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Chapter 14: Working with the community, parents and students

Trevor Male and Ioanna Palaiologou

Aims

In this chapter we aim to:

- Explore how the community, parents and schools can work productively in partnership to support students
- Discover the key elements of successful and mutually beneficial partnerships
- Identify the implications for school leaders.

This chapter is based on our research in schools into the ecology of the community where school leaders are concerned as much with the relationships with families and a number of other services such as health and social work as with national policies, reforms and global issues. Effective education settings, we argue, are those which 'have developed productive and synergistic relationships between learners, families, the team and the community, because the context, the locality and the culture in which the learners live are vitally important' (Male and Palaiologou, 2012: 112). Our views thus correspond to those of Mongon and Leadbetter (2012) who similarly argue that effective learning by all pupils occurs when the school, parents and learners are all actively engaged with the community, the school is not culturally separate and there is broad ownership of the purposes of school.

In this chapter, therefore, we explore issues relevant to the concept of the community, parents, students and schools working together and examine a range of consequences in the context of England. The key characteristics of working together effectively are illustrated, therefore, through examples drawn from the English school system and, in particular, through our research case study secondary school located in an area of urban poverty. The investigation and subsequent conclusions are of wider significance, however, and applicable to other education systems across the world.

Definitions

‘Community’ refers to the immediate local environment, rather than the national or global setting which also have an impact on educational expectations. The features of that local community environment are formative in terms of desired outcomes, but can be harnessed and changed through intervention by a school.

‘Parent’ is used here as a description of the adult(s) responsible for the welfare of each student.

The child as learner is referred to here as a ‘student’.

‘School’ is a descriptive term for any educational setting which takes formal responsibility for children’s learning.

‘Partnerships’ describes relationships between the community, parents, students and school.

In the early part of this century the traditional dualistic relationship of student and school has been superseded as a consequence of examining of the relationships between the community, parents and school that shape students. Relationships based on respect, listening to each other, cooperation and active participation between prospective partners have been emphasised as having positive benefits in students’ development, education and well-being (Epstein and Sheldon, 2006; Feiler, 2010; Fan

et al., 2011; Goodall and Montgomery, 2014). In 2008 central government highlighted the importance of partnerships with families as a key element for educational achievement (DCFS, 2008), with this accompanied by expectations contained within the statutory framework of inspection for schools to work closely in partnership with other providers and the community (Ofsted, 2015). Schools in England thus carry a central responsibility for leading, managing and promoting student learning, attainment and achievement and are accountable to all to ensure every effort is made to align their own actions with those from outside the immediacy of the educational setting. Consequently school leaders are expected to maximize every possibility to enhance the learning environment for their students and be able to demonstrate the ways in which this objective is achieved. In England this is now not only a moral and professional commitment, but is also a particular aspect of education provision for which school leaders are accountable.

The centrality of effective working relationships

In the school system there is an obvious need, therefore, for effective working relationships between schools and the community, parents and students. Parents are a key partner in this prospective relationship, although the community cannot be ignored either. Schools that seek to operate in a microcosm without parent or community engagement and concentrate only on the relationship they have with students consequently may set themselves at a disadvantage in terms of maximizing outcomes.

The concept of student outcomes needs clarification if the greatest impact is to be achieved. In keeping with most other nations the English government is concerned with student attainment and invest heavily in the continuing improvement on national

tests and examinations. At the institutional level these are often seen as being the driving force behind actions that need to be taken. One reason for seeking enhanced working relationships with other key aspects of the learning community, therefore, is to maximize academic attainment by the student body. There is the possibility of recognising distinctiveness between attainment and achievement, however, with the latter concept embracing wider measures of success. Achievement relates as much to self-regard as it does to examination success and is how students can come to terms with who they are and what they might become, now being recognised as an essential part of school curriculum with life-skills and character education becoming part of government policy (Gurney-Read, 2015). Aspirations in this regard often exceed the basic key to advancement of attainment and embrace success in other ways. Most parents wish to achieve the dream of their children having a better life than their own and thus are willing to invest in their development emotionally and practically wherever possible. With those parameters, therefore, it is incumbent on schools to seek to promote student achievement as well as attainment and to have clarity of how this is to be reached through partnership.

Case study school - Part 1: Winning trust

Over a period of three years we interviewed senior leaders, governors, other staff, students, local officers and parents together with a review of documentation such as inspection reports, internal documentation, press cuttings and relevant correspondence.

The story of this school's improvement began in 1997 with the school in virtual terminal decline with low achievement, student disruption and appalling behaviour being common. The appointment of a new headteacher familiar with the social context and the locality (having served as Head of Faculty within the school for the previous seven years) saw changes that led to dramatic improvement being recognised by Ofsted within two years. This continued to the point where the school became one of the schools achieving success 'against the odds' just a few years later (Ofsted, 2009). The bedrock of this process was the establishment of a school ethos where all students could be successful and

underpinned by a remorseless concentration on behaviour and achievement. The first step was to regain adult control of the school and convince the local community, especially parents, that this zero tolerance policy was real and would be sustained. Large numbers of disruptive students were excluded in the first couple of weeks after appointment of the new headteacher, with the justification that it gave the school the opportunity to talk directly with the parents. An exhaustive set of subsequent meetings resulted in ten permanent exclusions and a set of behavioural norms that have remained in place ever since. Once control was re-established within the school huge efforts were made to convince the local community that this was not cosmetic and would be sustained. Senior leaders became highly visible outside the school premises and confronted aberrant student behaviour wherever it occurred. Trust was quickly established, with parents and the local community feeling empowered to talk directly to school staff and students aware that they were, as one senior member of staff commented, 'walking adverts for the school'.

Whilst schools in isolation can be successful with developing and enhancing student life chances, they are more likely to be successful with the support and engagement of the community and parents in addition to the relationship they have with individual students. School leaders are advised, therefore, to invest time and energy into establishing synergistic working relationships with the other potential partners if they are to maximize student outcomes and be judged as successful.

Parental engagement

All research and commentary on the involvement of parents in their child's education shows it is a fundamental requirement for successful outcomes. There is lack of clarity on the specific actions that contribute to success, however, as much of the research has not been conducted in such a manner as to demonstrate causality (Gorard and Huat See, 2013). There is a need to recognise a difference between 'parental involvement' and 'parental engagement', however, as both may be understood in a very narrow sense of 'parental involvement with children's schooling' rather than the more useful concept of 'parental engagement with children's learning' (Goodall, 2013:

134). Parental involvement, Goodall suggests, is related to school-initiated activities, which have as their focus parental interaction with the school rather than with the learning of the child and is measured by parental presence rather than by student outcome or effect. Such activities may form part of the entire process of parental involvement in children's learning, but they are only a small section, rather than the whole of the concept. Research has made clear that the greatest lever for children's achievement is parental engagement in their learning in the home, and the atmosphere towards learning in the home (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011). What we know, therefore, is that parental engagement with their children's learning is central when seeking to enhance attainment and achievement at all levels of their development.

Parents are the most influential figure for young children although their influence of parents typically seems to become less direct as children grow. A meta-review of relevant research and published literature conducted by Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) on parental involvement, support and family education on pupil achievement showed that the key actions underpinning their children's success as learners were manifested in three ways:

- showing interest in the child
- holding secure values and educational aspirations
- demonstrating enthusiasm, engagement and encouragement for student learning (a positive parenting style).

Parents are largely responsible for the education of their children in the pre-school phase with most learning taking place in an incidental, rather than planned manner. The evidence from research is clear, however, that it is in this phase that intervention from beyond the home is most effective (e.g. Sylva et al., 1999; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). Such interventions 'are most likely to succeed when they are

aimed at young children, and involve parents and staff meeting regularly in an institution, with parental training, on-going support, and co-operative working with teachers' (Gorard and Huat See, 2013: 4). At all ages, however, what matters is 'the overall attitude towards parenting and children, and the actions that then flow from that attitude, in combination with each other' (Goodall, 2013: 137). Parental interest in terms of expectations, encouragement and support are vital, therefore, and this holds good regardless of race, ethnicity or socio-economic status throughout schooling (Catsambis, 2001).

The influence of the community

Just as the socio-economic status and academic level of parents largely determine student life chances so, to a similar extent does the community. The values, beliefs and expectations of local society often have a significant influence on student behaviour and engagement as, increasingly, does the peer group as the student grows older. The social setting in which the student develops needs, therefore, to reflect values and expectations that encourage students to achieve beyond any inherent assumptions and limitations of previous generations. That should not be a one way relationship, however, with schools also having a responsibility to exhibit respect for the value that aspects of the community can bring to the learning environment, which could have implications for curriculum as well as learning experiences. Many schools, for example, seek to impart what is a largely a white middle class curriculum to other socio-economic or ethnic groupings without making essential adjustments, alterations or adaptations to take account of what those parts of the community can bring to the enhancement of student learning, attainment and achievement (Sleeter, 2001; House of Commons Education Committee, 2014). Greater success can be achieved,

therefore, through the school both reaching out to and equally drawing in the local community. Both Epstein and Sheldon (2006) and Mongon and Leadbetter (2012) suggest this leads to the concept of home, school and community partnerships being a better term than 'parental engagement' or 'involvement' as it captures the value of community in relation to young people's learning.

Case study Part 2: Respecting the community

The population of the school underwent rapid transformation with changes to the local population during the first decade of the new millennium that dramatically changed the ethnic balance of the community. The development of the area had initially been the consequence of building a huge council estate in the early 1920s in order to relocate skilled workers from the slums of the nearby major city after the First World War. This almost exclusively white working class community was extended a decade later when a major industrial company relocated their production to the area. The consequence was that by the end of the twentieth century the student body was almost exclusively white working class. Changes to government policy on council house ownership in the late 1980s saw many of the by now ageing population initially purchase and then sell their property which opened the market for buy-to-rent entrepreneurs. With rental rates low (in comparison to other nearby areas) there was an influx of socio-economic immigrants which significantly diversified the ethnic balance of the community. This pattern was exacerbated with the arrival of refugees from many conflict situations in both mainland Europe and Africa, supplemented by further economic migrants from other European Union countries. By 2015 the school had a multi-ethnic population drawn from over 100 countries. The school's response was to continue the pattern of celebrating every success, but to ensure that all aspects of their community were recognised, respected and represented appropriately in both the formal and informal parts of their operation. This response moved beyond tokenism and included reviews of pedagogical practice and curricula provision. In this way the school can be considered to have engaged and involved all members of their diverse community in their continuing success.

We argue that the partnerships need to be extended further, therefore, to also include the community in order to form effective multi-modal relationships and conclude that partnerships between communities, parents, students and schools need to be approached as a holistic dynamic where relationships are shaped as much by

the local culture, values and ethos as well as external influences such as government agendas or policies.

Changing times, changing schools

Schools are a reflection of the community, therefore, and as demonstrated in our case study school due to socio-political and economic factors communities across Europe are becoming multi-ethnic and diverse. Such change brings with it the potential for conflict.

Case study Part 3: Dealing with radical views

Like most schools in English urban settings our case study school has not only to recognise and respect the social diversity of the local community, but also to confront the potential for social divisions which also carry the potential for radicalization of vulnerable members of the student body (see also Chapter 13). Having moved from an almost universal white working class society to one that is multicultural, yet still prone to poverty, the risk of disaffection caused by aberrant elements was a distinct possibility. As was previously shown, the school had sought to celebrate each and every aspect of that diverse community in a manner that went far beyond superficial actions. Nevertheless there were occasions when it was considered necessary to show intolerance of some individuals, groups or actions that could influence students to behave in ways that affected social equity. One of the earliest challenges in this respect was to confront gang-related behaviour (which in major cities in England are typically associated with Black youths). There was a deliberate policy to isolate such students, take them out of the normal programme (especially if they were exhibiting visible evidence of their gang membership, including hairstyles) and require them to study with a key member of staff (in this case a parent governor and school employee who was himself Black British) until such time as their influence was removed. It was a response that was recognised by the school leadership team as extreme, but one considered necessary to avoid the imbalance to individual rights for all members of the school community. This was evidence of the school taking a proactive stance to enhancing the institutional and community ethos in support of their overarching aim to provide a pedagogy of care. At the time our research was conducted this was the only example of an interventionist approach designed to negate the influence of one aspect of the community, yet there was great awareness within the school of the need to monitor the potential for other influencing local factors that could disaffect, alienate or radicalize their students.

What we are suggesting here, therefore, is that community participation should be a tool for reducing prejudice, encouraging desegregation among the different culture groups in the community and creating partnerships based on relevant reciprocity where complementary needs and cultural components are utilised in the creation of effective learning environments.

The formation, development and sustenance of partnerships

Epstein (1995) described six types of family - school - community relationships:

- parenting partnerships where the focus is on support for families to create home environments which support children as students
- forms of communication for school to home and home to school
- volunteering
- information exchange between home and school so students can be supported in learning at home with homework
- school decision-making partnerships where parents are included
- partnerships with the community where resources and services are integrated in the school to support student learning and development.

Georgiou (1997) cautions, however, that only relationships that are meaningful to the students are positively correlated with achievement. Desforges and Abouchar demonstrate, for example, there is virtually no impact on student attainment and achievement from in-school parental involvement, whereas 'at-home parental involvement clearly and consistently has significant effects on pupil achievement and adjustment which far outweigh other forms of involvement' (2003: 30-31). Such involvement should be in the form of interest in the child, they conclude, and manifested in the home as parent-child discussions. Engagement with parents, and supporting their engagement with children's learning thus 'needs to permeate the ethos of the school; it needs to be a core value alongside, indeed, as part of, the value given to teaching and learning' (Goodall, 2015: 174).

What this means for school leaders

Establishing a core ethos that is extended to and embraced by the community, parents and students is thus the responsibility of the school and embodied within the leadership team, particularly the headteacher. As Barr and Saltmarsh show 'recent research has reaffirmed that parents tend to see the headteacher as embodying the authority of the school and setting its vision' (2014:175). School leadership is the key force, therefore, in the formation of effective partnerships and the main motivating force for changing behaviours. Given the nature of social organizations and systems, leaders hold power which can be used to impact on partnerships, for which Collins and Raven (1969) identified six forms:

1. Reward: offering or withholding various rewards
2. Coercive: decision making on whether to punish (or not)
3. Reference: others desire to identify themselves with this person
4. Expert: holding appropriate and relevant knowledge
5. Legitimate: that comes from the role the person holds in the group
6. Informational: holding important pieces of information.

We argue that within leadership all forms of power are interconnected and tend to be found together in the formation or deformation of partnerships, but the balance of use is dependent on circumstances. In that sense leadership behaviour can vary considerably in the forms of social power and in relation to context and circumstance. In the early days of our case study school we can see examples of coercive, legitimate and expert power being exhibited. As student behaviour improved, however, we saw more in the way of reward, reference and informational power being used, although

the senior leadership team also demonstrated the willingness to revert to coercive power when circumstances demanded, as was the case when confronting gang-style behaviour. It is important, therefore, for leaders to reflect on the social power they hold, to see the centrality of their role as the nucleus for formation or deformation of partnerships and to be prepared to take action that is appropriate to the situation. Schools leaders also need to acknowledge, however, that other potential stakeholders of the partnership can exhibit influence within the relationship with the dynamics of power having a decisive effect on the partnership. Silencing of the students, for example, in an attempt to take on board parents' and community's views on what is best, could lead to students feeling undermined which will have negative effects on the formation of partnerships.

To conclude, therefore, we argue that school leaders hold the influential role in the formation of partnerships and need to adopt a proactive approach that appreciates the elements of power that are available to them. As explained earlier shared values and beliefs, willingness to engage, aspirations and trust are important in the formation of partnerships that empower the community, parents and students. School leaders should thus seek to form partnerships where all stakeholders' attributes and legacies are explored and understood in order to create collective ownership of desired outcomes, whilst being prepared to adopt leadership behaviours that are 'contingent on context and circumstance' (Male, 2006:3).

Summary

In our research we found that effective working partnerships between the community, parents, students and schools are based on the formation of relationships for which there are required elements:

- All partners need to have shared values and beliefs so they can engage and participate in the creation and sustenance of effective learning environments
- Partners need to show willingness to engage, share responsibility and exhibit trust, commitment and resilience in support of agreed objectives
- The partnership must be aspirational, inclusive and celebrate both achievement and attainment
- A common ethos must be established which enhances positive contributions from all partners, but avoids a blame culture and minimizes or removes aberrant influences
- There is a continuing need for partners to be in close proximity so they come together physically as often as possible to share information and exchange ideas
- Partnership success should be judged by the way in which reciprocity is exhibited and there is evidence of complementarity of stakeholder needs.

Implications

As a consequence of our investigation and this discussion we propose that in working effectively with the community, parents and students, school leaders should undertake the following actions:

- Explore the social economic, ethnic and religious constitution of their local community so the school has a clear understanding of the expectations of the local community
- Be fully aware of statutory responsibilities and accountabilities and ensure these are not neglected
- Establish an organizational ethos with agreed values and beliefs based on reciprocity of needs
- Maintain a close operational focus on that ethos and demonstrate intolerance of factors and behaviours that do not support agreed expectations
- Create and sustain effective working partnerships with all stakeholders to reflect on practice, share information and exchange ideas to ensure continued commitment and engagement
- Be adaptable with leadership behaviour according to context.

Further reading

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