Chapter 9

Communities of learning

It takes a whole village to raise a child.

(African proverb)

We take too much for granted the strong boundary between schools and the wider world. This has deep roots in history. The monastic schools of the Middle Ages offered learning to some village children at the price of isolation from the world and its wickedness. Given the mission of Victorian public education to domesticate the unruly offspring of the industrial working class, parents tended to be seen as the enemy rather than as potential collaborators. Only the church minister and an occasional wealthy benefactor were allowed through the door.

The boundary has weakened in recent decades, but the walls remain high and often unscalable. Parents of young children, once kept securely outside, are now encouraged to come inside the school at the start and end of the day, and often to help in the classroom. However, parents may experience resistance when their views, including their knowledge of their own children, contradict a teacher's assumptions. The possibility for liaison and influence is also differentiated by class and race. Meanwhile little has changed in secondary schools, and community schools, despite their proven value, remain the exception. The school improvement literature has emphasised the importance of parents, but in a one-sided way. In official advice, the parents' role is primarily to ensure that children attend school and do their homework.

At the same time, we have tended to take for granted the internal organisation of schools, and failed to question whether they offer a quality experience of community life. It has become unfashionable to devote attention to restructuring, and the extent to which structure constrains and determines culture needs re-emphasis.

In this chapter, I wish to argue the importance of both these aspects of community for school improvement, namely:

- how schools, and particularly larger secondary schools, function as communities for young people

- how schools relate to a wider community life beyond their doors.

The problem of the large school

Loss of community is a concern for many urban societies, and deeply affects the climate for school learning. Unfortunately, rather than providing a means for community building, many larger secondary schools tend to replicate and reinforce the problems of the wider society.

Sergiovanni (1999:9seq) reminds us of Tönnies' distinction between Gesellschaft and Gemeinschaft (normally translated as society and community, though the German implies an opposition between merely living *alongside* one another and sharing a *common life*). Gesellschaft involves encounters which are transactional and impersonal, in which meaning and significance are often difficult to find. People strive for their own advantage, and manage to coexist through politeness. Subjectivity is frowned upon and rationality prized. Sergiovanni argues that these are also prime characteristics of many schools.

Often, and especially where there is family breakdown and in the absence of extended family structures, adolescents seek community elsewhere, such as on the street. Sergiovanni argues that schools need to provide an alternative to teenage gangs by developing a strong and meaningful community life. We need to remember the African proverb: it takes a whole village to raise a child. It cannot be done by individual teachers working in isolation from each other, each in their own box and slice of time.

A real community is inherently educational. Its values and knowledge are taught to new members and celebrated in customs and rituals. 'Community of kinship, place and mind, in time becomes a community of memory.' (ibid:8) Sergiovanni argues for new school structures as a framework for the development of nurturing communities:

> We have lost vital parts of a good education: the neighbourhood and family. While we cannot return to a simpler time, we must still find ways to give children a secure place to grow up, an opportunity to play and create a chance to converse with adults. (ibid:11)

Until the 1960s, under a selective school system, most secondary schools in Britain had fewer than 500 students. A key criterion in determining the

size of the new comprehensive schools was the need to have a sufficiently large cohort entering at age 11 or 12 to sustain a final stage which could offer a wide range of subject choice, matched to different types of interest or ability. Little attention was given to the impact on younger adolescents of entering a school of a thousand or more students.

Various attempts were made to provide a sense of belonging, through a pastoral system based on houses or year groups. This was a pallid imitation of the house system of the independent boarding schools - residential communities held together symbolically by participation in competitive sports and cultural activities. Meeting briefly as a registration class once a day provides an inadequate anchor point to generate a sense of belonging. In Scotland, the pastoral care system was professionalised through the designation of carefully chosen staff as Guidance Teachers, who were given responsibility for teaching Personal and Social Education and released from a significant amount of subject teaching, but this has had the drawback of allowing others to become simply subject specialists without a broader responsibility.

Despite attempts to remedy the situation through these pastoral structures, the basic problems of size and anonymity remain. In most British secondary schools, subject teachers are allocated to younger classes on a random basis, such that 12-15 people teaching a class of twelve year olds have no further contact with each other – hardly a good basis for teamwork and collective planning. Geography or music teachers, with limited curriculum time, might teach hundreds of different children a week. Research by Maurice Galton and others (see Croll 1983:82) on transition to secondary school shows that children make far less progress in their first year at secondary school than previously, and around a third actually regress. Another member of this research team Sara Delamont (1983) demonstrates how the specialist teacher system cultures pupils into far greater dependency than at primary school. Especially in more troubled neighbourhoods, pastoral / guidance teams make phenomenal efforts to repair the damage of children's sense of alienation, but the system itself is dysfunctional and can exacerbate distressed and distressing behaviour.

The situation is not dissimilar in other countries with large urban populations, but solutions are being found. One answer is to divide large schools into smaller units, such as the halls of Stantonbury Campus in England. In this highly successful school, each hall is allocated a team of teachers with responsibility for most of their subjects. The team has a degree of autonomy in planning the use of time and people, cooperates

together in teaching and curriculum planning, and assumes responsibility for guidance and parental liaison.

A different pattern has been established for 11-12 year olds at Falinge Park School, Rochdale, where each class has a single teacher for over 40% of the timetable. The class teacher is responsible for English, humanities subjects, and Personal and Social Education. Teachers receive support from other members of the team if they lack experience in a particular subject. The system provides emotional stability at a critical time of school transition. The teachers are able to relate to each individual and respond to different learning needs and preferred learning styles. For the rest of the timetable, the number of teachers is strictly limited, including a caroussel system for creative arts, and the class teacher is able to act as an effective anchor point. Inspectors were impressed by this system, and concluded that children were making much faster progress on average than is normal, without the usual regression of the transition year. The school was soon nominated a Beacon School. (Wrigley 2000:91)

In Germany, a number of large comprehensive schools have implemented the small-group-model (Team-Kleingruppen-Modell - see Sergiovanni 1999; Ratzki 1996). In this system, not only is there a 'mini-school' consisting of about five classes and eight teachers, but the students work for much of their time within smaller mixed-ability groups. The group members learn to cooperate together and engage in tasks which develop their academic and social responsibility.

Teachers in Denmark are qualified in three different subjects and most students up to the age of 16 have no more than 4 or 5 different teachers each year. The main class teacher normally stays with the class for more than one year. This creates the basis for more democratic forms of learning in which there is greater flexibility and choice for the learner, and in which the cognitive and social needs of a full range of learners can be met.

In Norway, 13-16 year olds enjoy a similar system. Teachers do not belong to subject departments but to year teams, so that a team of five teachers is able to cover the whole curriculum. Teachers do not teach the children in other years unless they need to fill up their timetables. This arrangement makes it unnecessary to have parallel teams of guidance or support staff, or extended management systems.

The Coalition of Essential Schools in the United States works on the principle that no teacher should teach more than 80 students altogether. Although each school differs in its internal organisation, it is generally

felt that promoting deeper learning requires a more extended contact between each teacher and a class. (www.essentialschools.org)

These structures are different, but they are all designed to enable teachers to:

- work successfully with mixed ability classes

- negotiate appropriate work to match the various interests and abilities

- integrate learners with special needs

- relate well with their students

- create a sense of security and care

- support the social development of the class

- and promote more engaged and active learning.

Teams of teachers working in co-operation, and the improved social climate and relationships in a reasonably small learning community, would make it possible for many schools to reduce class size, since there would be less need for separate pastoral, managerial or learning support staff. This would make far better use of the overall 17:1 pupil:teacher ratios in the average British secondary school than the present elaborate structures which result in many classes of 30 pupils.

Community schools

The term 'community school' covers a wide variety of organisations, and many schools function as community schools even without the formal designation and funding. Though some individual schools are described in the school improvement literature, the concept as a whole has not been adequately explored, nor the impact of community schooling on ethos and achievement.

Basing some adult education classes in a school building may be a starting point, but it would be a mistake to confuse this minimalist position (sometimes adopted simply for reasons of economy) for genuine community education. There is no single pattern, but the common motive is to secure mutual benefit from the participation of young people and adults. School students might help in a nursery so that young mothers are able to attend qualification courses. Other students might interview senior citizens attending a social club within the school building. Community schools have the potential to be more than an economic amalgamation of different kinds of provision; there should be an impact on the curriculum.

There is no masterplan, and each school finds its own way forward; leadership means building on previous success. Thomas Hepburn School, Gateshead, established an electronic link with schools in Norway, France and Italy. As part of a multinational history project, the pupils accompanied older people attending their social centre to Beamish open air museum. They gained in confidence and communication skills, checking the museum's view of history against the older people's narratives. Their information was then exchanged internationally using internet and email.

Community schools help to bring parents into contact with teachers. In particular, the widespread interest in computer skills has created an opportunity to rethink student-teacher and child-parent roles. In the *Family e-Learning* programme at Monkseaton, near Newcastle, 17-year-old students work as technicians and tutors to provide computer skills classes for whole families. Children at Seymour Park Primary School (Trafford, Manchester) run courses for their parents, as well as staff development courses for their teachers. (Wrigley 2000)

> The children are now running training sessions for their teachers and for parents. We help the children to be good teachers, by asking them to plan carefully and consider what the adults will most need to know, and where their difficulties may lie, exactly duplicating the process which an adult teacher might use.
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> There was a wonderful moment last year when a Sikh boy taught his grandfather how to use the internet and access photographs of Indian cities he hadn't visited since he was a child. Word of this spread fast, and we are now seeking funding for a community ICT room, which we hope will evolve into a full-blown community learning centre.
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> (Jenny Dunn, Headteacher, Seymour Park School, in Wrigley 2000:38)

Other schools working in depressed areas help to provide parents with qualifications. At Sparrow Hill School, Rochdale, mothers of Pakistani origin attend courses provided at their request by the local College, though they would find it difficult to travel alone to the College's main campus. Their sense of achievement is motivating not only for themselves but for their children; it has helped to enhance a respect for learning.   (Wrigley 2000:145)

Community schools can work to empower marginalised groups through community development projects in which informal learning is linked to the generation of new democratic structures. Freire's practices and

philosophy have been adapted by community educators in more industrial countries such as Britain. Community development projects can also directly involve young people in schools. In some schools in Northumberland, England, youth workers helped students develop concrete plans for improving their area. A development grant had already been earmarked, so that the young people would learn positive lessons from their involvement, rather than risk frustration if good ideas failed to materialise.

The New Community School (see website) is a model being piloted across Scotland, based on the North American 'full service school'. Various service agencies are brought together around a school or cluster of schools, such as adult education, social services, health education and housing. Within this general model, local schools and communities are free to develop their own structures and priorities.

Parents as partners

Just when parents were taking a greater role and interest in their children's education, the 1988 Education Reform Act in England and Wales reconstructed their role as *consumers* within a system of market choice. (The reality of school choice depends, of course, upon parents having sufficient material resources and cultural capital to get their children into the 'best' schools; for many, consumer choice is like window shopping with an empty purse.)

Positioning parents as consumers gives some a temporary influence at the point of enrolment, but little positive influence during the years their children spend at a school. Despite tokenistic steps to establish more direct channels of influence, such as the election of a few parents to the governing body and an annual parents' meeting, parental involvement is slight compared with many parts of Northern Europe; even the governing bodies have limited room for manoeuvre given centralised control of the agenda for change.

Much of the legislative change assumes a one-way relationship between schools and parents. The school's statutory responsibility to report on a child's attainment supports the consumer relationship, but not an active partnership in supporting learning. Both sides can feel threatened: teachers become suspicious of parents, who appear to take on the role of watchdogs, while the parents of non-attenders are threatened with withdrawal of welfare benefits and even imprisonment. This is hardly a basis on which to establish a trusting partnership. By comparison, good practice in many parts of Scandinavia assumes a termly meeting between the

class teacher and parents at which curriculum content and methods are openly discussed.

The introduction of home-school contracts further reinforces the sense that education is something that only schools can do, with parents relegated to a supportive or even a custodial role. True partnership cannot be achieved through such a bureaucratic device.

> Knowing what we know about the importance of parents listening to and reading with their children does not justify putting pressure on parents to sign a home-school agreement in which they commit themselves to spending set periods on such activities.
>
> Where there is already confidence and trust between home and school and between individual teachers and families, such schemes will already be in place… Where such trust is lacking or where parents and teachers do not value one another, contractual agreements are worthless. (Mittler 2000: 157)

Fortunately, there are more positive and imaginative forms of partnership-building in schools, and particularly with marginalised communities where barriers to communication are most entrenched. There is substantial evidence of the success of reading partnerships, where children take home books to read with their parents, along with a diary for comments. This provides a context for relaxed discussions with individual parents at the end of the school day. Teachers at Spittal Primary School, Glasgow, visit parents before their children join the school, but write first to emphasise the parents' right to turn down the offer of a visit if they wish. Many other schools now employ home-school liaison workers, often chosen from the local community (Wrigley 2001a).

There is strong evidence of the benefits of an active parental contribution. A study of young people who had escaped from disadvantage shows dramatic correlation between parental involvement and educational success (Pilling 1990:167-7 in Mittler). This involved educationally stimulating activities, an explicit interest in learning, an emphasis on the importance of school work, and a sense of ambition for the child.

The barriers of prejudice

It is tempting, but extremely damaging, for teachers to assume that working-class or ethnic minority parents are uninterested in their children's education. Judgements are often made based on poor attendance at report evenings, without taking account of linguistic or cultural

barriers, feelings of anxiety or inadequacy, or some parents' bad memories of their own school experience. Research such as the NFER survey (Jowett and Baginsky 1991) or Topping (1986) shows that parents living in areas of poverty and disadvantage are just as keen to help their children to learn (cited Mittler 2000:156). Similar evidence elsewhere includes the Head Start programme in the United States (Sylva 1999).

The role of home-liaison teachers / assistants includes that of cultural mediation, in order to facilitate the partnership between school and parents, and overcome cultural misunderstandings.

The home-school liaison teacher at Whetley Park Primary School, Bradford, has many roles, including

- translating letters home
- interpreting at parents' nights
- explaining school procedures and expectations for newcomers
- acting as a mediator on issues of religious or cultural sensitivity
- helping parents understand the school's teaching methods
- showing parents how they can help their children's education at home.

The school invites parents to see what happens in classrooms, to see how teachers teach and what sort of work the children do. It also shows parents how household routines such as cooking can provide educational opportunities for language and maths. Parents are encouraged to teach pupils at home in the family language. They are encouraged to share books, talking with children about the pictures if their own reading in English is insufficient and asking older brothers and sisters to help.

As the home-school liaison teacher explained:

> This is a good staff. They are sensitive to parents and the culture. Parents don't come with suspicious feelings. They are keen to cooperate. They are very keen on education, even if sometimes they don't understand what we're doing. They've missed opportunities themselves, and will do anything to educate their children…

> There is a lot of co-operation, learning from each other's cultures. If we listen, then matters can be resolved. Some parents were against their children changing for PE, for religious reasons of modesty. They wanted the children to wear their normal clothes. The teachers felt loosely-fitting clothes made it difficult to see the children's movements. We reached a compromise by adopting tracksuits. (Wrigley 2000:116)

Particular tensions surround links with parents of children identified as having special educational needs. Mittler stresses the importance of

> ridding oneself of any preconceptions about families, whether they are families who live in a particular area, have a child whose behaviour is particularly challenging or families who have already been labelled by others as 'difficult', 'rejecting' 'over-protective' or 'not yet come to terms with their child's difficulties', to give just a few examples of the most popular labels. (Mittler 2000: 159)

The rights of parents are now encoded in law, reflecting increasing recognition of the value of the parents' perspective, but this advice from a group of parents may serve to remind us of the distance still to be travelled.

- Please accept and value our children (and ourselves as families) as we are.
- Please celebrate difference.
- Please try and accept our children as children first. Don't attach labels to them unless you mean to do something.
- Please recognise your power over our lives. We live with the consequences of your opinions and decisions.
- Please understand the stress many families are under. The cancelled appointment, the waiting list no one gets to the top of, all the discussions about resources – it's our lives you're talking about.
- Don't put fashionable fads and treatments on to us unless you are going to be around to see them through. And don't forget families have many members, many responsibilities. Sometimes we can't please everyone.
- Do recognise that sometimes we are right! Please believe us and listen to what we know that we and our child need.
- Sometimes we are sad, tired and depressed. Please value us as caring and committed families and try to go on working with us.

(Russell 1997:79, in Mittler 2000:170)

A community perspective on learning

There is a deep gulf, in many different parts of the world, between school learning and the life of the host community. It is easy for teachers to overlook the knowledge and skills of the community, and unwittingly to convey a sense of arrogance. The extent of this problem was brought home to me by a teacher-educator from Papua New Guinea. Under the

new curriculum there, teachers give agriculture lessons in schools. Unfortunately many have been disconnected, through their formal education, from sources of traditional knowledge and teach pupils to burn excess foliage rather than the indigenous method of recycling it back into the ground.

Some parents' knowledge is more acceptable to schools than others. Sonia Nieto asks why American teachers regard skiing holidays in Europe as culturally enriching, but not travelling to Haiti to visit family (1999:8). She argues that 'teachers need to build upon what [cultural capital] children do have, rather than lament about what they do not have.' Recalling her own childhood, she comments that there were few books, but reading the Sunday newspaper was a shared family activity, and many hours were spent around the kitchen table listening to family stories and folk tales.

We underestimate the knowledge and culture within working-class communities. The street of terraced houses where I grew up ('two up, two downs' with outside lavatories and no bathrooms) provided invaluable educational opportunities. I learned to play chess on the doorstep from an old man living three doors away. I was entranced by the power of Italian opera while I was still learning to read. (My uncle, who had left school at 14 and joined the navy during the Second World War, brought back from Italy recordings of the famous tenors Caruso and Gigli.) The corner grocer was a prime source of help with school projects: I remember him producing miniature packs of different varieties of tea and showing me where each had come from on a map of Asia. At the age of ten, I was keen to start learning foreign languages in secondary school – the Swiss mental health nurse who had moved in next door was multilingual. It came as a surprise, when qualifying to teach, to learn from a sociology lecture that I was *culturally deprived*!

Conditions change, and children growing up today on many housing schemes suffer a degree of poverty and cultural breakdown which would have been unimaginable in Britain in the 1960s. The problem remains, however, that schools know far too little about the knowledge, skills and culture embedded in the communities they serve, and community education services are too poorly resourced to develop it. In particular, council estates are thought of, in an undifferentiated way, as cultural deserts, if not concrete jungles. Ethnic minority communities fare better, but their cultures are often received by schools second-hand and in a tokenistic manner. It is almost unheard of for schools to draw upon the vast experiences of these communities, for example by inviting parents in

to speak to classes about their travels, hobbies or jobs. Teachers of bilingual children are naturally anxious about them missing school during extended visits to relatives, but we rarely see attempts to draw on that experience educationally. This inevitably gives children the feeling that worthwhile knowledge comes from teachers, and that their own families and communities must be deeply ignorant. In order to be successful in school, they feel the need to reject family and community – a price that few are prepared to pay.

The development of community perspectives on learning provides a means for school improvement to combine a greater sense of social context with new pedagogical understandings. The recent work of Lave, Engeström and others (e.g. Lave and Wenger 1991; Engeström and Middleton 1996) provides models of cooperative and situated learning which may help overcome the tendency of schools to focus upon individualised learning, and help them relate to the more communal forms of learning within the community.

The inability of School Improvement theory so far to make a significant difference to schools in areas of poverty or ethnic difference points to a need to learn from community models rather than building higher walls round the school tradition through a pursuit of efficiency. We would do well to explore the concept of *learning community* in a more grounded sense, involving what happens outside the walls of the school and as well as within. Untold benefit could arise from a closer relationship between the fields of school improvement and community education.