

How schools can contribute to area regeneration

The interactions between area disadvantage and schooling are long-standing policy concerns. While most previous research has been concerned with the impact of area factors on schools, this study focused on the contribution schools can make to the regeneration of their areas. Deanne Crowther, Colleen Cummings, Alan Dyson and Alan Millward of the University of Newcastle explored how schools serving two disadvantaged areas saw their roles, what activities they undertook, and the successes and problems they experienced. The study found that:

-  Schools' activities had important small-scale and local effects. However, there was little evidence of larger-scale effects that would transform the prospects of significant numbers of pupils or the character of local communities.
-  Heads, teachers and other stakeholders held a range of views about the role of schools. These fell into two main categories, with one major subdivision:
 - those who saw schools as a community resource, opening their facilities to local people, offering community education, and providing support to families;
 - those who saw schools' main task as enhancing pupils' personal opportunities by raising their attainments and increasing their employability. However, within this second group, some thought this could only be achieved if families and communities were engaged in supporting children's education and aspirations; while others considered that community involvement was a distraction from schools' core business of raising individual attainments.
-  In practice, the attitudes and range of activities schools undertook were not this clear-cut, and were influenced by many factors and sometimes lacked coherence. Much depended on the views of the head teacher, the approach of the local authority and the extent to which schools were able to relate to a single area. The national 'schools standards' agenda tended to dominate schools' thinking.
-  The researchers concluded that:
 - schools might have more effect on the neighbourhood and pupils if they were able to operate with stronger support from the local authority and local community organisations and with a more clearly defined and holistic role;
 - rather than considering how schools can contribute to the regeneration of disadvantaged areas alongside their 'core business', it might be more appropriate to ask: "What is it about schools' core business that enhances the opportunities of all children in all communities they serve?" and to act on that.

Background

The problems of the negative interactions between a disadvantaged area and educational attainment have been long-standing concerns of national and local policy. Many approaches to area regeneration have included an educational component. When the Labour Government assumed power in 1997, it promised a new approach which gave education a prominent role in tackling disadvantage and, in particular, outlined a role for schools in 'neighbourhood renewal'. Whilst this role opens up many opportunities for schools, it is not clearly defined and may create tensions with schools' primary responsibility of delivering on the Government's national schools standards agenda.

The study

The study investigated the contribution to wider regeneration initiatives made by three secondary and six primary schools serving two disadvantaged areas in the north of England. During the two-year project, interviews were held with teachers, pupils, parents, community members, local authority officers and representatives of other stakeholder groups in each area. These were analysed in terms of common themes and significant differences.

Schools' roles

All of the schools saw themselves as making contributions to their areas and undertook community-related activities. These included running breakfast clubs, opening school facilities for community use, organising courses to help parents become involved in their children's education, making links with local businesses and so on. Notions of what schools' contribution could be differed, but the team classified attitudes into two main groups, with one major subdivision.

- Schools should see themselves as a community resource, opening their facilities to local people, offering community education, or providing support to families under stress and linking them to other agencies.

"Schools are the most valuable resources in a community and they should be developed as a community resource."

(An elected member)

Schools which followed this line of thinking might host adult education classes, or encourage community members to use the gym, or put families in contact with other agencies when they were experiencing problems.

- Schools' main task should be to enhance pupils' personal opportunities by raising their attainments and thus increasing their employability.

"Regeneration must be about enhancing the life chances of young people, and education has to be the key for that."

(A local education officer)

Schools which followed this line emphasised the importance of academic work, placed high expectations on their pupils and gave them support to achieve as highly as possible.

- Within this view, some thought that involvement with the community was a distraction from schools' core business of raising individual attainments. They believed the job of the school was to create a more supportive and stimulating environment for pupils than they could find in their own communities.

"The school is a safe haven and provides an alternative to the community."

(A head teacher)

- Others thought that pupils would only fulfil their potential if families and communities were engaged in supporting children's education and raising their aspirations.

"Whilst the prime role of school is to educate, it is not going to be possible to drive up attainment without engaging fully with the community."

(Another head teacher)

Schools which followed this line made great play of reaching out to families and the wider community to involve them in education-related activities. They might run courses to show parents how to improve their children's reading, or send lap-top computers home for the whole family to use, or run 'Dads and Lads' events to encourage fathers to become involved in their sons' schooling.

In practice, the attitudes and range of activities schools undertook were influenced by many factors. They sometimes lacked coherence. Head teachers were powerful in determining the direction taken by schools, and a change of head could easily bring about a reversal of the school's orientation. No head, however, could escape the imperative to raise standards in accordance with the Government's national policy for raising standards of attainment in schools. This made the development of a wider, community role problematic, especially since funding for such a role tended to be short-term and unpredictable.

The geography and age structure of areas served by the schools was also important. One of the two study areas was large and relatively homogenous. Schools saw themselves as having a clear relationship with a single community. The other area was small and surrounded by several distinct communities. Pupils from the disadvantaged area formed only a small minority of some schools' populations and the schools therefore found it harder to see this area as a priority.

The difference was compounded by the policies of the two local authorities. The first area had a history of a community role for schools and a regeneration policy focused on the development of communities through education and family support. In the second area, regeneration had been housing-led rather than community-led and the local education authority focused heavily on the national standards agenda.

What worked - and what did not

There was some good evidence that schools were able to make some differences to the lives of individual pupils, offer some support to families and extend the resources available to communities. Some schools, for instance, acted as stable points in children's lives, offering them high levels of personal attention, finding exciting ways for them to learn and helping their families through crises. Without such interventions, these children would have been at risk from truancy, exclusion or family difficulties.

However, more widespread and fundamental impacts were difficult to identify. The attainments of pupils and their destinations post-16 were poorer than national norms, despite the best efforts of the schools. Though schools did enhance the resources of the communities, the areas remained disadvantaged. Likewise, although schools might see themselves as

attempting to engage local communities in education and raise their aspirations, they were only able to undertake relatively small-scale initiatives. They simply did not have the resources to work intensively with families or with large numbers of community members.

Based on its findings, the study team considered it was difficult to see how the limited work that schools could support might bring about the large-scale cultural change at which they claimed to be aiming.

The team observed that schools often remained disconnected from wider regeneration strategies. Schools felt dominated by the schools standards agenda and were generally poorly informed about the nature and needs of local communities. Community members, community workers and other agencies did not always find schools to be easy partners, often seeing them as narrowly focused on their own concerns rather than contributing to wider regeneration efforts.

Conclusion: Towards a coherent approach

Based on its findings, the study team made several conclusions and suggestions about what needs to be done if schools are to make a meaningful contribution to the regeneration of disadvantaged areas. A more coherent approach was considered important. In particular, the team considered that:

- It is unreasonable to expect schools to solve the intractable problems of disadvantage alone. A long-term strategy, in which schools play a part but which also addresses some of the underlying factors in which they are unable to intervene effectively, might help to overcome these disadvantages.
- Schools lack clear and coherent expectations as to their roles and are therefore heavily influenced by head teachers' views, funding and local factors. A role could perhaps be defined which draws upon each of the approaches identified above but which determines the precise contribution of schools in the light of a locally agreed strategy.
- In order to enable schools to take on a wider role, it would be helpful if the national schools standards agenda could be rethought. A focus on enhancing children's learning and life-chances is

essential, but this could be separated from the particular delivery mechanisms - such as mechanistic target-setting - which have characterised policy in recent years.

- It is suggested that this wider role could be a formal part of schools' briefs, supported by a stable source of funding and appropriate accountability mechanisms.
- The team considers it unlikely that schools can deliver on this wider role if they act in isolation. New structures linking schools with other schools, partnerships, agencies and other community stakeholders might help the process.
- An increasing range of data is becoming available to schools about their pupil populations. This needs to be enhanced by information about local communities provided to schools by their local authorities and their new partners so that they can make decisions that are not simply based on their own limited interactions with families.

Finally, the team considered that any extension of the role of schools might pose the threat of increasing the tensions between schools' 'core business' and the 'additional' responsibilities they are expected to take on in disadvantaged areas. Rather than considering how schools can contribute to the regeneration of disadvantaged areas alongside their core business, the team considered that it might be more appropriate to ask: "What is it about schools' core business that enhances the opportunities of all children in all communities they serve?" and to act on that.

About the project

The study focused on two disadvantaged areas in the north of England in 2000-2002. Three secondary and six primary schools, which educated the highest proportions of children from these areas, were studied over two years. A range of semi-structured interviews and informal discussions were undertaken on an individual and group basis, with head teachers, teachers, pupils, parents, community members, local authority officers, representatives of other agencies, elected members, community workers, regeneration policy-makers and other stakeholders in each area.

These were analysed in terms of common themes and significant differences.

The first year identified how pupils, teachers and the other stakeholders understood their own roles, the activities they undertook, the successes they achieved and the problems they faced. In the second year, specific initiatives were tracked, notably the development of the Education Action Zones in each area. Performance data relating to each of the schools were also collected and analysed in order to determine what impacts the schools were having on children living in the case-study areas. Emerging findings were discussed with participants at regular intervals.

How to get further information

The full report, **Schools and area regeneration** by Deanne Crowther, Colleen Cummings, Alan Dyson and Alan Millward, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 861 34 517 8, price £13.95).