the subject of illuminating research (see for example Hargreaves, 1967; Willis, 1977), illustrating how strong in-group affiliations can often work at cross purposes to the norms and values that schools attempt to instil. Since it was first identified by Coleman and his team in 1966, school effectiveness research over the following four decades has continued to document the impact of 'the compositional effect' (or peer group effect) as a key variable in distinguishing more effective from less effective schools (MacBeath and Mortimore, 2001). As teachers know without needing recourse to research, when there is strong bonding within groups, particularly gangs with their own sworn allegiances, they may prove highly resistant to the best intentions of teachers to engage their interest or change their belief systems.

Grammar and secondary modern schools encouraged their own forms of bonding, reinforcing a social and academic divide. The creation of comprehensive schools may be seen as an attempt to effect social bridging, in the belief that young people would achieve better in a 'mixed ability' environment and that benefits would be seen in personal and social education, citizenship and career opportunities. Some hoped that if there were a social, ethnic and gender mix it would broaden horizons and allow young people to become familiar with different lifestyles and cultures. These seminal principles have been seriously undermined, however, by market-driven policies and back door selection which allow 'bridging social capital' to be drained off from schools, affecting not only the student 'balance' within the school but depriving it of the parents most able to give indirect and direct support.

'Linking social capital' is reduced where there is an imbalance in the educational background of parents, their knowledge and confidence in supporting their children and their willingness to visit and participate in school affairs. 'Doing school' successfully requires both young people and their parents to be able to engage successfully with hierarchies and authorities and to negotiate their paths through school conventions. As has been demonstrated by work within the National Youth Agency (Wylie, 2004), young people from more privileged backgrounds owe much of their success to their ability to navigate within the system with an understanding of the rules and the safety blanket of home support. Reduced ability and confidence of parents to deal with hospital receptionists, welfare agencies, or police result in frustrations and alienation which may be passed on consciously, or insidiously, to their children.

Social capital theory helps us to gain a better understanding of attitudes to school learning when we extend our line of sight from school to community, to the local living environment, to housing and social services, employment opportunities, health and crime levels. Extending sight lines brings into view the texture of life as it is lived out of school, the belated recognition that for 'those in deprived

areas [...] there is a real lack of interesting, accessible and affordable things to do.' (DfES 2004a: 61). The link between leisure activities available to young people and adult outcomes is of growing significance for researchers (for example Feinstein et al., 2005). The OECD's PISA Report (2004: 208) concludes that many aspects of educational disadvantage are not amenable to education policy and that it is only in the longer term, with a rise in the educational achievement of parents and wider economic development, that the attainment gap will be reduced. This is not, however, simply a counsel of despair, as one of the main messages from that same report is that the closer policy and practice are to the learner, the greater the likelihood of impact. The more classroom-bound the focus, the less the potential for nurturing deep learning. The more insulated the experience from 'real life', the less likelihood there is of penetrating the inner world of disenfranchised young people.

These issues about family and peer groups and their inter-relationship with schools are of great significance because peer group norms and mores are not always kept outside the school gates. They impinge, sometimes in dramatic fashion, on the lives of classrooms. The answers are not likely to lie in more structured class teaching, in tighter objectives, or even in a more radical restructuring of the curriculum, but in imaginative approaches to informal learning, more informed and creative inter-agency work, alertness to local social issues and greater proactivity in addressing them.

What we know about schools on the edge

As we have argued, schools on the edge face distinctive challenges about which we have still much to learn. The rich seam of literature in the United States is not matched in Britain where little empirical data is available on schools at the critical edge of social and economic challenge. By the very fact that these schools are in 'exceptional' circumstances, generalisations do not apply. Improvement strategies such as *Improving the Quality of Education for All* and *High Reliability Schools*, described in Chapter 2, rely on internal capacity building but their inherent weakness is a failure to address the dynamic relationships between these schools and their communities. Improvement cannot be fully explored without constant reference to the context in which these schools are situated and their capacity to reach out to, and engage with, their local communities. Educational improvement in its broadest sense means building bridges between school and the world of family, community and external social agencies. For MacGilchrist, 'school improvement is not a linear, continuous, upward trajectory' (2003: 32). It will, she concludes, continue to defy prescription unless new and more sophisticated ways are devised to shift away from the present deficit model.

While there are many worthwhile lessons to be drawn from effectiveness and improvement studies, it cannot be assumed that the defining characteristics of an

effective school can be applied to make an ineffective school more effective, especially if that school faces multiple disadvantages (Barber, 1996; Stoll and Myers, 1998). Many of their starting points differ from schools more in the mainstream; differences which are made manifest from the earliest stages. Often by the time children enter Year 7 they have not achieved levels high enough to be able to engage in any meaningful way with the Key Stage 3 curriculum, often because, from a bad start there has been little opportunity to catch up. Learning may be subject to a series of disruptions – temporary residence in different localities, transitions among several previous schools, frequent absenteeism through ill health, and exclusion as a consequence of an inability to cope with the demands of schooling. Many are children of refugees, asylum seekers and migrant workers, their low attainment at Key Stage 2 SATs explained by the fact that they are still learning English.

When the defining characteristic of a school is the volatility and turbulence of its local communities, the impact on the internal culture is evident in every aspect of school and classroom life. Learning is never a simple matter of building on what went before. To learn well and to teach well relies on a minimal level of stability of pupil, parent and teacher population. Teaching has to have some consistency of focus; learning requires coherence and continuity, not only between life in school and out of school but within those precious and fragmented classroom interludes in which teachers try to sustain a relationship of trust, optimism and perseverance. The greater the pressures in young people's lives, the higher the absenteeism and discontinuity in their classroom learning. The greater the stress on teachers, the less their health and consistency of attendance can be assured. The more under-resourced the school as a whole, the greater the demands which stretch the capacity and capability of the teaching force. The higher the demand for teacher in-service professional development, the more likely teachers are to be absent from the classroom, perhaps at critical junctures in the learning/teaching cycle.

A report by the OECD (2003: 21) referred to a 'low sense of belonging' which, they concluded, was experienced by up to a quarter of 15-year-olds in schools, not just in England but in many other countries, due to a general failure to find viable alternatives to the traditional progression route which has proved too insurmountable a hurdle for many young people. In England, as Tomlinson et al. (2004) have argued, GCSEs were originally designed for 40% of the population, not as an accountability lever or as a valid measure of school effectiveness. In England, participation in formal learning post-16 is lower than in comparable countries with only 84% of 16-year-olds in formal education or work based learning (DfES, 2004a) while the DfES and Learning Skills Council are, writes Foster (2005: 48), 'failing to provide an integrated and coherent view' of alternatives for young learners.

In short, for schools on the edge it is impossible to rely on some of the core assumptions as to what constitutes 'good practice' and, as a result, many of the prescriptions for improvement break down. For an improvement culture to take root a number of essential preconditions have to be met.

Edging towards stability

Recruitment

The first and most essential premise is a full staffing complement. The Catch 22 is, of course, that it is in these less attractive schools that the 'crisis' in recruitment and retention of teachers bites hardest. While the issue is a national one it is also highly discriminatory in its impact.

The Select Committee on Education and Employment's Ninth Report to Parliament (House of Commons, 1998) expressed serious concern about the failure to attract people into teaching. A 2002 report by the General Teaching Council in Wales (GTCW) reported a crisis in teacher recruitment with one in ten posts remaining unfilled. Its chief executive claimed that 'clearly heads don't believe they have enough choice of applicants to make the appointments they want ... In some cases, they had no choices at all' (p. 8). Despite various initiatives the problem remains. The House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Skills, reporting in 2004, remarked:

High turnover, and the inability of some schools to recruit sufficient high calibre teachers, has a knock on effect on the achievement of pupils in those schools. Turnover within the profession may not be a significant issue for schools in general; but for those schools in the most challenging circumstances it can exacerbate an already difficult situation. (House of Commons, 2004: 16)

The crisis in attracting headteachers to disadvantaged areas is equally acute. A series of studies using NFER data (Earley et al., 1990; Earley et al., 1995; Earley et al., 2002) reported a generally low response to headship advertisements, varying according to geographical region and school phase. It was shown that applicants for primary headship ranged from 0 to 156 and those for secondary headship from 6 to 200. For special schools the figures were between 1 and 80.

Howson's 2003 study for the National College of School Leadership found that, on average, primary schools in London received only five applications for each headteacher post, and only 5% of London primary schools received more than ten applications; 98% of London primary schools interviewed no candidates at all and 63% of schools surveyed in London had to re-advertise compared to 25% in the Home Counties and 22% elsewhere. Regional variations were little different in the

secondary sector. While 62% of secondary schools in the Home Counties and 57% in other regions received 20 or more applications, in London the figure was 29%. The range of applications from school to school throws into sharp relief the differential attractiveness of jobs in different parts of the country and in varying locations.

The recruitment crisis for schools in 'less desirable' circumstances is exacerbated in areas of the country where the cost of living has become particularly high. These factors apply most acutely in London boroughs. Indeed, 'London Issues', the problems faced by schools in attracting enough teachers to London schools, became a focus for the DfES Standards Task Force in 2000. In 2001 the DfES announced the setting up of a Teacher Recruitment and Retention Fund targeted on 'schools in high cost or challenging areas' (DfES, 2001c), with strategies such as bursaries, housing allowances and golden hellos in shortage subjects. In the House of Commons Select Education and Skills Committee, in 2004, the Minister of State acknowledged the depth of the problem:

I have to be very careful about saying something is adequate because I think it is very challenging ... We have to accept that we are fighting against some pretty strong market forces in terms of London housing. We are making a fist of it, but it is tough. I certainly would not claim victory in this area. (House of Commons, 2004: 29)

Teacher and headteacher recruitment are clearly inter-related and the new pressures on headship explain the low rate of teachers willing to apply for posts. The headteacher role has been further diminished by the need to resort to poaching, headhunting, using temporary staff from agencies, filling vacancies with short term contracts for Australian, South African or Canadian teachers, or employing other 'innovative' means to fill vacant posts. This requires a large investment of time and emotional energy and takes heads and other staff out of their schools, distracting them from other priorities. In short, disadvantage has its own unique pressures. As one primary head remarked, people working in such schools need:

Super-human strength, a real commitment that is almost a vocation, being stubborn, prepared to fight for what you think is right ... raising expectations of pupils, parents and at times, staff ... humour, ability to cope with angry parents and the tenacity ... the real battle ... to get those people who don't work with children in a community like this to understand what we are doing. (Headteacher, Octet feeder primary school)

The tragic ending of the life of one headteacher, a middle-aged family man with a mission to help poor young black teenagers through 'tough love', became a story about the failure of education to compensate for challenging circumstances and the heartbreak which can await those who try. What transpired in the last decade of St George's School, Maida Vale is a story which illustrates some of the bleakness of the downward forces affecting schools in poor neighbourhoods.

CASE STUDY**Exceptional challenge: St George's story**

St George's is the Roman Catholic comprehensive school where, in 1995, its headteacher Philip Lawrence was stabbed to death at the school gates, protecting a 13-year-old black pupil from attack by a 15-year-old member of a black gang from a rival school. The school stumbled into decline and in 2000 failed its Ofsted inspection. It was even closed for a period because of violence inside the school gates. Mr Lawrence's replacement took early retirement after a student was injured in a gang fight in which a classroom and a teacher's car were damaged.

Westminster Council then gave the school one year to come off the list of failing schools, and the school was reopened and re-energised under a new headteacher Lady Marie Stubbs who was coaxed out of retirement to turn the school round. This period in the school's history became the stuff of positive media headlines – and a television production in which Marie Stubbs was played by Julie Walters in the ITV drama 'Ahead of the Class'. Stubbs said at the time:

If we are talking about what is called 'a cycle of deprivation', I think not to believe this can be broken is a counsel of despair and no sensible teacher can subscribe to a belief in the inevitability of a cycle of deprivation ... All our professional training and sense of vocation, particularly in the Catholic sector of course but not exclusively, leads us to believe that positive intervention can bring about change, and that's what I want to see happening in St George's. (BBC broadcast 29 July 2006)

Her stay was characterised as a new beginning. Bob Marley music was piped through the school and Lenny Henry and Cherie Blair came to call. Having retired, she never planned to stay long and was succeeded by Philip Jakszta, the former acting head of a Catholic school in Tower Hamlets, after governors overlooked her deputy, Sean Devlin, the man she wanted to replace her. Mr Jakszta won a glowing report for the school from Ofsted, and praise for his leadership. But he in turn has now quit, leaving the school, in the Autumn term 2005, without a full-time head (*Independent Online* November 25, 2005) <http://education.independent.co.uk/news/article/329178.ece>. There are now plans to turn the school into an Academy.

There are heroic stories of schools which are apparently turned round by visionary heads such as Lady Stubbs, but all too often the story is one without a sequel because sustainability has never been part of the equation and external forces are then allowed to push schools back to the place from where they came. The nature of this process is chronicled by Fink (1999) in his studies of the ways in which a slow process of attrition affects the most bold and radical attempts to change the status quo.

The statistics of disadvantage

The battle against attrition is the natural state of schools on the edge, statistics for which only touch the surface of the issues. These are, however, a useful starting point for probing further and deeper. A recent DfES account lays out six key indicators:

1. Schools serving areas of severe socio-economic disadvantage.
2. Schools with a high proportion of pupils with special educational needs.
3. Schools whose pupils have low prior attainment, poor motivation and low self-esteem.
4. Schools with a high proportion of transient pupils.
5. Schools where many of the pupils speak languages other than English.
6. Schools whose past reputation has made it difficult to maintain pupil numbers and consequently sufficient staff to offer a high quality education (DfES, 2004b: www.standards.dfes.gov.uk).

Eligibility for free school meals (FSM) is a much used but simplistic and inadequate proxy for disadvantage. Nonetheless its inverse relationship with educational attainment at secondary level attests to a deeper malaise. While nearly half of all 16-year-olds fail to gain five or more GCSEs at grade C or above, the figure rises to three quarters of those students who are eligible for free school meals. Furthermore, there is clear evidence of clustering. If you are a secondary school student who qualifies for a free school meal, your school averages 25% FSM eligibility; if you are not, your school averages 12% (Palmer et al., 2005: 42). Poverty and low attainment walk hand in hand: 11-year-old students on free school meals are twice as likely not to have achieved Level 4 at KS2 as other 11-year-old students (p. 35).

There are other ways in which poverty exerts its influence on a school's social mix. Research by the Sutton Trust into the top 200 comprehensive schools in England in terms of 5+ A*-C at GCSE found evidence of an inherent and insidious social divide at work (2006: 2). The study aimed 'to discover the extent to which

pupils eligible for FSM do – or do not – attend high performing state schools when academic selection is not a factor' (p. 3) and they found:

Social selection is evident in top comprehensive schools: the overall proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals at the 200 highest performing comprehensives is 5.6%, compared to 11.5% of children in the postcode sectors of the schools, and 14.3% in secondary schools nationally. (p. 2)

These high performing comprehensive schools could not, officially at least, select pupils but, as the Sutton study shows, attainment and affluence are bound together. There is selection by overt or covert means in schools, even in schools in which this runs counter to policy. The postcode data have particular significance because children next door to one another end up in different schools, as it is the more affluent or informed families in that neighbourhood whose children attend the highest performing, ostensibly 'non selective' comprehensive schools.

These insights are of critical importance for the study of schools serving poor neighbourhoods. In all of these schools there is a systemic downward inertia. Without local support and a strong and consistent set of forces working in the opposite direction these schools would simply concede to attrition and entropy. External support is critical to their survival, but it needs to be relevant and powerful enough to vouchsafe longer term sustainability.

Ethnicity and the reality of racism

Data on ethnicity demonstrate further the multi-layered nature of disadvantage but also conceal deeper issues of racism. There is no inherent hierarchy of intelligence and ability among different ethnic groups but in secondary schools in England, all major ethnic groups outperform Black Caribbean students who also, not coincidentally, are the ethnic group most 'on the edge' of the mainstream – socially and economically.

An Ofsted study of all 129 schools in England with more than a 10% Black Caribbean student population found that they were distinguished by the following characteristics:

- the average proportion of Black Caribbean pupils was 17%, compared to 1.4% in secondary schools nationally;
- most of these schools served areas of relatively high socioeconomic deprivation, with almost two thirds of the schools having more than 35% of pupils eligible for free school meals, and only five schools with eligibility below the national average;
- the majority were in inner and outer London LEAs, with the rest in metropolitan and unitary authorities. (Ofsted, 2002: 33)

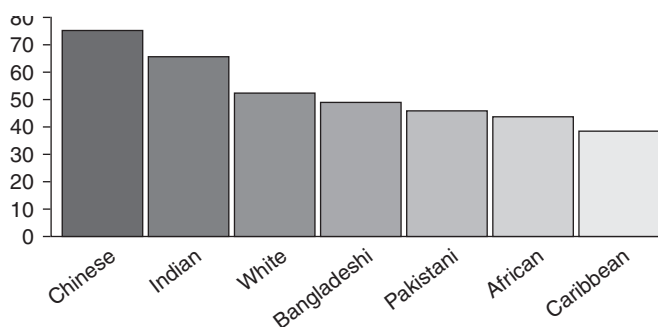


Figure 3.1 Students achieving GCSE A* – C passes in 2004 by percentage of ethnic group entrants

Source: DfES 2005, GCSE results, England 2004, National Statistics, First Release SFR 08/2005 (24 February 2005) www.dfes.gov.uk.rsgateway/DB/SFR

In discussions of race and achievement, often conducted in simplistic terms, the complexities of class, gender and geographical location tend to be ignored (Mirza, 2005). Schools with high proportions of minority ethnic pupils and those with English as an additional language (EAL) tend to be located within areas where there is relative social deprivation and, unsurprisingly, performance levels in these areas are relatively low. There are strong associations between the percentage of pupils with English as an additional language and the proportion of pupils eligible for FSM, with high proportions on one measure corresponding with high proportions on the other.

Getting at the underlying difficulties, however, can be problematic. Owen et al. (2000) point to the fact that at GCSE level, schools with higher proportions of pupils with EAL, appeared to have higher performances overall than other schools with equivalent levels of FSM, and suggest that it is possible that EAL is a shorter-term issue for learning, whereas FSM is a more constant indicator of disadvantage. This is a judgment echoed in part by Lupton (2004a; 2004b) who draws attention to important differences in the attitudes of different ethnicities and cultures to education, suggesting that for white working class disadvantaged communities, education in previous generations was not an important consideration. By contrast other parents, for example from Chinese or Indian backgrounds, while equally disadvantaged economically and socially often value education as a means of making progress in society and have higher expectations of their children. However, Mirza highlights the dangers of this kind of distinction based on ethnic and cultural ‘differences’.

In the new cultural construction of ‘race’, cultural and religious difference is played out when we say ‘... blacks are good at sport, not so good at school. Chinese are good at maths, and make good food. Asians are good at business and love family life. Muslims cannot be trusted: they are aggressive, sexist and, under all those clothes, usually a bit wild-eyed’. Racism in this cultural and religious guise seems less overt. (2005: 6)

The phrase 'institutionalised racism' has entered the discourse as a result of the inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence, a promising young black student who was stabbed to death at a south-east London bus stop in April 1993 by a white gang shouting racist abuse. No one has been convicted of the murder despite the ongoing battle for justice by his parents. The Metropolitan Police were found to have bungled the investigation, and '[t]he conclusion reached by the inquiry chairman Sir William Macpherson [was] that police prejudice against black people was so ingrained that it contributed to allowing racist murderers to get away with their crime' (Dodd, 2000).

What has also become established through the Macpherson report is the definition of racism – that it can be discrimination unwittingly and without intent. A racist incident is defined as 'any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person'. An illustration of this comes from Youdell (2003: 16) describing how, during a school assembly in which there was no apparent disruption, black boys were singled out and ejected from the hall. This was not because the head of year was deliberately discriminating against them but because, implicitly, these boys were identified in this community as a group who challenge authority.

CASE STUDY

Black bodies walking, Year 11 Assembly

Source: Youdell, 2003: 16

The majority of the year group (predominantly white), group tutors (all white, predominantly women), and DY are present.

The head of year (man, white) is addressing the year group. The head of year pauses and looks out to the back of the assembled students. A few minutes later, looking in the same part of the audience, he calls out a short string of boys' names and instructs them to pay attention. A minute or so later he stops mid-sentence and calls: 'OK Daniel, outside my office please'. There is a pause. Daniel (boy, black) slowly gets to his feet, shaking his head as he does so. He takes his time as he leaves the hall, there is a sway and spring to his gait. The head of year continues his address. Through the rest of the address the head of year sends a further two black boys from the same group to wait outside his office. Each boy exits in a similar manner to Daniel. As the final boy walks towards the door, the head of year continues to chastise him. The boy makes a short tutting sound, which is audible to those towards the front of the hall, as he walks out of the door.

In 2002, the rate of exclusion of Black Caribbean students was three times higher than that for white students and twenty times the rate for Chinese and Indian students. Whereas 71% of Chinese students achieved 5+ A*-C grades, the figure for Black Caribbean boys was 25% whilst for white students the figure was 46%. But when social class is added to the equation the figures for white students drop significantly. Gillborn and Mizra (2000) give a finer grained picture of attainment within the black ethnic group between pupils from non-manual and manual backgrounds, showing that class differences in patterns of attainment for white pupils are replicated among black young people. This plays out too in the targeting of students who are seen as most likely to improve the school's performance statistics with black students, particularly boys, finding themselves in the 'low ability' sets (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000).

This is not the place to disentangle the interaction between class and race, but there are worrying signs that some ethnic groups have missed out on the overall trends in performance. Though there is some evidence of improvement for example the rate of exclusion among Black Caribbean students has halved (Palmer et al., 2005: 35), in some cases the inequalities have increased in recent years: African-Caribbean and Pakistani pupils, for example, have not shared equally in the rising levels of GCSE attainment (Gillborn and Mirza, 2000: 27).

The inclusion enigma

It is these low performing schools, in the most challenging of circumstances, that are at the sharp end of the inclusion agenda. The policy is for children and young people who would previously have been on the edge of the mainstream, in special schools, to be 'included' in mainstream schools along with their same age peers. This principle is one that teachers have mostly welcomed but in practice it has brought a new raft of problems, particularly for schools 'facing challenging circumstances' in which there are disproportionate percentages of students with special educational needs (SEN). In January 2005 almost 242,600 pupils (nursery, primary, secondary) in England had statements of SEN, and 60% of these students were in mainstream schools, but concentrated in relatively few schools: over 70% of primary schools and 44% of secondary had less than 2% of pupils with statements of SEN. Less than 1% of both primary and secondary schools had over 10% of pupils with statements. The incidence of special educational needs (with or without statements) is much higher for boys than for girls. Statemented SEN students were nine times more likely to be excluded than those with 'no SEN'. There was a strong and consistent link between exclusion, truancy and achievement. SEN (unlike eligibility for FSM) is defined and funded by the local authority. So, besides any pressures to reduce the numbers of SEN students for central political

purposes, there are very real funding advantages to an authority for setting the bar high for establishing SEN.

In the battle for ratings schools are reluctant to accept young people who will drag down performance scores and are happy to see them accommodated by a neighbouring school with an already generous complement of SEN pupils. Berliner (2006) describes a process of commodification whereby children and young people come to be seen as 'score enhancers' or 'score detractors'. The impact of policies which treat pupils as unit measures pushes disadvantaged schools closer to the edge, to the edge of special measures or to an 'improvement notice', and possibly ultimate closure. A recent study of inclusion described the double disadvantage for these schools.

In disadvantaged areas where a school may have over half its pupils classified as 'special needs' and five or more per cent of children statemented, strategies which may work in more stable situations do not apply. Here the critical 'balance' shifts so as to make effective teaching nigh on impossible. It is only with exceptional dedication and resilience that teachers cope with the turbulence and unpredictability of day-to-day life. It is in these circumstances that lack of resources and insufficient expertise issues hit hardest. (MacBeath et al., 2006: 34)

This study reported not only the impact on schools, but on teachers and on pupils themselves struggling to make sense of a curriculum that made no sense. These pupils were typically given into the full-time care of teaching assistants who, with goodwill but without expertise, watered down the curriculum so that these young people could grasp something of the importance to their lives of Boudica, the Saxons, geometry and soil erosion. Florian and Rouse (2001) have shown the pernicious effects on attitudes to children with special needs, caught in tensions between the two agendas – standards and needs. Pressures on teachers to meet curriculum targets not only shape staff attitudes to special needs but extend to parents and pupils too, who begin to resent the diversion of teachers' energies and priorities. In the process, two laws – the legal and moral – are undermined. The law which forbids discrimination against children goes hand in hand with 'the law of natural distribution' which expects schools to take an equitable share of children with special needs.

SEN interacts with poverty, albeit in complex ways. Despite government and research suggesting that it is classless, there is a high coincidence of SEN and FSM – about a quarter of those with SEN were eligible for free school meals compared with 12% of those without SEN. Schools concerned with doing well in the examination performance tables have done their best to avoid too many of these students, while others deserted by middle class parents because of their lower league position, have taken additional numbers in order to claim the available resources in an effort to balance the budget and retain viable staffing levels

(Tomlinson, 2004). Schools become well-known locally for being good with SEN students and local authorities can become complicit in directing SEN students to these schools – particularly when they are less popular locally and would otherwise be under-subscribed. The most prevalent type of SEN amongst pupils with statements of SEN in secondary and special schools is Moderate Learning Difficulty, 29% and 30% respectively (MacBeath et al., 2006).

Warnock, who chaired the influential commission in 1978 which gave us the term ‘SEN’, now accepts that too many different kinds of need and disability are shoehorned into one all-embracing term.

The idea of transforming talk of disability into talk of what children need has turned out to be a baneful one. If children’s needs are to be assessed by public discussion and met by public expenditure it is absolutely necessary to have ways of identifying not only what is needed but also why (by virtue of what condition or disability) it is needed ... the failure to distinguish various kinds of need has been disastrous for many children. (Warnock, 2005: 20)

The 1978 Warnock Committee’s second error, ‘possibly the most disastrous legacy’ (2005: 20), was the failure to clearly designate as SEN either children whose mother tongue was not English or those living in particularly deprived circumstances. This has led to a fudging of the links between social deprivation and learning disability which continues to this day. It has further meant that schools have found themselves having to cope with a sizeable proportion of such pupils with this double disadvantage.

Challenges in challenging circumstances

This chapter has attempted to portray something of the relationships between schools and communities and the policy which impact on their futures. We have argued that improvement strategies need to be located within the broader policy impetus, directed towards regenerating neighbourhoods, which in turn rely on not only significantly increased levels of funding but radical rethinking of what education is for as well as how and where it is provided.

For schools in challenging circumstances more sources of funding have, in fact, been made available over the last decade but they can often be no more than temporary palliatives. The Single Regeneration Budget (initiated in 1994) and Neighbourhood Renewal Funds as well as funding from the European Union through its European Regional Development Fund are, however, an explicit acknowledgement that housing, health and employment are the infrastructural trilogy of educational opportunity. While there are signs of changed thinking, progress is slow.

We may be accused of having painted too bleak a picture, particularly in light of the extraordinary things in inner-city classrooms which lighten up even the most

depressing of urban landscapes. We argue, however, that it is only when policy makers are prepared to grapple with the multiple dimensions of disadvantage, and the discourse which frames it, that we can truly understand the nature, limits and potential of improvement for schools on the edge.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How helpful is 'social capital' in explaining the challenges faced by schools on the edge?
2. How does the concept of social capital apply to the school as an organisation?
3. What factors in school and community contribute to the evidence of continuing disadvantage and discrimination against certain ethnic groups? In what ways might these factors play out differently in schools on the edge?
4. With reference to providing for children with special needs, what would need to be done to ensure that 'the law of natural distribution' was observed on a national basis?