

Steve Jones

“The role of educational leadership at the school/community interface in fostering school improvement in disadvantaged communities”

Introduction

This paper firstly provides a brief overview of: major issues in the literature and in current U.K. government policy concerning education leadership and school improvement in disadvantaged communities; an account of some current interventions being made in the U.K. to tackle educational disadvantage; and the potential gains educationally and in terms of community regeneration to be made from fostering links between a school and its surrounding disadvantaged community. Secondly, it gives an account of fieldwork conducted during the Autumn of 2001 in South Yorkshire, U.K. This consisted of semi-structured interviews with key respondents in the fields of educational leadership, school improvement, and innovatory intervention in disadvantaged communities. The paper seeks to describe broad views of respondents concerning: the actual situation facing schools in disadvantaged communities, what is perceived to be successful in making educational progress in tough circumstances and differences of view concerning the best way of tackling these issues.

Literature Review

Educational leadership

There are almost as many views about leadership as there are people writing about it. Leadership is generally regarded by researchers and policy-makers alike as of crucial importance to organisations and communities but its nature, who exercises it and how are all contested areas. Observing leadership in action is similarly problematic given the tendency of leaders to seek to influence others in often subtle and unobtrusive ways on a day-by-day basis. For this reason much empirical research into leadership has been at best inconclusive and, according to Yukl, characterised by “confusion and contradictions” with “a high proportion of seriously flawed studies” (1994 p287).

What makes for effective leadership is also a major area of debate. Alimo-Metcalfe/Alban-Metcalfe (2000) and Stogdill (1950) stress the importance of asking followers’ views when assessing the most effective leadership traits. Stogdill (ibid.) believes they include adaptability, ambition, assertiveness, decisiveness, dependability, having a high activity level and being self-confident. Alimo-Metcalfe/Alban-Metcalfe (ibid.) found that health workers valued “down-to-earth decency, humanity, humility, sensitivity and respect for others”. Context, too, is clearly crucial to how leaders act. Tough situations may require more robust leadership than less demanding ones. For instance, Elgie (1995) points out that institutional structures can constrain leaders significantly. Values as well as traits are also crucial to determining leadership behaviour. Sergiovanni believes, in fact, that there is too much emphasis on leaders “doing things right”. Rather, he prefers an approach that stresses leaders “doing the right things” (1992, p4).

Two models of leadership in particular have currently risen to prominence: “charismatic” and “transformational” leadership. The U.K. government’s promotion of the concept of “super-heads” to turn around “failing” schools is essentially a charismatic model. Charismatic leadership leads from the front and seeks to provide inspiration. However, it can equally disempower, be narcissistic and leave a vacuum behind it. According to Grint (2001), reliance on charismatic leadership can stand in the way of individuals solving their collective problems.

Transformational leadership, on the other hand, connects with a team and aims to share leadership throughout an organisation. Silins and Mulford (2001) characterise the transformational model as empowering, sensitive to local and community aspirations, supportive of followers, capable of building collaborative school cultures and emphasising shared vision. Mulford points out that schools which move from competitive, top-down forms of power to more collective and facilitative forms tend to find greater “success”. Similarly, Bolman and Deal (1991) argue that good organisations are likely to be those that encourage leadership from many quarters whilst Grint (ibid.) characterises transformational leadership as aiming to persuade followers to put the collective good ahead of their own.

Finally, Gronn (1999) makes the important point that leadership can never be taken for granted. Leadership, he argues, needs constantly to be renewed and rumour mills, conversational grapevines and cliques are to be ignored at a leader’s peril, with successful leaders being those who create elbow-room for themselves: a “zone of discretion” within which to act. For school leaders working in disadvantaged communities, that “elbow-room” may effectively be the fostering of effective links with parents and the wider community in a joint enterprise.

School improvement in disadvantaged communities

Janet Ouston (1999 p2) inspiringly outlines her five underpinning purposes of education as being: “for personal growth and fulfilment”, “to ensure cultural continuity”, “to facilitate social mobility”, “as a means of combating inequality” and “as an economic investment for the future of individuals and society”. These purposes need to apply as much to disadvantaged young people as to everybody else. To enable this to happen the barriers to learning experienced by these youngsters need to be overcome.

The U.K. government makes the assumption that all pupils, regardless of social background should be able to perform academically, given the right kinds of intervention. According to the education minister Stephen Byers in 1997 “poverty is no excuse for educational failure”. This a laudable sentiment conveying commitment to achievement for all regardless of social background. However, the social reality is that many young people live in families that are struggling to cope with hopelessness and devastating home circumstances. Ball (1990, 2000) and others are critical of the government’s approach and the school improvement agenda. They see the deep-seated nature of class and societal differences as being the major cause of educational under-achievement in the inner-city and believe that a broader agenda needs to be pursued by government to address these problems. Nevertheless, others such as Barber and Dann (1995), along with the U.K. government, regard school improvement as the starting-point for the achievement of societal change and the

tackling of poverty. To this end, schools require necessary pressure and support to improve their performance.

Essentially, the school improvement agenda pays attention to those measures and organisational features which can improve school performance, such as: strong management, well-focused curriculum, good communication with parents, placing “all energy” on raising standards, shared leadership, collective planning, direct and sustained interaction with pupils, high teacher expectations and parental involvement (Ofsted 2000). Realistically, however, there must be limits to what schools can achieve on their own in difficult circumstances. Mortimore (1991) recognises this in defining an effective school as one in which pupils progress further than might be expected from consideration of its intake.

Whilst Gray and Hopkins believe that overall “competition may have contributed to school improvement” (1991 p17), most commentators point to the overall damaging effects on schools in disadvantaged communities in the U.K. of the culture of competition and the publication of crude league tables. Gewitz (2001) believes the market system in schooling is counter-productive because it benefits the middle classes and adds to the huge educational and other disadvantages suffered by young people in the inner city.

Current government determination to raise standards and give all young people access to high-quality education is given as justification for “naming and shaming” “failing” schools. This policy gets a mixed reaction. The process itself is not necessarily believed to be “what works”. Gray believes “it is the “new team” which frequently accompanies restructuring which secures progress” (DfEE report 2000 p24). Gray and Hopkins point out that it is principally the process of “jolting a system” that seems to work, however temporarily (1999 p19).

Nevertheless, Stark (1998) believes that a calmer organisational approach stands a much better chance of turning around “failing” schools. Further, Stoll and Fink (1996) point out that “failure” can often be hidden but equally deadly in terms of hitting young people’s life chances. “Cruising” schools, they would argue, merit identification and corrective action just as much as “failing” schools.

U.K. government programmes targeted at disadvantaged communities

The current round of interventions in the inner city (e.g. Education Action Zones, Excellence in Cities, specialist schools, Surestart, ICT programmes and interventions with parents and families) are a varied programme of challenge and support to professionals, agencies and the communities themselves. Particular emphasis in some of these initiatives has been put on improving the curriculum relevance and interest for young people, provided targeted support, improving school links and easing the process of transition at the start of secondary schooling. It remains to be seen just how much of a contribution they will eventually make to improving attainment and reducing social exclusion. Similarly, the modernising agenda for local government seeks to encourage partnership and “joined-up” working to maximise service delivery. Evidence for the effectiveness of this process is currently patchy and initiatives in this direction are generally at an early stage.

How crucial the building of social capital and developing disadvantaged communities is to helping young people achieve educationally is a major issue both with government and in the literature. Putnam (2000), Coleman and Bourdieu (1991) and others link the building of social capital to the achieving of positive change in disadvantaged communities. Similarly, Gamarnikov and Green (1999) link social exclusion with lack of social capital. Whitty (2001 p292) believes society needs “to tackle the extent to which working-class children continue to be denied opportunities open to middle class children on all fronts” requiring “much stronger measures of positive discrimination than have been tried ...hitherto”. Robinson (1997) advocates a programme to alleviate child poverty to tackle educational attainment. Partnerships of schools with parents and students in developing an ethos of a shared education enterprise is a familiar theme, particularly emphasised by Wrigley (2000 p27) when he says “effective schools listened to and learnt from students and their parents”. But the extent to which schools are seen as central to community regeneration initiatives or actually see themselves as having a role in developing their surrounding communities are important issues for further consideration.

Fieldwork

These semi-structured interviews were referred to in the introduction. This data added to information gained from pilot interviews and observations in a disadvantaged secondary school community which also formed a small E.A.Z. (Education Action Zone) in Rotherham (for details see annex). They lasted approximately an hour each and were transcribed verbatim and anonymised (e.g. respondents referred to as “E.A.Z. co-ordinator 2”, schools referred to as “school b”). They examined issues concerning the role of leadership in what are perceived as effective schools in disadvantaged communities, the forms of leadership in existence and their consequences, and where leadership is to be found in schools. Other issues explored included: expectations of pupils, current interventions to raise attainment/achievement, examples of effective school leadership and why, the process of school leadership, the general environment affecting school leaders, issues surrounding the official categorisation of “failing” schools, and school-community and other agency links and their nature/importance. Interviews with the council heads of social inclusion tended to concentrate less on specific school improvement issues and more on the perceived and actual importance of education leadership to wider community regeneration efforts currently underway locally.

Broad views: *the current situation*

The situation in South Yorkshire

South Yorkshire is a deprived sub-region overall with major educational challenges, particularly within its disadvantaged communities. Speaking of one of the local authority areas, Chief Adviser 2 says: “What I think is different about the local authority is I think you would not find an area of advantage. Every secondary school intake has areas which are significantly disadvantaged”. Literacy is a big issue throughout the area impacting not only on reading and writing but also on young people’s skills in speaking and listening. The culture of underachievement in some communities is rooted in adults’ bad experiences of school, compounded by major social problems such as drug abuse and partly expressed in historically poor post-sixteen take-up rates beyond the official school leaving age. Some schools have

almost entirely ethnic minority populations with particular challenges, with population turbulence creating a lack of stability and continuity for young people in some communities. Barriers to learning are not the lack of ability of working class youngsters but include factors such as parental aspiration, home resources, institutional barriers, communication difficulties, cultural orientations, transition between learning stages, peer pressure, and inadequate routes to school. E.A.Z. co-ordinator 2 adds “I think ill-health is a big issue as well. And, again, that’s one of the areas we’ve really tried to focus on, some of the key issues around health in the zone. Because there are attendance problems which are related to just families being unable to cope with getting their children to work and also attendance difficulties are related to support of truancy”.

The role of the Local Education Authority

Faced with these problems, not only are schools grappling with a complex and uphill task but the local education authorities (L.E.A.s) are required by government to provide a framework of challenge and support to educational professionals. The nature of this role is outlined briefly by Chief Adviser 3 as follows: “schools have to purchase us in order to help with their work. But I think it’s our responsibility to have a quality service that they want to purchase and our ... work is about improving standards and improving provision in schools. And our aim is to have an impact on that and to develop the ethos in the borough that enables everyone in the borough to take those issues on board and to provide improvements”.

This role is a difficult one not just because of the nature of the task but L.E.A.s have to grapple with being supportive to schools, setting targets, monitoring projects and at the same time intervening where schools are regarded as “failing”. At the same time the service is often skewed too much towards aiding recovery rather than prevention. Often the necessary links with other agencies to help schools deliver programmes such as family learning, adult education, easing transition and aiding community regeneration are not effective and schools themselves in challenging circumstances can feel isolated and lacking necessary support.

The role of leaders/headteachers

Clearly, education leadership at all levels is crucial to addressing the needs of young people in disadvantaged communities. Headteachers of schools have the potential to be a key element in encouraging colleagues and children to succeed educationally and at the same time can also be a disabling influence. Leadership also extends beyond heads to many other roles within school, including middle managers and also outside to others in the connexions service, health, community work and so on. Attitudes of these individuals and L.E.A. officers will help shape their response to the educational challenge in disadvantaged communities.

Attitudes/values of participants

A range of attitudes were exhibited amongst the respondents interviewed as might be expected, but particularly noteworthy were examples of professional honesty about the nature of the task they faced, passion about their roles, and faith in disadvantaged communities and their young people. Empathy for the circumstances of those communities through personal background and life experiences are demonstrated by the following: “I was brought up in a very disadvantaged mining community – it’s tough and it was hard and there were some kids who didn’t succeed and could have

done and others who did. You know, so I hate to make ... sweeping statements”; “as a youngster who came from a disadvantaged community – I have to say my teachers didn’t believe in me and I would have been a self-fulfilling prophecy. So I think teachers have an incredible role to play in terms of expectations”.

How schools are doing

Many schools in South Yorkshire’s disadvantaged communities are achieving “against the odds”. Chief Adviser 2 gives an example: “The work that’s been done in those small education action zones is outstanding in my view and the impact that has made on attainment and the opportunities for children in those areas is significant. And we’re seeing that in terms of the progress that’s being made in a lot of our schools”. However, although progress is undoubtedly being made, the inner city has continuing teacher supply problems, many schools are suffering the destabilising effects of falling rolls due to factors outside their control and one substantial geographical area has recently had a relatively large number of schools requiring additional support or “special measures” to be taken to address the situation.

Improving attainment can often be slow to achieve in spite of major and successful efforts to tackle teaching quality, major difficulties may persist in addressing underachievement of boys and some ethnic groups and there may also be pockets of resistant cultures amongst some staff in schools to making necessary changes to ways of working to achieve progress. Chief Adviser 1 points out that some schools find it hard to concentrate sufficiently on raising attainment: “so much of what’s happening in the community comes into school and I think primary schools are always at the sharp end of this because in general ... they are very concerned about the families – they take a holistic view – and try to do too much of that themselves. Now I think it’s incumbent upon councils, L.E.A.s, to actually enable schools to have that joined-up approach.”

E.A.Z. co-ordinator 3 makes the point that some schools compound their difficulties by being too isolated: “I think schools are too closed as institutions as well and that ability to be open ... if you want the community to trust you, you have to demonstrate your ability to trust them which I do think schools find really difficult.”

Initiatives

As referred to earlier, the government and local authorities are currently engaged in providing a large number of initiatives aimed at tackling the problems of disadvantaged communities. “Excellence in Cities” and “Education Action Zones” are two linked activities aiming to provide schools and their surrounding communities with targeted support.

In spite of national reservations about the track record of these initiatives, Chief Adviser 1 says “I think Excellence in Cities has been really useful where trios of schools are actually looking at each other’s practice. I think that’s helpful.” E.A.Z. co-ordinator 2 explains: “I mean one of the things a zone can do is just put that extra resource in and enable people to be able to do things that are a bit more exciting”.

However these programmes are often insufficiently linked to other regeneration initiatives (such as Surestart, Single Regeneration Budget [S.R.B.], and Neighbourhood Renewal Fund [N.R.F.]), and E.A.Z. co-ordinators can sometimes feel

isolated and lacking community and other support. Schools sometimes feel there are too many initiatives and they feel these may sidetrack them from the major issues they have to deal with educationally. As Social Inclusion Officer 2 says: “I do think we’ve been a bit initiative crazy, where the government’s thrown so much at us all that I don’t think they’re knitting together”.

Speaking of the lack of linkage between her zone and the local S.R.B. project, E.A.Z. co-ordinator 3 says “[laughs] we don’t really work very closely with them, I have to say. I think there is a notion, too, particularly where people are getting grants from elsewhere that schools have got it all anyway ... And yet the schools have got the buildings, they’ve got people and they are part of the community. There seems to be a notion that these kids and their families are not the same children that we’ve got in our schools, you know. So, for me, I don’t understand that. So there seems to be a bit of a barrier”. Nevertheless, where joining-up locally has been achieved beyond the boundaries of organisations and funding regimes, schools have felt that the partnership working has been of benefit to them.

The school/community interface

Links between schools and their surrounding communities show a mixed picture of success. Where some communities have given strong support to their local school, this is believed to have helped those schools emerge successfully from “special measures”. The capacity of disadvantaged communities for advancement, partnership working and regeneration is often viewed to be limited by education professionals and others working in organisations and agencies. Some multi-ethnic communities can be perceived to possess richness and community strengths in a way that some white working class communities may not.

Certainly, where a disadvantaged community possesses a shortage of facilities for local people, the challenge for that community may be all the greater. Speaking of the capacity of the community surrounding his school to engage with what the education service is aiming to provide for young people, E.A.Z. headteacher 1 says “there were in the past barriers associated with unemployment. Expectations as to whether education could provide a job. I think there’s a lack of awareness as well, perhaps generally, but more likely in an area such as this, as to what education aims to do, and can do, and might do for children. But having said that, I mean, I would argue that the vast, vast majority of parents are very supportive of this school in what it does”.

Broad views: *how to make progress*

Overcoming barriers to learning

Targeted solutions are identified as being crucial to overcoming perceived barriers to learning in disadvantaged communities. These include the introduction of a more flexible curriculum and the meeting of individual pupils’ needs through such processes as young people mapping out a curriculum path for themselves, the provision of appropriately differentiated learning materials, the use of more innovative teaching styles, and the provision of learning mentor and other support from careers and youth service staff.

Realistic target-setting is generally felt to be a useful motivator for young people. E.A.Z. Co-ordinator 1 refers to practice in her community: “So, in the classes we’re

almost individually teaching up and down the corridor ... which is possibly the way through to success. It's only when the classes get big that that breaks down". Availability of high-quality early years provision is believed to be crucial, too, in overcoming learning barriers; as is sufficient support to enable young people to access further and higher education.

The community/parents

The interface between schools and their surrounding disadvantaged communities is believed to present a real challenge. It is also believed potentially to have great scope for helping young people engage more effectively in the education process. Regarding parents as partners in their child's education is also believed to be extremely important. As Headteacher 1 observes "We're not going to move children on unless we influence parental views, parental aspirations, parental expectations. So if you took literacy, for example, some of the better reading partnerships involve parents, getting parents and other adults involved. Reading with children and alongside children. Trying to raise their awareness and their expectation. So we will link up with the local colleges and their adult learning provision to do that".

To achieve this partnership, however, may require a change of climate and ethos, particularly where secondary schools are concerned. There may also need to be outreach work with parents in community settings. As Headteacher 1 suggests, engaging parents in their child's learning will require shared reading, games sessions, and using ICT workers to help draw parents in by offering them ICT training, so they can help children learn the same skills. It will certainly need to feature effective communication with parents and regular opportunities for them to discuss their child's progress with tutors and other teachers.

The perceived aim is engagement to increase parental aspirations, and through lifelong learning and other means involving parents, grandparents and the whole community in the education of their young people. Chief Adviser 2 makes the following observation about what her local authority is trying to achieve through raising aspirations: "You know, it's community pride and I think that's a lot of what the leader is trying to do: the litter-picking, the chewing gum, the dog fouling, all of that sort of thing. You know, if you let an environment decline it perhaps gives an implicit comment about ... there's a lot of corporate working about raising the aspirations, the profile, the expectations of people generally."

E.A.Z. Co-ordinator 1 spells out how important it can be to raise parental aspirations "I know a lot of girls who've confided in me that they've got nowhere to work at home, and no space. You know, that sort of situation. I know a lot of girls who I've helped achieve some results to get to college and then they go to college and after two months they've dropped out because of parental pressure. There are all sorts of cultural things that can be against these children, stopping them achieving".

Having local people as role models working in a school, having community education locally for ease of access, schools being involved in community events and the encouragement of local business are all believed to help create an ethos of shared educational endeavour in a disadvantaged community. However, enabling a partnership with a surrounding community is perceived to require that community to possess its own "social capital" through the encouragement of an active community

and voluntary sector, encouragement of school governors and effective working with local elected representatives and area assemblies where they exist.

School leadership

School leadership is generally regarded as crucial to educational achievement in disadvantaged communities. Heads need to have the ability to harness the skills of everyone, to create and “sell” a shared vision about what needs to be done, and to lift individual workers’ spirits. Charismatic leaders are regarded as often unhelpful if they are unable to share leadership effectively or prevent dislocation when they leave their post.

A range of different leadership styles are believed to be potentially effective in disadvantaged communities. Establishing personal credibility, problem solving, and having effective informal and interpersonal skills are highly rated. As Chief Adviser 3 points out “I think it’s more to do with leaders who enable and empower people to do things for themselves and who understand why a different quality is needed”. Similarly, E.A.Z. Co-ordinator 4 says “You’ve got to be very outgoing. I think, very loud and very enthusiastic. You’ve got to have somebody with vision, somebody who’s capable of seeing not only the problems but ways round them. But not afraid to say what the problems are”.

Where schools are facing difficulty the issue of leadership and the possibility of changing the leadership are crucial ones, as outside intervention is often seen to be necessary to changing a school’s overall performance, although not in all cases. Tough situations are generally seen to require a remorseless and visible commitment to bringing about improvement by school leaders and this is also likely to involve leadership strength to find a way through necessary changes, to confront resistant cultures and keep a sense of direction. E.A.Z. Co-ordinator1 says “Sometimes you do need something much stronger and I imagine in an area like where you’ve got special measures you’ve got to be much stronger there”.

In addition, the L.E.A. is seen as potentially important in providing assistance to school heads as “critical friends” and helping to foster the building-up of other leadership roles (such as middle managers) and shared leadership within schools. As Chief Adviser 2 says “I think we do that (developing leadership) in two ways. The first way we do it is actually developing the leadership, you know, we actually have a long-term view of leadership and what is needed. And, that you actually focus on developing the leadership qualities within the non-leaders, if you like. Particularly where ... the weakness was actually our middle managers”. Chief Adviser 1 adds “So I think for me it’s about leadership at all levels. It’s leadership in terms of curriculum areas. You’ve got to have strength there, whether that be primary or secondary. You’ve got to have a strong team”.

Given the perceived importance of schools seeing themselves as being within a community context, headteachers are regarded as needing to be outward-looking and having a role that extends beyond the school. Equally, given that leadership is regarded as being found in all levels of a school, the community dimension to a school’s role is an issue that is perceived as requiring the attention of as wide a group of staff as possible.

Initiatives

There is a mixed perception of the success of current initiatives such as E.A.Z.s. Excellence in Cities and other regeneration programmes in disadvantaged areas. It is generally felt that E.A.Z.s have considerable potential for encouraging co-operation between schools and the sharing of best practice. E.A.Z. Co-ordinator 3 says “Because of my previous contact with the schools and the schools ... there was already some coherence at certainly a headteacher level, not necessarily any further down. But they were already working in a group, if you like. So it looked like ripe for further development but obviously needed somebody external to provide that kind of push, if you like”.

This can encourage teachers to see beyond their immediate school situation and make positive plans for tackling their most pressing issues. Similarly, E.A.Z.s can help schools co-operate to ease the potentially damaging effects of transition between stages and by actual sharing of staff between schools in some cases.

The experience of small E.A.Z.s is positive because they more readily engender ownership of initiatives by school staffs. However, it is generally agreed that agencies, programmes and area plans require much greater joining-up than is currently the case to maximise effective working. This is occurring to some extent already in Headteacher 1’s E.A.Z., but because of local effort: “You know, you’ll have family support workers, social services, you could have detached youth workers, you’ll have the school and the school may involve an educational psychologist, a learning mentor ... you could have all of these people working away with one another. And one of the things we’ve tried to do is set up what is called a multi-agency team that will look at their delivery through the eyes of the child, rather than through the eyes of their agency. Because it’s what makes sense for the child and their family. So that has improved but it’s still a barrier”.

So, support to children and their families needs to be much better co-ordinated as do family learning programmes, adult education provision, neighbourhood renewal and social inclusion programmes. Area working is an innovation at the local level but is at too early a stage of development to have major potential for joining up efforts in a thoroughly coherent way at present.

Attitudes

Attitudes of those involved in the education process in disadvantaged communities are characterised by some passion: passion about the need for high working-class aspirations, passion about teachers having high expectations, and a determination that children should be listened to and, wherever possible, regarded as equals in the education process.

Views expressed about the purpose of education include: a belief that if pupils in disadvantaged communities are equally intelligent as other young people they should be given the chance to reach their full potential, that schools are there to improve the life-chances of all children, and that schools should enable young people to have choices in their lives. There is general agreement that for initiatives to work they need to have ownership at the school level.

School improvement

A number of ways of improving the performance of schools in disadvantaged communities and of maximising young people's educational experience are identified. It is regarded as crucial for the quality of teaching and learning to be improved, for the curriculum to be made more relevant, the learning more interesting and the materials more stimulating.

Basic skills teaching is felt to be also extremely important: reading, writing and listening require constant emphasis at school, with success in these areas being the pre-requisite for effective wider learning experience. According to E.A.Z. Co-ordinator 3 "If you don't learn basic skills stuff then they're not going to survive". More generally, E.A.Z. Co-ordinator 2 points out "It's about the person being well-planned, knowing what they're talking about, understanding their subject area, being able to keep ... being firm but fair with the kids, making sure that kids' work is marked and we understand the value of it and having a sense of humour, dealing even-handedly with kids across the board. All those sorts of things that have always been there and that kids recognise, I think are very important". Nevertheless, E.A.Z. Co-ordinator 1 warns "I think we just need a large injection of money for a different style of teaching and learning because if we don't we're going to have major problems in the community later". Motivation for staff and pupils is regarded as crucial to any chance of success in raising standards of attainment of pupils.

To maximise the standard of education in a school, effective teamworking by those involved is regarded as essential, based on effective leadership. Schools also require better self-evaluation. A challenging curriculum is particularly needed in disadvantaged communities, linked to a determination that vocational courses have to be seen as part of a continuum, not something that is viewed as "second-rate".

It is particularly felt that attainment requires as much attention as achievement in disadvantaged communities. Whilst stressing the importance of raised pupil expectations, it is believed to be crucial to listen to pupils' views whilst encouraging them to believe in the importance of education for their future prospects in life. As E.A.Z. Co-ordinator 4 says "The children here need a different experience to what they get every day of their lives and they need to realise that one way of attaining what they see elsewhere is through getting a decent education and they're as responsible for their education as anybody else and the benefits of getting that education".

It is generally believed to be important for teachers to be both challenged and supported in their work, with L.E.A.s and other management bodies raising the issue of teaching standards and then providing the opportunities for teachers' professional development. It is felt that schools should keep their focus firmly on the educational progress of the young people in their communities and not try to do everything themselves. Trying to tackle all the health and social issues that impact on young people's lives rather than working in a linked team of agencies and workers often lead to failure on all fronts, but particularly in terms of educational progress of young people.

Developing creative approaches to teaching and learning is felt to be vital to the success of school provision in disadvantaged communities. E.A.Z. Co-ordinator 2 says "I think one of the things we need to do is to put more sparkle in because that is

what then gets children feeling more positive and motivated. And teachers as well, for that matter. And quite a lot of what the zone is doing is trying to put some sparkle in. So it's getting the basics right. Things like the gold star production where we had three hundred children in the Crucible Theatre performing in the children's festival last year." It is felt that active learning environments are what many children need to enable them to progress educationally.

Major Points of Difference

Overcoming disadvantage

Views are divided concerning the practicality and effectiveness of current initiatives to overcome educational under-achievement in disadvantaged communities. Whilst there is general agreement that barriers to learning thrown up by circumstances prevailing in poor communities are difficult to overcome, chief advisers tend to be supportive of current U.K. government school improvement measures. Chief Adviser 3 believes that as long as the teaching is of a high standard all pupils regardless of background should be able to achieve national attainment targets, adding "The only issue might be an attendance issue ... in fact to me it's very straightforward and simple really, to be honest".

Social Inclusion Officer 2 feels that the underlying social conditions require tackling at the same time as the education issues "I think it would be daft for us not to recognise that there is a correlation between disadvantage and educational achievement, or non-achievement. But that's not an excuse for not addressing the issue".

Initiatives

E.A.Z. co-ordinators are generally more critical of the practicality of bringing about major improvement within the current policy framework and with the current level of resources. E.A.Z. co-ordinators tend, also, to be more wary of claims of the efficacy of interventions to individual pupils. One council head of social inclusion is doubtful, too, about the capacity of E.A.Z.s to deliver any positive results to disadvantaged young people. Whilst there is general agreement that schools need to be central to current efforts to regenerate deprived communities, chief advisers tend to believe this is a realistic and deliverable aspiration whilst council heads of social inclusion tend to be critical of schools' ability to engage with wider social inclusion programmes effectively.

"Top-down" vs. "bottom-up" approaches

There is a tension between "top-down" and "bottom-up" language and solutions concerning the capacity of deprived communities to respond to the challenges they face. Chief advisers tend to "top-down" discourse. For instance, when asked to account for recent changes in her L.E.A. area, Chief Adviser 2 points out "The chief exec.'s changed, the leader's changed, the management structure of the education department has changed" whilst E.A.Z. co-ordinators/workers and council social inclusion officers tend to refer to "bottom-up" approaches. As Headteacher 1 says "A group of us met over a period of time trying to influence officers, politicians ... we did it all: attendance, background ... trying to quantify the factors that were come to bear on children's experience".

Relevance of national attainment measures

There is a difference of view about the relevance of national attainment measures (e.g. five A*-C GCSE as a benchmark for pupils and schools). Chief advisers tend to regard them as basically correct with arguments to be had about how best to ensure pupils achieve them, with appropriate strategies being devised to help pupils overcome barriers to learning. Chief Adviser 3 says “I think A*-C is a good measure. It’s spot-on, it’s about whether pupils have access to go on different things beyond school, whether they access further and higher education and whether they can access better opportunities in terms of employment. I think it’s a good measure in terms of national expectations and reasonable”. By contrast E.A.Z. Co-ordinator 1 says of the A*-C measure “It’s a waste of time ... it’s just not relevant. I can give you examples, actual concrete examples where it’s not relevant”. Headteacher 1, however, believes five A-E is a more appropriate benchmark as it allows young people access to intermediate GNVQ post-16, whilst there was a mixed view about the relevance of the A*-C measure amongst E.A.Z. co-ordinators.

School improvement

Finally, there is a difference of view about the ability of deprived communities to respond to current programmes of parental involvement, capacity building and school improvement. On the issue of viewing parents as partners in the education process Chief Adviser 2 has a mixed view as to its appropriateness “Parental involvement, I mean, it’s a two-edged sword. In certain ages and stages it’s very important. At other ages and stages the children actually actively ask their parents not to be there”. Headteacher 1 is rather more optimistic about the possibility of involving parents at the higher age ranges “I would argue that the vast, vast majority of parents are very supportive of this school in what it does. It’s just we’ve never really in any area of work spent a lot of time explaining to parents how they can actually help their child within the process”.

The capacity of disadvantaged communities

Whilst one E.A.Z. co-ordinator believes that the only hope for pupils to progress educationally is for them to leave their community to broaden their horizons, Headteacher 1 believes progress can be made in disadvantaged communities through building on existing long-standing local regeneration activities and on parental faith in the school’s ability to deliver outcomes for their children.

However, there is a difference of view about the importance and relevance of a school consulting and developing a partnership approach in the provision of education to young people locally. The general view is that partnership working is essential to achieving positive outcomes in disadvantaged communities. As Chief Adviser 1 says “I think through active communities ... with groups, I think they all have a part to play in creating a sense of identity and hope and creating the opportunities for people to feel they’re at least taking charge whether it be of their environment or ... and making some contribution”.

However Chief Adviser 3 feels that very often there is insufficient capacity in a disadvantaged community for genuine partnership working to take place: “I think there’s the balance between the officer analytical view and objective view and the community’s view. So you might go to a community and say “education’s the issue” for example, in some of our governing bodies where we might say that the governing

body is not quite working at an appropriate level yet. You might have the discussion entirely focused upon, say, the school playing fields and dog fouling whereas actually the whole discussion should be on pupil standards”.

Conclusion

As has been demonstrated by the literature review and the issues emerging from the fieldwork, school leadership in disadvantaged communities is regarded as crucial to making a success of educating the future generation in very difficult circumstances. However, it is the school/community interface that potentially provides the school leader with the “elbow room” he or she needs to make meaningful progress in changing the culture of poor expectations, to create a sense that the school “belongs” to its community, that adults from the community are involved in the education of their area’s young people and that the school is something that is central to a community’s pride and identity. Beyond that, clearly a deprived community requires more than an improving school at its heart to make significant progress economically and socially and this requires schools potentially to be involved in wider efforts to regenerate their local deprived area.

Clearly, theory needs to be developed about the potential relationship between perceived successful school leadership and school improvement in disadvantaged communities. Secondly, the context of the school/community interface and its potential contribution to school improvement is an ill-researched area and requires further examination in the future. Thirdly, the role of leadership in the interesting area of the school/community interface, and the links between leadership, school improvement and the developing of social capital also requires further research work in the future.

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Appendix

Fieldwork: January 2001-April 2002

Initial discussions and interviews

Initial discussions with advisers and other stakeholders: about the situations of schools in disadvantaged communities in South Yorkshire

2/2/01 Adviser A Sheffield L.E.A.

12/2/01 Adviser B Rotherham L.E.A.

12/3/01 Adviser C Barnsley L.E.A.

11/4/01 E.A.Z. Co-ordinator, Sheffield

31/10/01 Senior Adviser D Rotherham L.E.A.

Pilot interviews/observation with key respondents about the nature of leadership/school improvement in the a small E.A.Z. area, Rotherham

5/3/01 Headteacher E

6/3/01 Observation: E.A.Z. headteachers meeting with the E.A.Z. co-ordinator

15/3/01 E.A.Z. co-ordinator

29/3/01 Headteacher F

30/3/01 Headteacher G

3/5/01 Observation of staff performance management session, school F

Semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders: School leadership and school improvement/building of social capital in disadvantaged communities in South Yorkshire

Chief Advisers

22/10/01 Chief Adviser 1

25/10/01 Chief Adviser 2

12/11/01 Chief Adviser 3

Council Regeneration/Social Inclusion Officers

7/11/01 Social Inclusion Officer 2

18/12/01 Social Inclusion Officer 3

E.A.Z. Co-ordinators

12/12/01 E.A.Z. Co-ordinator 5

15/11/01 E.A.Z. Co-ordinator 2

27/11/01 Headteacher 1

30/11/01 E.A.Z. Co-ordinator 4

15/11/01 E.A.Z. Co-ordinator 1

23/11/01 and 5/12/01 E.A.Z. Co-ordinator 6

26/11/01 E.A.Z. Co-ordinator 3