

The interaction between housing policy and educational problems: a case study

Relatively little is known about the interactions between housing policy and educational problems. There are, however, good reasons to believe that processes of polarisation and residualisation in social housing over recent years have had significant impacts on schools. This study, by Alan Dyson, Alan Millward and a team from the Special Needs Research Centre, University of Newcastle, looks in-depth at these interactions in the case of a primary school serving an area of social housing. They found:

- f** The policies pursued by social landlords can have significant impacts on local schools. Housing families on the basis of need means that more children with difficulties enter those schools.
- f** Relatively small-scale changes in communities can have a destabilising effect on the schools serving those communities. Schools have established practices which are difficult to change and which may not be appropriate for pupils with significant difficulties.
- f** Even a small number of such pupils can create problems for a school. However, where social landlords manage their lettings policies to moderate the rate of change in the community, this can also have a stabilising effect on local schools.
- f** The researchers conclude that the case study suggests:
 - Where communities are in transition, schools need to reorient their practices to meet the needs of their new populations. However, they need support to do this and need to be locked into community-wide strategies.
 - There are good reasons for social landlords to extend the notion of Housing Plus to include working with schools. But this means more than merely providing additional resources to schools. At the very least, they should provide schools and LEAs with information on policies which may affect the balance of their communities or the needs of the families they are housing.

Background

Over the past two decades, national housing policy changes and other social and economic trends have produced a polarisation within social housing. The residualisation of some of the most difficult estates has generated multiple social problems. In turn, these have been reflected in local schools which have found themselves dealing with an increasingly problematic pupil population.

The changes in the composition and characteristics of those occupying social housing in these difficult areas are well-documented. However, we know a good deal less about areas which have experienced similar changes in the characteristics of their residents, but where these have had less dramatic impacts. In particular, we know very little about the implications for schools in these areas.

Impacts on the school

This study focused on a primary school serving an area of social housing. Over time, as the landlord increasingly began to house families on the basis of need, the nature of the community changed and became more problematic. These changes were not too dramatic and were carefully managed by the landlord. Nonetheless, they had a significant impact on the local school.

The school felt these impacts in four aspects of its work:

- young children entering the school were less prepared by their experiences in the home for the demands of schooling;
- the attainments of pupils in the school were depressed and more children had difficulties with literacy;
- increasing numbers of pupils displayed disruptive behaviour;
- it became increasingly difficult to involve parents in the life of the school or to count on support from parents for the schools' values and expectations.

These problems were not caused by a mass influx of children with difficulties. It took only relatively small numbers of such pupils to destabilise the school.

There was some evidence linking the appearance of these pupils to changes in the landlord's lettings policy. There was also evidence that when the landlord modified its lettings policy to create a more 'balanced' community, this reduced the numbers of problematic pupils entering the school.

Implications for policy and practice

The study looked at four aspects of policy and practice in the school and the community which might have an impact on the problems reported by the schools. These were:

- support for young children and their families;
- the school's own responses to its changing pupil population;
- the relationship between the school, parents and the community; and
- the extent of inter-agency collaboration on issues to do with children and families.

In each of these aspects there was some activity and provision. However, much of what was going on seemed to be targeted at the community as it had been in the past. The consequence was that the 'new' families in the community were cast as 'problems'. They were either alienated from the provision that was available or were dealt with by agencies operating in isolation on a case-by-case basis.

There was a clear need for a reorientation of the practices and policies of the school and other agencies. In particular, they needed to redesign their provision in the light of the community as it now was rather than as it had been. They needed to develop some overarching strategies for addressing the problems of children and families and they needed to collaborate with the landlord and others in the implementation of these strategies.

These strategies were particularly important in two related areas: support for young children and their families and the development of a 'learning community'. It was not realistic to expect that the school in isolation could address the educational needs of its pupils. Instead, there had to be coherent educational provision and support for children before they entered school and an involvement in learning across the community as a whole.

The importance of 'Schools Plus'

There was evidence that the school needed to rethink its relationship with parents and the community by embracing the principles of 'Schools Plus'. In other words, it needed to accept that it could only carry out its core function of educating children if it was more proactive in reaching out to the families and communities in which those children lived. However, the everyday pressures of running a school mean that schools are unlikely to accept this wider role without considerable support.

The engagement of the school in community-wide strategies is one way of delivering that support. Partnership with other professionals and agencies helps schools constantly review practices. It also makes it worth the school's while to invest in such strategies if it can see its efforts being amplified by the work of its partners.

Implications for the social landlord

There were particular issues for the landlord in this area. As part of its commitment to 'Housing Plus', it made resources available in order to maintain a balanced community with access to a range of facilities and support. In line with this strategy, it was involved with the school and made resources available to it.

The landlord's involvement in school and community brought many benefits. In particular, the collaboration of a landlord committed to Housing Plus and a school potentially committed to Schools Plus promised to form the basis of a seamless network of provision.

However, ambiguities existed:

- the landlord needed to develop a clear strategy rather than responding to particular issues and needs as they arose;
- in responding to issues as they arose, there was some evidence that the landlord unwittingly favoured established members of the community and community agencies who were best able to articulate their needs; this was not always felt to be appropriate;
- there was a suggestion that too heavy an involvement of the landlord might act as a disincentive for other agencies to become more fully involved in the community;
- there was also a suggestion that the availability of additional resourcing from the landlord inhibited the development of resources in the community and its institutions, including the school; and
- the landlord's involvement sometimes led it into areas where it had little expertise.

Implications for Housing Plus

These ambiguities point to a fundamental dilemma for landlords operating a Housing Plus approach in communities which are undergoing transition - in this case, a gradual change in the characteristics of its population. The dilemma is whether they are trying to secure the maintenance of the best aspects of the status quo, or whether they are trying to bring about a reorientation of the community, its institutions and agencies in order to meet the new situation.

Maintenance involves landlords in trying to stabilise communities by meeting apparent need and using their own resources to deal with problems as they arise. The principal limitation is that it does nothing to prepare the community or agencies for the new situation. Instead, it reinforces established practices and may become an open-ended and ever-increasing commitment for landlords.

Reorientation involves landlords in developing a community and network of community agencies which are able to respond to the new situation. It requires the landlord to act as a catalyst and facilitator of development rather than as a front-line provider of services. Landlords are in a position to do this because they can represent their communities to other agencies. Reorientation also focuses on developing resources that are already available within those communities.

There are good reasons why social landlords should extend the notion of Housing Plus so that it includes working with local schools. In particular, landlords should provide schools and LEAs with good information about the impacts of their policies. This information should detail not only the numbers of children expected in an area, but also their likely characteristics and needs.

Beyond this, the involvement of landlords in educational issues has to mean more than simply offering schools additional resources. Landlords also have to seek ways of assisting in the reorientation of

schools' existing practices. This means representing the needs of the community to schools, working in partnership with other agencies (particularly the LEA) and locking schools into community-wide strategies.

Implications for national policy

The study has implications for national housing and education policy. Many current policy initiatives - Education Action Zones, Health Action Zones, Education Development Plans and so on - are welcome because they promote inter-agency collaboration and coherent area-wide strategies. Landlords can use these initiatives as vehicles for their own involvement in educational and other social issues.

However, there is a danger that purely zonal initiatives will by-pass areas like the one in this study. There are real needs in areas such as these, but they are not acute and agencies are likely to be reluctant to undertake any radical restructuring. This reinforces the importance of landlords in such areas acting as catalysts of development.

A second issue is that the interaction of national housing and education policy had resulted in negative consequences for the school in this study. This points to the need for better analysis at national level of the impacts of one policy area on another. The weakening of local authority control and the fragmentation of providers in education similarly points to the need for stronger local co-ordinating mechanisms.

The school also felt that its new and more problematic population made it vulnerable to inspection and to the other forms of public accountability which characterise the national education system. Unless these pressures can be relieved, it is unlikely that such schools will be enthusiastic about extending their roles still further into Schools Plus.

About the study

The study focused on a primary school serving an area of social housing with a single landlord. Interviews were undertaken with the staff of the school, professionals in other agencies, representatives of the landlord, parents and other residents. Data were

collected on the attainments and needs of pupils. These were related to changes in the landlord's lettings policy by cross-referring from pupil attainments to information on the family's housing status (type of tenure, date of entry into the area etc.). The study was contextualised by cross-referencing the data collection with three other 'comparator' schools with similar characteristics and locations.

How to get further information

The full report, **Housing and schooling: A case-study in joined-up problems** by Jill Clark, Alan Dyson and Alan Millward, is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 899987 88 6, price £13.95 plus £2 p&p).