

The Task of Raising Social Capital and Educational Outcomes in Highly Disadvantaged Communities in Poland and England: School Leadership Teacher Education Implications

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Introduction

This paper provides an overview of major pertinent issues in the comparative context of Poland and England concerning the task of school leadership in highly disadvantaged communities and pointing towards possible Teacher Education (TE) issues, building where possible on our previous school leadership research. This area of study is recognised by policy-makers and practitioners alike as a crucial one. School success in these circumstances necessarily involves the provision of a school environment capable of lifting-up poor communities in inner cities, with implications for TE and policymaking.

This overview paper is part of the initial issue formulation stage of a joint research project between the universities of Lodz (Poland) and Sheffield Hallam (UK). The four working research questions at this stage are:

- 1. What is perceived to be successful school leadership practice in highly disadvantaged contexts?*
- 2. How do school leaders view the school's role in raising the social capital and educational outcomes of their local communities?*
- 3. What comparative policy and practice implications arise?*
- 4. What TE strategies need to be put in place?*

The research will employ mainstream qualitative methods within a case study design to facilitate comparative results between two communities (one in Poland, the other in England). It is envisaged that the study will examine situations where there is perceived school success in raising their performance in challenging circumstances, through "joined-up" efforts across agencies, schools and local communities. We take the view that school leadership/improvement and the building of the social capital of a school's community are potentially reinforcing of each other and we aim to develop theory, policy and practice in this crucial area of working. Finally, we intend to disseminate research outcomes amongst practitioners in both countries and in an international context, partly to aid the development of school leadership initiatives through TE opportunities. This process of dissemination, particularly with practitioners, will potentially build on the broad areas for TE activity outlined in this paper, and developed during the course of the research project.

The paper initially provides a summary overview of the nature of highly disadvantaged communities and the challenges faced by school leaders

working in these types of communities. Major policy and practice issues impacting on schools and their communities in Poland and England in these highly disadvantaged contexts are then examined. An overview is then given of the potential relevance of the term *social capital* for professionals seeking to raise educational outcomes in these contexts, and for their school practice. Finally, broad TE and policy implications are examined, with possible ways forward suggested.

The nature of highly disadvantaged communities and the challenges faced by school leaders

In both Poland and England, the issues of poverty and social exclusion are major ones. In highly disadvantaged communities, the everyday experience of local people is typically of poor health, housing, local facilities, environment, access to public transport and of underperformance educationally. These challenges taken together represent a considerable and daunting task, particularly for schools and their leaders.

Highly disadvantaged communities are by their nature "different" in the sense that social conditions in these neighbourhoods are of a different order from much of the rest of society. Poverty and deprivation tend to set a context of hopelessness and anger that are difficult for schools to grapple with and turn around. This applies to the task of all agencies seeking to address issues and problems in such communities. Schools providing an effective and uplifting experience in these settings are truly achieving "against the odds". Particularly, schools face major barriers to engendering positive attitudes to learning and the process of education generally.

High ideals of moral strength for school leaders are a requirement in these circumstances and great realism is also required to apply these effectively. Schools in these situations often have to grapple with inadequate resources, and leaders may face resistant cultures inside and outside school, challenging behaviour of pupils, as well as obligations and imperatives imposed externally. Clearly, though, leaders have an important role in addressing huge challenges faced by schools in highly disadvantaged circumstances and schools themselves have a potentially pivotal role in assisting community development in extremely poor areas.

The reality for the future of inner city school leadership is likely to be one of working in a partnership context. This is increasingly likely to involve working with local stakeholders, other agencies, with neighbouring schools, and sometimes through specific regeneration structures involving schools as partners. The task is a major challenge in the context of a more individualistic environment, where trust in institutions is harder to engender. This is particularly the case in poorer communities, where both perceptions

and personal experience tend towards negativity, anger and cynicism that are extremely hard to break down. So, encouraging participation and co-operation from sceptical local people, let alone the fostering of inspiration and aspiration are likely to be extremely difficult for everyone associated with the educational task.

However, in spite of these difficulties, failure to effect change in these circumstances means that inequality and underachievement of individual children persist in a highly negative way, not only for those individuals and their families but for society as a whole. So the issue of how to foster school improvement and community development in highly disadvantaged communities is a pressing one, raising as it does major issues for everyone associated with this area of work, including policy-makers.

Major policy and practice issues impacting on schools and their leaders in Poland and England

Poland

The period of political transformation, started in Poland in 1989, has brought about new legislation, which has become the basis for changes in education. From the former communist regime, a more open educational system is being built and its core curriculum has been developed. Now the Polish school system is distinctly decentralised. The state is constrained to providing guidelines and creating a basic framework for schooling. Each school is administered locally and possesses a high degree of autonomy. Each school has a high degree of control over its own decisions and destiny. The basis for this is the conviction that a market approach will lead to greater efficiency and higher standards. Therefore, school leaders are sometimes torn between their educational tasks and economic pressures, between the local school council, the staff and different groups of interest within the community. Market orientation also characterised the training and development opportunities for school leaders. The provision of school leader training and development is driven by this market, which is characterised by diversity and choice. There is a wide range of providers (universities, advisory boards, professional associations, independent training organisations) and programmes, which differ in content and methods as well as quality but they are mainly focused on administration and management not on leadership. As to the development of school leaders, the state does not interfere at all. The school leader, particularly the 'Principal', is seen as the director of a public institution. The work emphasis has traditionally been on administrative tasks.

In the last few years, the scope of site-based educational responsibility has been enlarged, bringing with it new tasks for school leaders: the school leadership in highly disadvantaged communities has been started to be treated as a key feature in enrichment of a school environment capable of

lifting-up poor communities in inner cities. Tackling poverty and social exclusion continue to be an important challenge facing Poland particularly with regard to children in deprived areas.

Poverty as a social problem emerged when market economy rules were implemented at the beginning of the 1990s. Poverty increased steadily to 1994, then stabilized but since 1998 a new wave of poverty has been observed. The rise in poverty is evident in recent years and no matter which poverty line is taken into account an increase is visible. According to Joint Commission/Council Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion, publication on 22nd February 2007, not one European Union country has a poverty rate as high as Poland. In particular data about the children situation is alarming. In Poland 29% of children are at risk of poverty, whereas across the EU at risk of poverty are 19% of children.

Low income and unemployment, especially long-term unemployment, are considered the most important factors leading to poverty and social exclusion in Poland. Other important factors leading to poverty are: low qualifications and early school leaving, family break-ups, living in multi-children families, weak health, disability, alcoholism, and living in a disadvantaged area. If these risk factors interact and accumulate over time they may result in a cycle of poverty and inter-generational transmission of poverty.

The issue of intergenerational inheritance of inequalities has been neglected in political and scientific discourse for several decades in Poland. It was assumed that public education is a remedy for limited social mobility among people coming from low status families. In a course of 90s comparative studies on poverty revealed that it is children and youth who suffer mostly from poverty in Polish society. The reasons for that are manifold, as it was above mentioned, but changes in employment patterns, family structure, social welfare and education seem to be of particular importance. The cumulative effect of discouraging family and non-supportive school are the most likely factors leading individuals to stay in poverty and follow their parents' life course. While social policy is not perceived by young adults as a factor impacting on their life course, the survey data reveal that policies can contribute to upward mobility of underprivileged young people (Warzywoda-Kruszynska, Rokicka, Rek, Wozniak, 2006). Therefore, a major challenge for Poland is tackling the number of children living in poverty to prevent them from exclusion in the future. Good education, education for all children, is one of the best ways for meeting this need.

England

The approach of the present government has been to concentrate on raising school standards through "challenging" and "supporting" educationists. At the same time, inner city schools have received particular additional attention, not only through in-school measures but through broader projects targeted at "transformation" of the communities in which these schools are located. In the view of many critical writers and ourselves, it is highly questionable whether these "transformational" measures are sufficient to make the necessary and sustained improvements to these inner city communities that can start to feed back into substantially increased educational outcomes. Also, these initiatives have often failed to join up efforts in an effective way, particularly as far as schools are concerned. Nevertheless, we also tend to the view that a great deal can be done at a local level by all concerned to affect the life chances of young people and their families in these highly disadvantaged contexts.

Retaining many of the market reforms of the previous and long-standing Conservative government, the 1997 Labour administration set about injecting "shock" into the school system. They proclaimed that poverty was no excuse for educational failure (Byers, 1997), and set ambitious targets for the raising of achievement, in national test scores, to arrest the perceived "flatlining" of educational outcomes. The threat of closure was introduced for schools defined as "failing" and new demands were made of teachers through performance appraisal linked to pay. Schools were subject to regular and rigorous inspection, with perceived inner city school failure being laid firmly at the door of headteachers and their colleagues (Ofsted 1998). This process was seen by the new government as key to restoring national economic competitiveness.

On the other side of the policy equation, new sources of "support" were provided, along the lines suggested by Barber and Dann (1996), with Michael Barber then becoming adviser to the Secretary of State. These included: increased funding for schools; an ambitious school building programme to overcome years of underinvestment; various programmes of curriculum innovation and support targeted at inner city schools; large additional numbers of support staff to provide support to children with specific difficulties; and new partnership initiatives at the local level with other service providers. More recent policy innovations have included the setting-up of Children's Services, replacing previous local education authorities (LEAs), so that schools link more effectively with workers providing care services for children and families. There have also been moves towards greater school diversity at secondary level and of parental choice.

The potential relevance of the term *social capital* to the raising of educational outcomes in highly disadvantaged contexts, and some possible consequences for school practice

Issues of social capital and education

There are a number of approaches to the defining of social capital. For Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992:119), social capital is primarily a set of resources accrued by individuals to gain an advantage in society, facilitated through "possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (ibid). Putnam (1993:173) emphasises social capital's role as a force for society's benefit, having at its core "trust, norms and networks", which can facilitate "coordinated actions". Baron, Field and Schuller (2000:1) underline its importance as a means of people using collective action "for achieving mutual goals" by using "social networks" and "the reciprocities that arise from them". These various definitions all emphasise the potential for social capital as a force for enhancing individuals and collective life chances in a range of ways.

Beyond these specific definitions with differing emphases, a differentiated conception of the term has been developed by a number of writers. Firstly, "bonding" social capital is based around close relationships of friends and family, tending to reinforce exclusive identities and homogeneous groups. Secondly, "bridging" social capital links people to others who are beyond their immediate circle of close relationships, to extend horizons. Thirdly, Woolcock (2001:13) points to the vertical dimension of "linking" social capital, allowing for people to "leverage resources, ideas and information from contacts outside their own social milieu" (Field, 2003:66). Beyond these three functional elements, the term potentially works at three types of level: micro- (individual and group), meso- (community), and macro- (nation or wider).

This paper adopts a definition of social capital which is fairly broad to capture its full potential range. This recognises its relevance to the engagement of community bodies and activities encompassing voluntary associations, sports and leisure groups (largely "bridging"). It also involves networks and relationships arising from kinship and neighbourhood (mainly "bonding"). Some writers have suggested that trust is a feature of social capital. The current assumption is that while trust may assist the operation of successful networks and is closely related to social capital, it is probably best treated as an independent factor, which is a consequence rather than a component of social capital.

Schools have a major role to play in fostering social capital and helping to combat disadvantage in inner city contexts. Educational underachievement is a key component to disadvantage. High levels of

disadvantage comprise a number of factors, as Halpern (2005:142) points out. These range from "parental education, to cultural capital and, of course, financial resources". Conversely, education can be a means of creating social capital and tackling disadvantage (Halpern 2005:143). Not only can individuals with higher educational attainment have greater civic or voluntary engagement and larger and more diverse social networks, but schools themselves can have a major impact on young people's social networks and skills (McNeal, 1999; Langbein and Bess, 2002), so that "these networks and skills prove to be a resilient and transferable form of social capital" (Halpern 2005:164). In addition, the skills gained through the educational process can foster engagement and networking that can feed through into such activities as volunteering and in the encouragement of tolerance.

If education and schools are central to the development of social capital, then social capital can also assist the educational process in return. Social capital is crucial to educational success on a range of fronts. The benefits also extend beyond education to outcomes in economic growth, health, crime, and the democratic life of the wider society (Halpern 2005; Field 2005). One of the crucial relationships in assisting children to achieve educationally is that between home and school. When parents are involved in their children's education at home and at school this can assist those young people to achieve better outcomes, as well as adding qualitatively to the school itself (OECD, 2001). Relationships with attentive adults generally assist young people to develop emotional and social control that can assist in their positive educational development (Halpern, 2005:144). Part of the process for maximising relationships with significant adults and the raising of educational outcomes involves their having higher expectations of young people (Weiner, 1979). In addition, both parent-teacher relationships and child-teacher relationships can also contribute to higher educational achievement by young people.

Inside the school, networks between teachers and effective links between school leaders and other staff are important to educational outcomes. As Hargreaves (2001:5-6) explains, "in a school rich in social capital, the high levels of trust generate a collaborative culture and strong networks among the organisation's members and stakeholders. High levels of social capital in a school strengthen its intellectual capital". Moreover, collaboration on learning and general mutual support amongst staff can enable professionals to take risks (Wolf et al, 2000). Staff collaboration of this kind can involve both "bonding" social capital within the group, and also "bridging" activities beyond the school.

More generally, community norms upon parents and pupils can help young people achieve positive educational outcomes. These norms, of a multiple, dense and mutually reinforcing nature, can possibly help poor communities to overcome the effects of disadvantage. Such closely knit communities

with strongly shared norms can help to promote the value of skills, knowledge and qualifications amongst school students. In addition, Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) point to the importance of "bridging" social capital in asserting that it is the range and number of weak ties that can contribute most effectively to student achievement in disadvantaged contexts. So, social capital can potentially operate in a number of ways to help young people in inner city contexts to gain from their educational experience.

Without doubt, disadvantaged communities struggle when it comes to the possession of various forms of capital, particularly economic capital. For Li et al (2002:519) those without adequate economic resources, education and service-class friends tend also to be deprived of access to social capital. More advantaged groups tend to have significantly wider and more varied networks capable of providing economic and professional advancement. However, a number of writers regard social capital as a resource for disadvantaged communities and individuals capable of providing a way out of the vicious circle represented by poverty. As pointed out above, educational input is a potentially powerful source of social capital in itself. Various forms of intervention to assist the educational progress of otherwise disadvantaged students (eg mentoring) may also provide a way of overcoming the potentially devastating effects of context.

The massive difficulties for individuals in disadvantaged communities can be addressed relatively positively by regarding social capital as a potential counterweight to economic and social disadvantage. In this vein, Lauglo (2000) emphasises social capital's potential to "trump" the disadvantages of social class and weak cultural capital. Providing access to networks of a "bridging" and "linking" nature through various means has the potential in a more fluid twenty-first century society of helping disadvantaged individuals overcome the sometimes crushing lack of opportunities in inner city contexts. This optimistic view of the potential of social capital and education to help overcome some of the massive difficulties faced by poor communities provides a possible way forward in these tough circumstances. It also possibly provides some way for school leaders to envisage their task as educators and optimistically to underpin the hopes and aspirations of pupils and their families in inner city contexts.

Social Capital's potential relevance for schools and their leaders

The role of school leaders has been characterised above as an essentially *networked* one in the twenty-first century situation. Outcomes from Steve Jones' recent research in England suggest a networked model of school leadership may be of wider relevance for highly disadvantaged contexts (Jones, 2007). Of particular importance to the building of social capital in poor communities, are the following aspects of successful school leadership:

- Encouragement of co-operative working between families of schools;

- Development of shared values;
- Encouragement of school success;
- Fostering of high-quality teaching and learning;
- Building trust and putting the school at the heart of the community;
- Making a difference to the school's context and environment; and
- Maximising local community input and parental involvement.

Many of these issues are picked-up and broadly developed below.

In the previous section, the massive task of overcoming disadvantage for pupils in inner city schools has been related to issues of networking and establishing linkages that give access to resources needed by communities and individuals. Educational input is viewed as a crucial element in the building of social capital, and social capital is a potential resource in the educational task at a range of levels involving "bonding", "bridging", and "linking" forms of networking. Crucially, a number of writers, including ourselves, regard social capital and educational improvement as important means whereby highly disadvantaged communities can be lifted out of poverty and given hope for the future.

The concept of social capital has potential relevance in the following broad areas:

In the school situation

Many writers emphasise the social nature of knowledge creation, for which good relationships are deemed to be essential. Fullan (2001), for instance, argues that positive relationships must be the foundation for engendering such "good things" as: enhanced student performance, increased teacher capacity, greater involvement of parents, engagement of students and higher levels of enthusiasm for the learning process, together with increased levels of pride (ibid:10). Similarly, Wrigley (2000) emphasises the relationships side of the school leadership task when it comes to encouraging positive staff-student relationships, since "effective schools listen(ed) to and learn(t) from students and their parents" (p.27). At the same time, collaborative cultures need to be encouraged amongst staff (Hopkins, 2001; Louis and Miles, 1990). For Hopkins, "active democracy" involving participation at levels of staff in a school is a very important way to promote a quality classroom experience for pupils. Leadership, too, requires sharing not only at management level but at all levels in the school.

So, the creation of effective networks and associations between members of staff, "collegial" ways of working, and positive relationships of a productive nature throughout the school community can possibly reap major dividends in terms of learning outcomes in highly disadvantaged communities. To this end, the practice of staff working together (eg in small

working groups) can increase people's sense of belonging and of collective endeavour, leading to less overall stress, isolation and alienation. Also staff working together to set clear goals for student learning, assessment of student progress and the development of student action plans, can help to increase collective inquiry and problem-solving.

Building effective relationships between schools locally is a potentially important school leadership task. A cooperative arrangement between schools can provide greater use of specialist teachers, potentially deploy staff more effectively to aid the inclusion process, assist with issues of transition, and assist the tracking of individual pupil progress to provide more effective intervention strategies. Ansell (2004) suggests that schools should act in federations, particularly in disadvantaged areas. These can be fairly formal or substantially less so. More structured federations can share resources, staff, leadership and curriculum arrangements. This cooperative structure can not only help to counter the effects a market system (as in England), but can build school capacity through the sharing of knowledge. Cooperative arrangements of this kind arguably require strong leadership, together with a major will by staff to work effectively together.

Beyond the school situation

The adoption of a more networked way of working by school leaders can help put schools at the heart of the local community to effect positive change for people in the locality. Harris and Chapman (2002), for instance, stress the importance of school leaders generating positive relationships with parents and fostering a view of the school as central rather than aloof from the community. Leadership can involve acting with others and enabling others to act. This networked approach aims for an interconnectedness of home, school and community to assist young people to maximise their education. Further, leaders actively need to establish dialogue with parents and to connect with formal and informal community leaders (ibid:11). To enable this to happen, leaders should aim for a situation where staff, students and parents have more opportunities to engage effectively with each other.

Schools can be encouraged to act at the centre of effective networks, alongside local agencies, groups of workers providing support to families, and active community organisations. This process of building bridges with the outside community means that a school is more likely to gain support and loyalty from them in difficult times. Schools in highly disadvantaged contexts are likely to be fragile at times and therefore a strong relationship with local people and organisations can be invaluable when the going gets tough. The school can play its part in involving and helping to develop a range of individuals and organisations locally. The general

approach can usefully be one of assiduously developing relationships and aiming for a distribution of leadership both inside and outside the school.

Furthering the social development and regeneration of the local community can also impact positively back upon the success of the school in its educational task. As we have seen, the social capital of a community in a family of schools can potentially have an important effect on children's educational achievement. Policies that appear to have little to do with education (eg community development and the building of "healthy alliances") may contribute indirectly to the raising of educational attainment. Part of this building of social capital can be provided by providing opportunities for learning beyond the compulsory school age (Mortimore and Whitty, 1997). Drawing more people into the community of learning is central to economic prosperity and can possibly tackle social exclusion. At the same time, the scourge of child poverty needs to be tackled to help reduce the considerable barriers to learning that high levels of disadvantage throw up. To this end, it may be that a combination of activities at local level can assist: better co-ordination of effort by different agencies, better early intervention for children and families linked to higher spending, better targeting of help for pupils with specific difficulties, and ongoing transformation of teaching and learning in schools.

Possible TE Implications

Many writers are deeply critical not only of the current organisation of schooling in capitalist, "neo-liberal" countries such as the US and England, but are particularly concerned that twenty-first century schools should promote social justice and a problematising approach to learning amongst school staff. Not only should TE provide an opportunity for novice and practising teachers to examine issues of power and control in capitalist society, but also issues of commodification in schools, the effects of globalisation on local communities, the need to challenge patterns of oppression in society, and a recognition of the role of discourses in the education service (Cole, 2006). We tend to agree with these concerns, particularly as they relate to school leaders and their staff having the tools to challenge "top-down" policy agendas, teachers being enabled to work in a problem-solving and collegial manner, staff being empowered to challenge orthodoxies to develop new curriculum and pedagogical approaches, and where schools need to help highly disadvantaged communities advance to reach their full potential.

None of these are straightforward issues, particularly in inner city contexts. As has been pointed out, the task of school leaders in inner city communities is fraught with challenges, of lack of aspiration locally and disbelief often borne of generations of inequality, grinding poverty, and relative underachievement. But we have captured the task possibly as one where through maximising social capital locally and advancing

educational outcomes professionals can begin to make progress in these tough circumstances. This approach needs to be reflected in national and international programmes of support for teachers, as well as in teacher formation programmes.

Specific areas for further development are likely to include the following:

- Funded training opportunities linked to specific inner city projects
- Specific support for school leaders and managers, linked to issues of highly disadvantaged communities, networked ways of working and inclusive educational provision
- Greater research capacity as well as training and consultancy assistance for school leaders
- The systematic development of leadership networks, particularly for those working in poor contexts
- Development programmes to assist teaching and learning
- Peer support programmes to develop sharing of expertise and knowledge and to encourage collegial working as the norm
- Proactive programmes of recruitment and support for beginning teachers and those entering inner city environments, to aid teacher retention and maximise teacher quality in tough environments
- A support programme for helping support staff to move into teaching, particularly those from highly disadvantaged and ethnic minority backgrounds
- Programmes to develop and assist putting values and principles at the heart of school working
- Encouragement of cooperative working between schools
- Sharing locally of successful programmes of school engagement with their surrounding communities.

Conclusion and possible ways forward

This issue formulation paper has outlined the scale of the school leadership task in highly disadvantaged communities but in a positive context. Yes, the task is a daunting one with huge challenges, but we have argued that much can be done to replicate successful practice more widely. We have captured the task as one where schools need to reach out to their surrounding communities to maximise the educational opportunities of those they serve but also to regard their role as being to help develop the social capital of the locality. To enable this to happen, a range of possible policy and TE actions need to be put in place to make some widespread advances. Some of the policy challenges have already been spelt out, but they include:

- Targeting of funding at inner city programmes to address the poverty of these areas, by raising their social capital across-the-board;
- Encouraging schools and their leaders to create effective networks internally to maximise the quality of teaching and learning for pupils;

- School to recognise the importance of staff-pupil links and links with parents and the surrounding community;
- Greater early intervention, and programmes of lifelong learning to help develop social capital at the local level;
- A recognition of the need for more “joined-up” working between schools, agencies and organisations, to provide the best level of support for the development of local social capital;
- Greater widening of decision-making regarding schools and their future direction to encompass pupils, parents and the wider community; and
- An encouragement for schools to work cooperatively (either loosely or more formally).

So, these issues have been raised to promote debate and as a basis for our further research work involving successful school practitioners working in tough circumstances. The task facing school leaders, policymakers and providers of TE to effect major changes in highly disadvantaged contexts is an urgent one. Far too many young people and their families are failed in a way that is unacceptable and wasteful of talent that should be harnessed for the benefit of society as a whole. Even though the task is a major one with issues of social justice at its heart, nevertheless we approach it with optimism. Where very positive practice points a possible way forward we feel that research can help in affecting practice in this important area of work.

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