

# Towards Extended Schools? How Education and Other Professionals Understand Community-Oriented Schooling

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*The government in England is proposing that every school should offer extended services to children, families and communities. However, in the absence of agreed models of how such community-oriented schooling should operate, its form will depend on how it is understood by the education professionals and their partners in other agencies who have to make it work in practice. This article draws on data from interviews with over 350 professionals to outline two such understandings. It suggests that they rest on different assumptions about fundamental social and educational issues and argues for a more open debate around these issues. Copyright © 2006 The Author(s). Journal compilation © 2006 National Children's Bureau.*

## Background

The idea that, in addition to their 'core task' of teaching children, schools might also make important contributions to local families and communities is one that has a long history in England. It can be traced at least as far back as the Cambridgeshire Village Colleges established by Henry Morris in the 1920s (Morris, 1925) and thence through to the community colleges established by other local education authorities (LEAs) and the urban community schools of the 1970s (Midwinter, 1973). Such developments were always dependent on the approaches of individual headteachers and particular LEAs, and never, therefore, led to a major reformulation of school role at national level. Nonetheless, when the new Labour government took office in 1997, it inherited a rich history and a diverse pattern of community-oriented provision (Ball, 1998).

Since then, new Labour governments have sought to explore the potential for schools with a community orientation to play a distinctive role both in raising standards of achievement and in promoting social inclusion, particularly in areas of disadvantage. In the first instance, the 1999 'Schools Plus' report (DfEE, 1999) proposed that schools might play a key role in the emerging neighbourhood renewal strategy (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998). Subsequently, the government and allied organisations sponsored a range of pilot programmes for what have come to be called 'extended schools', including demonstration and pathfinder projects and a programme of 'full service extended schools' in every LEA area (DfES, 2002, 2003b,c). Most recently, the government has proposed that all schools should become 'extended' in the

sense that they 'provide a range of services and activities, often beyond the school day, to help meet the needs of children, their families and the wider community (DfES, 2005, p. 7)'.

In this latest formulation, community-oriented schools are aligned with the wider every child matters (DfES, 2003a) agenda. 'Located as they are right at the heart of the community,' according to the Secretary of State for Education (DfES, 2005; p. 4), schools are 'ideally placed' to become key delivery units for reconfigured family and community services. The expectation is that, as a minimum core offer all schools will work with partners beyond education to make childcare facilities available to families, provide out-of-school activities for children, deliver parent support services, facilitate referral to other agencies and open their facilities to community use.

The rationale for community-oriented schooling offered in this national roll-out is not unlike that underpinning similar developments elsewhere in the UK – notably in Scotland (The Scottish Office, 1998) – and in many other countries where the role of the school is being rethought around a wider set of family and community issues (Moss and others, 1999; Wilkin and others, 2003b). A common starting point is the assumption that traditionally configured services are increasingly proving incapable of meeting the demands placed on them, particularly where children, families and communities live in significant disadvantage. It follows that some sort of reconfiguration is needed which will bring services together, locate them close to the communities they serve and give them easy access to children and families. Schools thus appear to be the obvious service base, particularly as they themselves cannot carry out their educational function without calling on the support of other agencies. As Joy Dryfoos, one of the principal advocates of full service schooling in the USA, argues:

schools are failing because they cannot meet the complex needs of today's students ... The cumulative effects of poverty have created social environments that challenge educators, community leaders, and practitioners of health, mental health, and social services to invent new kinds of institutional responses. (Dryfoos, 1994, p. xvii)

Seen in this way, community-oriented schooling in general and extended schools in particular seem like common sense policy solutions to the practical problems of service delivery. However, this is not the whole story. Inventing 'new kinds of institutional responses' raises a whole series of questions: about how needs are defined, who defines them and which needs take precedence; about what sorts of interventions are likely to be effective and whether these are best directed at the level of child, family, or community; and, indeed, about what counts as the school's 'community' given the complex geographies of school recruitment (Crowther and others, 2003) and the equally complex nature of the relationship between place and notions of community (Galster, 2001; Lupton, 2003).

In this situation, the front-line professionals – headteachers, local authority officers, community workers, social workers, health personnel and others – who have to 'invent' these new institutional responses, have some difficult questions to answer. In principle, they might look to government guidance for help. However, the guidance which is available in England tends to avoid the sorts of fundamental questions outlined above in favour of a listing of the activities in which schools and their partners might engage, and the promise of multiple, often highly ambitious outcomes which these activities will generate (see, for instance, DfES, 2002, 2003b,c, 2005, n.d.). Even then, the guidance tends to shy away from specificity, on the grounds that: 'there is no blueprint for the types of activities that schools might offer.

How these services look and are delivered in or through a particular school will vary (DfES, 2005, p. 8)'.

The international literature on community-oriented schooling is scarcely more helpful. As a review by Wilkin and others (2003b) concludes, the American literature in particular

appears to approach the concept of full-service or extended schooling in a promotional or celebratory manner. Several sources expound its virtues or merits, and are permeated with such terms as *pioneering; innovative; revitalised; exciting; radical* and *dynamic*. (Wilkin and others, 2003b, p. v)

In any case, there are serious doubts about whether the difficult questions raised by community-oriented schooling can be answered simply by importing solutions from abroad. In part, this is because the answers arrived at in other national systems tend to arise out of deep cultural assumptions which may not be shared elsewhere (Baron, 2001; Moss and others, 1999; Nixon and others, 2002). In part, it is because different initiatives tend in any case to generate very diverse responses rather than single, coherent, models (Ball, 1998; Dryfoos, 2005; Wilkin and others, 2003a).

It seems likely, therefore, that local professionals will be driven back on their own resources in answering the difficult questions to which community-oriented schooling gives rise. Even more than in most centrally driven initiatives, the attitudes, values and assumptions of local professionals – in short, their understandings are likely to determine what extended schooling means in practice. It seems important, therefore, to try to identify these understandings and consider their implications for the roll-out of policy. Accordingly, the remainder of this article reports findings from three studies which sought to explore these professional understandings. In the next section, we describe the studies and set out the methodology we used to elicit and analyse professional views. We then map out these views in terms of positions which respondents held in relation to key issues and the coherence of these positions into overall understandings of community-oriented schooling. Finally, we consider the implications of this map for the further development of policy and practice.

## The studies

The analysis reported here is based on data from three studies of schools which were developing their roles in relation to the (typically disadvantaged) families and communities they served. The studies are referred to here as the 'regeneration', 'demonstration' and 'pathfinder' projects. The first of these, sponsored by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, explored the role of schools in contributing to area regeneration (Crowther and others, 2003). The fieldwork was conducted during the period September 2000 to November 2002 and focused on two areas in north-east England which had been subject to regeneration initiatives and on nine case-study schools serving these areas. Interviews in each area were conducted with school teaching and support staff, and representatives from the LEA, the wider local authority (LA), community organisations and statutory agencies. During the course of the study more than 200 interviews were conducted with professionals.

The evaluations of the extended schools 'demonstration' and subsequent 'pathfinder' projects funded by the DfES, ran respectively from February until May 2002 and from November 2002 to December 2003 (Cummings and others, 2004; Dyson and others, 2002). The demonstration

project supported developments in some 13 schools across three LEAs. The Pathfinder project involved between one and 28 schools in each of 25 LEAs. For evaluation purposes, visits were made to all LEAs and to a sample of up to six case-study schools in each. Across the two projects, individual and group interviews were conducted with over 150 LEA officers, school staff and partners from a range of agencies working in the areas served by participating schools.

Although the three studies differed in their detailed aims, each of them was centrally concerned with determining how education and other professionals understood the role of schools in relation to local communities. Frequently, these understandings were implicit in action or able to be only partially articulated by respondents. In each study, therefore, we encouraged the respondents to describe to us the specifics of action – what schools did or should do in relation to local communities – and to link these actions to what they saw as the characteristics and needs of local communities which called for action of this kind. As community-oriented schooling requires schools to operate in fields that have traditionally belonged to other agencies (and as some professionals worked for these agencies), we were also interested in how the respondents saw the work of schools fitting into wider interventions. In each of the studies, therefore, we elicited views in relation to three aspects of community-oriented schooling:

- what schools, acting alone or with their partners, were doing or might do in relation to local communities;
- how those actions related to the perceived characteristics, needs and potentials of local communities and
- how the work of schools and their partners in this respect did or might relate to broader interventions (for instance, area regeneration strategies) with those communities.

In order to construct an overview of the professionals' views across the three studies, we then undertook a two-step analysis of responses:

- Firstly, we analysed the similarities and differences between individual responses in each area of questioning, in order to identify a range of the *positions* in each area that were adopted by our sample.
- Secondly, we analysed the extent to which the respondents adopting a similar position in one area tended to adopt similar positions in the other areas. We were thus able to test whether there were a limited number of overall *understandings* of schools' roles shared by groups of respondents.

The result was effectively a verbal map of the respondents' understandings, in some ways similar to the various forms of mapping undertaken by Kay and others' study of community education in Scotland (Kay and others, 1998; Tett and others, 2001). However, it is important to emphasise that what we mean here by understandings are clusters of related assumptions, sometimes articulated in clear and coherent accounts, but often needing to be inferred from responses to particular issues and situations. The issue of the implicit nature of these assumptions is one to which we shall return later.

## Two professional understandings

Two broad understandings emerged from this analysis – one which was more 'school-oriented', and one which was more 'community-oriented'. Not surprisingly, perhaps, there

was a tendency, as we saw it, for the education professionals to favour the former and the other professionals the latter. However, this was no more than a tendency and professionals from any background might share either understanding. The same is true of professionals from any local authority area, even where, as was sometimes the case, local policy was clearly based on one or other of these understandings. Again, this individual diversity is an issue to which we shall return.

### *The school-oriented understanding*

We characterise this understanding as school-oriented because it sees the role of schools in relation to the communities they serve largely in terms of how that role can contribute to the school's core task of teaching children – and, in particular, of driving up levels of educational achievement. Only in this way, some respondents told us, can young people acquire the knowledge, skills and credentials which will enable them to compete in the labour market, secure an adequate income for themselves and their families and thus escape the cycle of disadvantage which besets their communities.

At the extreme, some respondents felt that the pursuit of student achievement meant that schools could not and should not engage directly with local communities. In the words of a senior local authority officer:

The authority concentrates on attainment. This may divorce the school from its social milieu and mean that schools are not seen as a community facility. However, this should work at the macro level.

Indeed, the perceived low expectations and low levels of engagement with education in disadvantaged local communities were seen as further disadvantaging young people, who had, therefore, to be insulated from them. In the words of one comprehensive school headteacher:

The school aims to provide a different sort of area for pupils in which it imposes a strict uniform and discipline code.... The school is a safe haven and provides an alternative to the community.... The number one priority is raising attainment as that is what it [the school] is accountable for.... The priority is to teach pupils to read so that they can get their exams and leave [the area], so they can get out of there.

Other professionals were similarly committed to the importance of driving up levels of achievement, but saw some more direct engagement with local families and communities as the only way in which this could be achieved. As one headteacher put it: 'while 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.'

According to this view, the ways in which children learn in school are bound up with the attitudes of their families and communities towards education. Engagement with families and communities is thus a prerequisite of improved achievement for children and young people:

By working with parents and community members to raise aspirations and see the value of education, the school will be in a stronger position to raise standards and levels of aspiration in the school. (Teacher)

However direct engagement with communities was viewed, those communities were assessed predominantly in terms of their perceived impact on children's learning and their perceived capacity to contribute to the school's core task of promoting achievement. Overwhelmingly, these assessments were negative: 'In general, pupils from [name of area] have very low aspirations. Very few aim for or get to University. Education is not seen as a priority.'

Drugs, drink, crime, housing, health all link to children's attendance and behaviour and attainment.

There is a very high risk of some male pupils turning to crime and some female pupils falling pregnant before they complete their education.... Peer group pressure is an enormous influencing factor, as is family life. (Headteachers)

These negative impacts on children and young people tended to be seen as part of a more general malaise within local communities. The devastating effects of unemployment, poverty, poor housing and other social problems were acknowledged, but they were seen as having produced dysfunctional cultures which meant that local people were helpless to solve their own difficulties:

We have third generational unemployment and we need people to realise that there are some opportunities. We must help them to help themselves. Also there are lots of pressures on children; lots of drugs, crime and lack of work opportunities. We must get children into nursery and get parents in at that point and keep them on board, give them parenting skills. (Headteacher)

In these circumstances, extending the role of the school was seen not only as a means of protecting children from the perverse effects of their families and communities, nor even as a means of enlisting the support of adults for the work of the school, but also as a means of bringing about fundamental transformation in local cultures

One of the things that we're going to have to look at through this is how we change the culture of the whole community.... I want them to have different aspirations than they had when I came here [as head].... I think it'll take another generation for that bulk of people to actually change it for their children. So it is this long-term change that will make this biggest impact.... If there are these small pockets that seem to be intractable then it's going to be long-term policies and long-term changes that'll change them rather than the short term.

In principle, this long-term agenda suggested the need for a wide-ranging strategy in which interventions managed by and from the school were co-ordinated with the work of other agencies and organisations. In some places, this was indeed the case, as schools collaborated with early years providers, family support workers, community health workers and other professionals to re-energise local communities and re-engage them with learning and – ultimately – employment. However, it was also possible for schools to work largely in isolation from other agencies – and, indeed, from each other – focusing exclusively on what they could do for their own students and with those students' families.

Indeed, for some respondents, the idea of long-term interventions in communities aimed at bringing about cultural change seemed likely to be unworkable in the most difficult cases. The senior LA officer cited above, for instance, outlined a regeneration strategy which did not depend on transforming existing communities. Rather, he said, young people would be helped to leave their communities by means of high educational achievement which would lead on to well-paid employment. As a result, those communities would become progres-

sively residualised until the point was reached where they were no longer viable. At that point, local people would be dispersed, the housing stock would be demolished and the community would exist no more. Put crudely, therefore, the role of the school was not to support, nor even transform local communities, but to be an instrument in their destruction.

### *The community-oriented understanding*

The second understanding was less commonly articulated than the first (perhaps because of the preponderance of education professionals in our samples) and its articulation tended to be more partial and somewhat less coherent. Nonetheless, there were views expressed that were quite different from those we have just outlined and that tended to see the role of the school in a broader context of community problems and priorities.

For instance, some respondents saw the school as a resource for local communities, rather than seeing communities as a resource for (or, indeed, as a drain on) the school. As one elected member put it: 'Schools are the most valuable resources in a community and they should be developed as a community resource'.

Most straightforwardly, this might mean opening up the school's facilities for community use, so that areas which had no sports or information and communication technology facilities, for instance, might have access to them. It might mean opening the school up as an educational facility to local adults. It might also mean making the expertise of education professionals and their linkages into other agencies available to local people as a source of support and guidance. Crucially, this last role was not dependent on some hoped-for impact on children in general and student achievement in particular. Rather, the school was seen simply as offering a service to local people who had problems in their lives. One primary head in particular told us about a recent incident in which young people who had left the school some years ago had overdosed on a cocktail of drugs. He was quietly proud that after all this time it was to his school that their families turned for support. Helping local people with problems of this kind was, in his view, an essential part of the school's role. As he warned: 'Placing all energies into raising standards and ignoring community needs could create bigger problems in the long run.'

This understanding embodied a view of families and communities that was subtly different from that in the school-oriented understanding. Whilst the social and economic problems faced by local people were self-evident, these respondents tended to emphasise the overwhelming nature of these problems rather than the failures of local people to help themselves. As a result, there was a sense that local people might have a part to play in shaping the role of the school and that decisions about what provision should be made could not be left entirely to professionals:

It is only going to be successful if the community want it and are on board....The fact that it's the community on the steering group, the partners are on the steering group and the community and the partners are constantly involved in everything and that is why it's successful today. (LEA officer)

This sense of partnership pervaded the relationship between schools and other agencies and organisations. For some respondents, it seemed that schools alone could not make the kinds of transformational changes needed to improve the life chances of disadvantaged children

and their families. A strategic and collaborative approach involving the local authority and/or other schools was, therefore, essential: 'In the end, we either work together or go down together. It's no use me just trying to do things for this school, we work collaboratively in this area (Headteacher)'.

Heads such as this one tended to complain, not when community issues diverted them from their supposed core business of raising achievement, but when other agencies failed, as they saw it to involve them sufficiently in local initiatives. Similarly, non-education professionals working with this understanding tended to view autonomous action by schools, independent of local strategies, in very negative terms. As a regeneration officer commented: 'Each school is its own little empire and they don't tend to take kindly to, let's say, encouragement for overarching type solutions that they don't think of'.

Even more negatively, schools which were not locked into partnerships with local people and community agencies were seen as a source of problems in the area rather than as a means of overcoming those problems:

Schools are like a monster, they eat everything in their path, then spit it back out again.... Schools are like a secret society. They make plans that involve others but the others are always the last to know. Others are used by schools for their own ends; they're self-interested. (Community worker)

### Some implications for extended schooling

In the course of our interviews, a community worker summed up the sense of uncertainty felt by front-line professionals in the following terms:

There is no agreement, certainty or clarity at national and other levels as to the role of schools in meeting community needs. There are lots of visions coming from central government but no single, coherent vision.

The range of views we have set out above is, we suggest, a direct consequence of this uncertainty. Thrown back on their own resources, professionals will inevitably arrive at different conclusions and, in many cases, not even a common professional background will produce a shared understanding.

In principle, this lack of central steering might form the basis for a kind of 'new localism' (Aspden and Birch, 2005) in which front-line professionals develop forms of community-oriented schooling which respond to local priorities and in which those priorities are shaped in a process of democratic engagement. In practice, however, it seemed to us that the control exerted by the local was a rather weak one. The widespread perception that local families and communities were mired in problems, and, even more so, that those problems originated in part from their own deficits, meant that some professionals, at least, were disinclined to see local people as equal partners in shaping provision. Indeed, one headteacher told us how, shortly after his appointment, he had visited the local community centre with a view to building partnerships with local residents and the professionals based there. However, when he found unemployed young people abusing drugs on the premises, he decided that there was no way such partnerships could work and he had never visited the centre again.

Moreover, as we suggested above, the understandings of different professionals working in the same area (and even from the same professional background) might be quite different. Rather than local circumstances leading professionals to a common understanding, the local is read differently in the light of understandings which arise out of other factors. At the extreme, this means that particularly powerful individuals – notably, headteachers – can shape local provision in accordance with their own, idiosyncratic views. We did indeed see schools which ‘flip-flopped’ in terms of their orientation towards local communities for no better reason than that there had been a change of headteacher.

There are, inevitably, concerns about the legitimacy of community-oriented schooling if it is so much dependent on the understandings of individual professionals. These concerns are heightened considerably by the frequently implicit nature of the two broad understandings which we have outlined. They seem, in many cases, to be the result of individual preferences, experiences and values, rather than of any rational debate between clearly articulated alternatives. Indeed, there is reason to believe that, even if these alternatives were more clearly articulated, they themselves rest on yet more fundamental assumptions. As Moss and others, reviewing approaches to school and community across a range of national contexts, conclude, such understandings imply answers to

a wider range of critical questions, not only ‘what works?’, but also ‘who do we think children are?’, ‘what do we want for our children, here and now (as children) and in the future?’, ‘what is a good childhood?’, ‘what is children’s relationship to and place in society?’ and ‘what are the purposes of institutions for children?’ (Moss and others, 1999, p. 39)

Hence, what we have characterised as the school-oriented understanding rests on a whole set of social, economic and political assumptions—that educational achievement offers a reliable pathway out of disadvantage; that the effects of family and community background on achievement can be overcome by the sorts of interventions that community-oriented schools can muster and that state institutions led by professionals with little local accountability are justified in making such interventions. These assumptions are, of course, eminently open to challenge. For instance, it is possible to argue that the role of education in promoting economic development has been much over-stated (Lloyd and Payne, 2003; Robinson, 1997; Wolf, 2002), that schools are able to overcome the effects of disadvantage to only a limited extent (Mortimore and Whitty, 2000; Teddlie and Reynolds, 2000) and that school-based interventions are likely to have little impact on family and community disadvantage unless they form part of a much more wide-ranging strategy extending across many areas of public policy (Lipman, 2004; Noguera, 2003; Rothstein, 2004). Moreover, fundamental socio-political issues are raised by the interventions of schools and their partners in the supposed deficits of families and communities. Such interventions easily degenerate into attempts, as one critic puts it, to ‘clone the Blairs’ (Gewirtz, 2001) by requiring poor families and communities to think and behave like their more affluent counterparts in middle-class areas (de Carvalho, 2001; Dyson and Robson, 1999; Gillies, 2005; Vincent, 1996; Vincent and Tomlinson, 1997).

Not surprisingly, then, some commentators have concluded that this school-oriented approach is limited, if not downright dangerous, and have begun to explore alternatives. These in turn begin to uncover some of the assumptions underpinning what we have called the community-oriented understanding. For instance, a recent report on extended schools from Demos argues that simply focusing on reconfiguring services around schools offers

a worthy but narrow vision of the potential of extended schooling...When we talk about the 'extended school', what is being extended? By whom, to who?... The central challenge of extended schooling is legitimacy—it is about engaging with a community, and with the other agencies inside the community, in a manner that invites their participation, ownership, even leadership. Simply dictating undifferentiated, unresponsive services will miss the point entirely, however cost effective, rigorous and integrated these services are. (Craig and others, 2004, p. 2)

We begin to see here a different set of assumptions, not least in terms of the nature of professional power and community politics. Schools are not the agents of the state, bent on transforming disadvantaged communities; indeed, when they attempt this, they are, in the community worker's telling phrase, 'monsters that eat up everything in their path'. Rather, schools are the agents of those communities, placed at their disposal by the state so that local people can more easily solve their own problems. The implication is that disadvantage is not overcome by education-driven economic development – or at least not by that alone – so much as by political action in which local people take greater control of their own lives. As the American scholar, Jean Anyon argues:

In this new paradigm of educational policy, the political potential of pedagogy and curriculum would be realised. Critical pedagogy would take to the streets, offices and courtrooms where social justice struggles play out. Curriculum could build toward and from these experiences. Vocational offerings in high school would link to living wage campaigns and employers who support them. (Anyon, 2005, p. 200)

Such a view is, of course, some way from the rather tentative, partially articulated and context-specific understandings which were often as much as we were able to elicit from front-line professionals. Our point is precisely that those professionals are currently steering the development of community-oriented schools on the basis of assumptions which are largely unquestioned and the implications of which are rarely, if ever, articulated. Moreover, this cannot be seen simply as a failure of professional integrity. Given the multiplicity of forms of community-oriented schooling across the world, the tendency of the international literature towards breathless advocacy and, above all, the lack of serious engagement with fundamental issues in government guidance, professionals have little more to rely on, in circumstances where they are required to respond rapidly to national initiatives, than their own best judgement.

We suggest that both front-line professionals and the families and communities on whose behalf they seek to work deserve better than this. At the very least, they deserve to take part in a more searching debate than any that has so far informed the recent development of community-oriented schools. A national lead on such a debate would be helpful. However, given the tendency of recent governments to prefer the generation of policy initiatives to the generation of policy debate, it may be more realistic to hope that debates will take place at local level as schools, agencies and local people come together to determine local strategy. The best hope in this situation is that there are already a few examples of such meaningful engagements. We must hope for more.

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Accepted Date: 19 May 2006.

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