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# Walking the leadership tightrope: building community cohesiveness and social capital in schools in highly disadvantaged urban communities

Kathryn A. Riley*
*University of London, UK*

School leaders in highly disadvantaged urban communities across the globe walk a tightrope, caught between the needs of communities and the requirements of national policies. This article aims to enrich our understanding of the potential of school–community relationships. It examines the policy discourse on urban schools and the practice of community leadership. The policy context is one of UK and international concerns about divisions in society and the rise of political extremism: concerns which, in the UK, have led to a policy focus on community cohesion. The article offers a conceptual framework—a theory of action—as a possible road map for school leaders to manage through this complex and evolving arena of policy and practice. The template—developed through earlier work on urban schools—is underpinned by a focus on trust (as the lubricant to link communities together) and social capital (as a way of harnessing the 'social energy' of communities for positive good). The template is tested against the leadership of two school principals in challenging contexts in London and Greater Manchester. The author concludes that there is potential for schools to create space for the voices of the marginalised and disenfranchised to be heard. This analysis will resonate with school leaders serving disadvantaged communities in many international contexts and signals a new departure for leadership.

**Keywords:** *community cohesion*; *leadership*; *social capital*; *trust*; *urban schools*

## Introduction

School leaders in challenging urban contexts walk a tightrope, clutching their balancing poles to retain their footing. On one end of the pole are the beliefs and values, which sustain them as leaders, and the needs and aspirations of communities, on the other, the national policies and imperatives that shape the policy context.

*London Centre for Leadership in Learning, Institute of Education, University of London, 20 Bedford Way, London, WC 1H 0AL, UK. Email: k.riley@ioe.ac.uk

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This article explores community leadership in challenging urban environments. It examines the extent to which leadership is shaped by the socio-cultural context, moderated by the policy agenda and influenced by school leaders' own beliefs and expectations about communities. In a global context in which mobility of population and fluidity of ideas are increasingly the norm, the article throws light on the ways in which school leaders manage the interface between schools and communities and build trusting relationships.

The nature of the relationship between schools and community is a critical one for policy-makers, practitioners and communities alike. As a relationship, it is historically located, bound in culture and context and unique to each school. While the literature in the field indicates a growing emphasis on the need to link schools and communities to raise attainment (e.g., National College for School Leadership, 2007), there is less understanding of *what* the nature of that relationship should or could be or *how* it relates to an emerging policy agenda on community cohesion, a central policy theme explored in this article.

Over recent years, the UK has witnessed a growing policy emphasis on community cohesion, a trend that has significant implications for school and community relationships. The focus on community cohesion has emerged in response to highly charged events, including the emergence of extremist views on the far right of British politics and amongst Islamists, disturbances in several towns in the North of England and the 2005 bombings in London. The article explores the leadership issues implicit in this policy development and is organised into four parts. Part I explores the UK and US policy discourse on urban schools and the UK policy response. Part II offers a conceptual framework—a theory of action that draws on issues of trust and social capital—as a possible road map for school leaders to manage through this complex, and evolving, arena of policy and practice. Part III examines how leadership is conceptualised and enacted by two school principals in challenging contexts in London and Greater Manchester. Part IV reappraises the theory of action, highlighting the tensions and contradictions for school leaders in challenging urban contexts in responding to both national policy requirements and to the needs of communities.

## I. The urban agenda

### *The challenges of schooling*

Schools serving highly disadvantaged urban communities have been high on the policy agenda for over a decade in the UK (Lupton, 2005; Harris *et al.*, 2006; Riley, 2009) and elsewhere, for example in the USA (Lazerson, 2006). The social and economic challenges have been identified as including ill health, financial pressures, family stress and poor housing (Smith & Noble, 1995; Barber, 1996). While scholars have identified the challenges of urban schooling (Ainscow & West, 2006; Riley 2008, 2010) and located them within the wider social and economic context (Grace, 2006), problems of definition remain (Keys *et al.*, 2003). Issues associated

with schools serving highly disadvantaged urban communities include management, resourcing and interactions with the local community (Cutler, 1998; Learmonth & Lowers, 1998; DfEE, 1999; Englefield, 2001; Hopkins, 2001).

In the USA, characteristics of highly disadvantaged communities include high population density, areas of profound economic disparity and high levels of ethnic, racial, religious and linguistic diversity (Kincheloe, 2004).[1] In broad terms, policy analysts on both sides of the Atlantic have argued that the policy discourse on disadvantaged communities has been predominantly negative and that: (1) the interrelationship between race, class and gender and the impact of capitalism has served to ghettoise black communities (Wacquant & Wilson 1989), (2) the powerful effects of poverty on schooling have been underestimated (Berliner & Biddle, 1996; Whitty *et al.*, 1998; Lupton, 2005) and (3) there has been a lack of recognition of the challenges for schools of managing the turbulence characteristic of many socially disadvantaged communities (MacBeath *et al.*, 2007).

Policy concerns in the UK over the last decade have been expressed in terms of closing the achievement gap between young people in the most deprived and advantaged areas (Bell, 2003) and enhancing the well-being of children (Children Act: HM Government, 2004). A raft of policy interventions have been introduced aimed at improving the life chances of young people. Some have been nationally focused, such as Every Child Matters and Extended Schools (the application of the Children Act), and others more locally orientated, such as the London Challenge (Brighouse & Fullich, 2007; Riley & Emery, 2007), elements of which have been replicated in the Black Country and North-West Challenges. These initiatives have had strong leadership elements. Following the election of a Coalition Government in 2010, the performance of schools in urban areas remains a policy concern. However, there have been significant shifts in policy solutions.[2]

### *The challenges of, and within, communities*

A second strong policy emphasis in the UK has been that of community cohesion. In response to concerns about divisions in society and the rise of political extremism, and in the wake of the 2001 race riots in the northern towns of Bradford, Oldham and Burnley, Labour Home Secretary, David Blunkett, set up the Cantle Commission of Inquiry to examine the origins of the riots. The Inquiry concluded that these northern towns were characterised by a high degree of polarisation. Communities were segregated, typically living 'parallel' but separate lives, trust had broken down and there were pressing issues about citizenship, diversity and opportunity, which needed to be addressed to avoid further violence (Independent Community Cohesion Review Team, 2001).[3] The Cantle Commission provided the policy framework for subsequent discussions about community cohesion.

Political concerns about divisions in society were heightened by other high-profile events, most notably the London bombings in July 2005 (also known as 7/7): a series of suicide attacks in opposition to Britain's involvement in the war in Iraq carried out during London's rush hour by three Muslim Pakistani British men and a

British citizen of Jamaican descent (Home Office, 2006). More recent events, such as the August 2011 riots in several cities in the UK, have reinforced political disquiet about social disaffection.[4]

The policy response of the Labour Government to the 2001 riots and the London bombings included a reappraisal of the role of the state and the development of a strong community cohesion agenda, which emphasised the centrality of public services. Launching the policy in 2007, Alan Johnson, Secretary of State for Education and Skills, described community cohesion in the following terms:

> By community cohesion, we mean working towards a society in which there is a common vision and sense of belonging by all communities; a society in which the diversity of people's backgrounds and circumstances is appreciated and valued; a society in which similar life opportunities are available to all; and a society in which strong and positive relationships exist and continue to be developed in the workplace, in schools and in the wider community.[5] (Department for Children and Family Services [DCSF], 2007, p. 2)

Practical guidelines were introduced to support the development of community cohesion (Home Office, 2005) and schools were assigned a distinctive role in developing knowledge and respect between groups and encouraging citizenship (Pearce, 2004). Building on previous legislation,[6] a duty was placed on all maintained (publicly funded) schools in England to promote community cohesion (Pearce, 2004) and to ensure that 'all pupils understand and appreciate others from different backgrounds with a sense of shared values, fulfilling their potential and feeling part of a community, at a local, national and international level' (DCSF, 2007, p. 2).

Under the new policy, schools were encouraged to promote 'equality of opportunity and inclusion for different groups of pupils within a school and promoting shared values' (DCSF, 2007, p. 6) and to challenge 'the corrosive effects of intolerance and harassment … build … mutual civility among different groups … [and] ensure respect for diversity alongside a commitment to common and shared bonds' (p. 3). This was to be achieved through their teaching and learning, their work to raise standards and ethos and their engagement with the community and extended (i.e., wider public) services. Ofsted[7] was given the remit to report on schools' performance in this arena[8] and in 2008–2009, 15% of schools inspected were designated as 'outstanding' in their promotion of community cohesion (Ofsted, 2009).[9]

### *Preventing Violent Extremism Policy—Prevent*

A further aspect of the community cohesion agenda was the Preventing Violent Extremism Policy, also known as Prevent. Launched in 2007 to encourage local and national bodies to work together to prevent violent extremism, Prevent was a cross-department programme run by the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism. Resources were targeted at local authorities with the largest Muslim populations and activities included how to teach school children to spot a terrorist

(Dodd, 2009). Speaking at a 2008 conference on preventing violent extremism, and in the wake of the 2008 Mumbai attacks, Home Secretary Jacqui Smith noted that community projects funded over the previous 12 months had reached over 40,000 people across the UK and had, in her view, served to promote inter-faith interaction and cohesion (Travis, 2008). She commented:

> There are extremists out there who suggest these attacks can somehow be justified by some twisted interpretation of Islam. They can't. Indeed many of the victims were themselves Muslim. And that's why so many groups around the world have condemned those terrorists' attacks. (n.p.)

She went on to urge local communities to address the ideology of extremism, calling for extra vigilance in relation to 'extremist' groups who targeted mosques and community centres and who argued that it was not possible to be both Muslim and British.

Implementation was problematic for staff (teachers, lecturers and community workers) involved in Prevent-funded projects as they were required to report any suspicions about terrorism to the police and other authorities. The Prevent Action Plan for Waltham Forest in North London (the locality most closely linked to the 7/7 bombings), for example, suggested that all young people should have their behaviour screened and those identified as being vulnerable to radicalisation would be deemed suitable for a 'targeted approach' and an assessment of any changes in behaviour (Waltham Forest Local Authority, 2009).

Prevent became a cause of concern to some grant holders (Dodd, 2009) and led to criticism from a leading civil liberties figure, Shami Chakrabarti, who criticised the gathering of highly sensitive information about the lifestyle, family and associates of named individuals as the biggest spying programme in Britain in modern times (Dodd, 2009). In 2011, following Conservative Prime Minister Cameron's speech on multiculturalism, the Coalition Government announced a withdrawal in funding from some community groups deemed as being 'too soft on Islamic extremism' (Wintour & Percival, 2011).

Community cohesion is a relatively new policy direction, requiring further investigation (Dyson & Gallannaugh 2008; EPPI, 2008). However, the policy discourse to date has failed to acknowledge the ways in which the values and beliefs of different groups and communities can be at variance with each other, or the tensions for school leaders generated by the Prevent remit. There has been a lack of clarity about *whose* values should underpin cohesion and *what* communities should cohere around. The implicit assumption is that the task of the school is to harness networks and relationships in a locality for some common educational 'good' with little acknowledgment of the complexity of the task.

## II. A conceptual framework

Within the context of these challengers, in this section of the article I offer a theory of action as a possible road map for school leaders. The approach is influenced by the work of Argyris and Schön (1978) on theories of action and is

guided by the traditions of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Argyis and Schön distinguished between *theory in use*: the theories implicit in what practitioners do, the mental maps that influence their actions, and *espoused theory*: theories that are made explicit to inform others of the actions taken (Argyris and Schön, 1978; Anderson, 1997). The purpose of presenting this theory of action is to generate a dynamic for reflection and discussion in a complex arena of policy and practice in which trust and social capital are such valuable commodities.

In terms of trust, Manuel Castells (1997) argues that in a global climate in which the importance of national identity is reducing and the significance of other identities is growing (for example, based on culture, faith or ethnicity), building and sustaining trust is an increasingly difficult task. Yet trust is the basis of positive and deep-rooted changes in schools (Louis & Kruse, 1995; Louis, 2007) and a key component of successful educational reforms (Byrk & Scheider, 2002). Teacher trust in parents and students is critical to school success (Goddard *et al.*, 2001). Low levels of trust lead to low levels of student performance (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1997). In Western societies, social trust is manifested as *institutional trust* (the expectations and norms of an organisation) and as *relational trust* (the interactions between individuals) (Byrk & Scheider 2002; Louis, 2007). Trust is a dynamic concept, an essential ingredient for the cooperative action that is the foundation of social capital (Coleman, 1988, 1990), part of the 'invisible assets', the untapped resources of communities (Hargreaves, 2003). Trust and social capital are intrinsically linked.

Social capital in its turn implies a focus on social networks or relationships (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putman, 1993, 2000, 2007). Interest in social capital is increasing in many fields of study. In part, this is because of the global shifts that bring rapid increases in immigrant populations to areas that were previously homogeneous. A focus on social capital enables educators to look for the positive features of the cultures of newcomers, rather than those that emphasise what newcomers lack (Brunn & Delaney-Barmann, 2001).

Definitions of social capital include the concept of 'social energy': harnessing the creativity, values and relationships within a community for a shared purpose (Hirschmann, 1984). The importance of social capital in the field of education is supported by studies that examine successful schools with large minority or poor populations, which find that a shared social cohesiveness outside the school supports learning objectives (Elliot *et al.*, 2002; Morris & Morris, 2002) and helps stabilise the political environment (Hill, 2001). While a social capital perspective points to the importance of building on social networks and relationships, it also recognises the tensions and constraints of working with communities with diverse views and perspectives.[10]

### *A theory of action: creating a sense shared community*

As well as being influenced by the literature on trust and social capital, the theory of action presented here is framed by empirical work from the project *Leadership*

*on the Front-line*, a research and development project that focused on school leadership in challenging urban contexts and ran from 2003 to 2009. The project involved over 70 headteachers and principals from a range of schools in challenging city contexts across the UK and Eire – Belfast, Birmingham, Cardiff, Dublin, London (Greenwich, Hammersmith and Fulham, Newham and Tower Hamlets), Liverpool, Londonderry, Manchester and Salford, as well as schools in the outer areas of Paris. The schools were cross-phase (nursery, primary, secondary and special) and reflected the range of types of schools in city contexts (denominational, integrated, county, girls and boys) (Riley 2007, 2008, 2009).

The theory of action has three component parts: Bridging, Challenging and Building (see Figure 1). Each component is characterised by embedded activities designed to respond to the demands of the community context and to develop a sense of shared community. Section III will test this template out in relation to the views and practices of the two school principals described in the locality studies.

- *Bridging*. The concept of bridging has both historical and contemporary roots and is based on recognition of differences in values, beliefs, motivation and expectations between schools and communities. 'Bridging' has been described as creating a 'sense of place' for children, young people and adults (Glasman & Crowson, 2001). The significance of school in young people's lives may well include the school as a place of safety, a space to play and to be with their friends, as well as a location through which they can access opportunities (Riley, 2008, 2009).
- *Challenging*. There are strong links between the notions of bridging and challenging. While bridging is about reaching out to make links and develop relationships, challenging is about setting the boundaries. Schools in socially disadvantaged urban contexts may find themselves at the cutting edge of some of the most difficult social challenges of the day, which can include

Figure 1. Creating a sense of shared community

confronting a range of ingrained attitudes and perceptions to tackle prejudice and reduce ethnic or racial tension.

- *Building*. The final component of the theory of action is that of building, which has three elements: capacity building, partner building and trust building:

  - *Capacity building* is about recognising potential and possibilities, knowledge and skills within the community, in ways that build on and generate social capital. It is a recognition of the potential within communities, which is so often untapped (Hargreaves, 2003).
  - *Partner building* embraces the notion of the school as a partner in re-generating communities through a range of social networks, initiatives and opportunities. It points to the ways in which school leaders can connect institutions and organisations and draw resources together in ways that can benefit communities.
  - *Trust building* is the connector between capacity building and partner building. Trust and mutual understanding between schools and communities go hand in hand. Trust is developed through relationships, through information and through knowledge which in their turn are developed through the bridging process of reaching out, as well as the boundary setting process of challenging.

In the next section, the implicit theories and mental maps that shape the actions of school leaders in two challenging but different contexts are examined as a way of exploring the realities of leadership in practice and some of the available choices. The field work for these illustrative explorations took place in 2009/2010, as part of a wider examination of the ways in which community context influences school leadership.[11] The names of the schools and the principals have been anonymised.

## III. Community leadership enacted

Island School (in Greater London) and City School (in Greater Manchester) are both Community Schools for young people aged 11–16, serving communities in highly disadvantaged urban contexts. The accounts broadly represent the perspectives of the two principals, however, the views of two cohorts of young people were also sought.[12] The extended interviews with the two principals focused on the contextual and community challenges and their responses to those challenges. The interpretation of these perspectives by the author was fed back to the principals for accuracy.

### Island School

*Context and challenges*

Island School has 1250 students and 200 staff and is located in the East End of London, near the River Thames. It is a full-service, extended school (with extensive community provision before and after school, including breakfast clubs

and sports activities). At the time, it was also a training school (with links to a nearby university, which accredits trainees and provides theoretical and practical experience). The locality around the school houses impoverished communities, as well as one of the world's wealthiest financial districts. Although there has been significant investment in the area (through a range of projects aimed at tackling social disadvantage), poverty and unemployment remain high.

Traditionally, the area has been predominately white and working-class. The students attending Island School now come from a wide range of faith, heritage, social and economic backgrounds: 50% are from white backgrounds (English, Scottish and Welsh) and a further third from Asian backgrounds (largely Bangladeshi). Black, Chinese and other backgrounds are also represented in the student population. Of students, one in two have a home language that is not English and high numbers have special educational needs and are eligible for free school meals—an indicator of social disadvantage. Student mobility is 15–20%: many of these young people are asylum seekers and refugees whose families are housed in temporary accommodation. Student attainment on entry to the school is below the national average and, for some, is well below average. The principal, John Shea, described the community context in the following terms:

> …It's a very isolated community…very insular and suspicious of authority.…When the Bengali population moved in, in about 1994, the housing policies caused great aggravation and outbursts of racism. A British National Party councillor was elected, and we still suffer from that. So our biggest issue has been to bring the communities together. It's quite a divided community, although it's mending, we've seen a lot of changes and it's getting a lot better. However, we still have the fact that people still live in different housing areas. The kids leave [the school] and go their separate ways mostly.…It's very much that racial, ethnic divide. We are trying to open pupils' eyes to the issues and we're working to deal with conflict, whether its racial, gang or faith-related.

With a strong steer from the school's leadership team, Island School set up a project for students who had been involved in racial, faith or ethnically motivated conflict. This project included a week-long residential experience in Belfast, aimed at encouraging Island students to get to know each others' cultures. Students worked together in faith, ethnically, racially and gender mixed groups and shared the chores—cooking, cleaning, shopping etc. They met local young people from the Falls Road (a Catholic area of Belfast) and the Shankhill Road (a Protestant area) and explored the differences and the similarities between those pupils and communities. A key goal was to develop their skills in conflict resolution. As John Shea explained:

> We chose Belfast because it's a divided community: although one divided by religion, rather than ethnicity. It is a shock for them to see such divisions among people who look alike (white) and who have the same religious base (Christian). We are trying to move students out of their comfort zone. The work that we've done with the groups that go to Belfast is really important.…It changes the climate.…Because kids don't want others to be hurt. The group that goes to Northern Ireland…are trained to intervene and to try and resolve issues. What we try to do, if we can, is get there before

> it happens and get the kids out and do the conflict resolution. It's is all about intervention, so the rows happen but they get sorted.

The school has reached out to the community—and the community has embraced opportunities to become part of the life of the school. Local community members have become volunteers, first aiders, fire marshals. Through training and development opportunities they have become support staff, taking up significant roles within the school. As a training school, community members have become leaders in alternative behaviour management, conflict resolution, anti-bullying. The school's goal in involving the community in this way has been to build local capacity, a strategy which, according to the principal, is based on the recognition that:

> It's not possible to do anything significant about achievement unless you do something about what gets in the way of learning. And that's in the community.

The lives of the young people who attend Island School are governed by their perceptions of territory and space. Boundaries are defined by tagging (gang-rated graffiti), as well by locality. This is depicted by one student in Figure 2, and by another in the following comment:

> There's lots of good things around here. But it's a scary place to live sometimes. Everyone keeps to their own area. You don't go down to 'C' 'cos it's not yours and people don't want you there. We know where the gangs are and you have to keep out.

## City School

City School has just over 800 students and is located in the Greater Manchester conurbation. It is also a full-service extended school, opening its doors for most of the year from before 8 am in the morning until 9 pm in the evening and offering a range of activities, services and facilities for students and the wider community, as well as additional support and learning opportunities to local primary schools.

Historically, the locality has housed a predominantly poor white working community but is now more ethnically diverse. However, the community remains

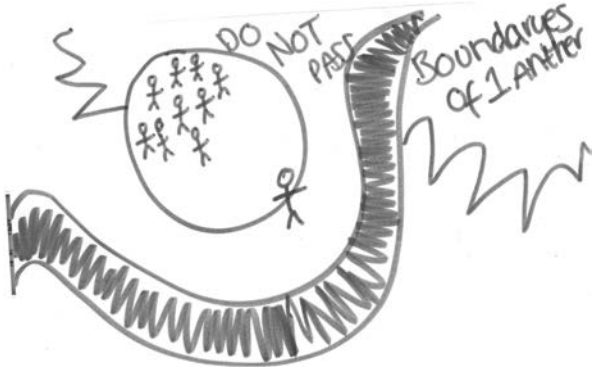


Figure 2.

largely disenfranchised, with aspirational families tending to move away. Established families have not always welcomed the arrival of Asian families (and more recently families from Eastern Europe) into an area characterised by a poverty of expectations. Unemployment is high, vandalism and gangs common. Local shopping is limited, although, in response to ill health and the demand for prescription drugs, there are a large number of chemists. Disability levels are relatively high and many children have problems with eyes, teeth and asthma or are undersized or obese: both indicators of poor health.

The school's principal, Marian Wielding (pseudonym), described the school's context and challenges in the following terms:

> The school is situated in an area of high social and economic disadvantage. However, the composition of the area is changing; for example, there has been a recent influx of families from Poland. There are large numbers of one-parent families and the housing stock around the school is varied and includes high rise, new housing stock, as well as older housing in various states of repair and disrepair.

She saw the school as having a critical role to play in acknowledging the pressures inherent within the community, as well as challenging the stereotypes:

> We want our students to feel positive about themselves and about those around them. We want them to celebrate diversity and to be proud of who they are. There are many negative stereotypes about the area and sometimes, people can misjudge you for where you live, or what you wear, and it is important to be able to rise above injustice, and be the best you can.

Partnership between the school and families and the local community is seen as being critical. The school has strong links with a range of organisations, institutions and agencies and is part of an Education Action Zone (EAZ), a government initiative to improve standards and raise achievement in education by developing innovative ways of working with parents, the community, business and industry. Involvement in the EAZ has expanded cross-school working arrangements, encouraging participating schools, including City, to share expertise and respond to barriers to learning for pupils. According to Marian Wielding, the school is one of the few places that can act as a bridge between families and the wider society:

> One of the challenges is developing that real sense of partnership with communities, establishing the real shared fundamental values. I think it is a challenge because the education system means very different things for people working at schools, and the families that attend those schools. Many parents have had negative experiences during their time at school and it's difficult to re-engage them.

The school recognises the day-to-day challenge within the community. A senior member of staff highlighted a number of gang-related issues as being a major concern:

> [The gangs] create a sense of uncertainty and lack of safety—as well as being a source of admiration—and are often involved in vehicle and motor bike theft. Gang issues 'kick off' in particular areas, and there has been a recent growth in 'tagging', i.e., the practice of individual gang members leaving their calling card, their personal mark as

> graffiti. There is also a degree of hostility towards immigrant or migrant groups and the emergence of language such as, 'We're the foreigners in our school. They're taking over our place. They don't speak our language'.

City School's predominantly white, working-class community is changing fast (with the arrival of Afro-Caribbean, Eastern European and Bengali families) and Marian Wielding sees her task as opening minds and hearts in a locality in transition. Practical, outwardly-focused steps have included youth activities intended to help migrant workers' children integrate with local children and, as part of a concerted policy to tackle bullying and to challenge prejudice, an invitation to the 'Scary Guy' to visit the school. This experience is captured in the following account of the visit, taken from the school's website:

> The lights went down, music started and a DVD showed newspaper images of the hatred and violence prevalent all around the world……Then the Scary Guy walked in…a former tattoo artist from America who legally changed his name in 1998 after a rival tattoo artist ran a full page advert asking "Are you tired of dealing with scary guys with war paint facial tattoos?" As a result, Scary decided to draw something positive from his scary exterior….
>
> City School students and staff were challenged to think about the world we live in and just how much hate and violence there is in it. For 90 minutes they listened to the Scary Guy's story as he explained how he had spent over 40 years being a 'professional name caller' hating, getting revenge and caring nothing about how his words affected other people.
>
> Towards the end of the presentation, students and staff were challenged to take up Scary's 7 Day, 7 Night Challenge: not to say anything negative about another person and not to call anyone by a bad name.

Young people from City School spoke of many positive aspects of the local environment: the leisure centre and local parks, their 'mates', the shops. However, the presence of gangs and high levels of vandalism diminished what was on offer. As one young person put it:

> There's everything you want round here but it's the quality and the environment and that's not good.

Young people described their sense of threat from 'chavs in rebok classics', their concerns about walking some of the streets alone, for fear of abuse, and the availability of drugs:

> There's lots of dodgy people, dealing with drugs.

Their world was defined by areas of safety:

> Its fine near to where I live because I know everyone….It's safe in B.

and areas of threat:

> They threw eggs at me in 'HB' [local area]. There's lots of prejudice against the colour of your skin. Someone called me a nigger.

Young people wanted to see 'more police, not just community police'. Heightened police presence would help deal with another major problem, vandalism. They described the ways in which play areas became vandalized very quickly: one minute 'there's lots of new things…like swings, it's great. Then a few days it will be on fire'. Figures 3 and 4 depict this sharp transition. Figure 3 shows a happy group of young people enjoying the play facilities, and Figure 4, their despondency after the playground has been vandalised.

## IV. Making sense of complexity

*From theory in use, to espoused theory*

The examples of Island and City School illuminate the mental maps that influence the scope and direction of the leadership of the two school principals. In presenting their response to the external challenges, both John Shea and Marian Wielding acknowledge the community pressures but also celebrate the potential.[13] Their common starting point is a belief in possibilities. Their behaviour seeks to reaffirm what students are capable of achieving. Their actions are both inwardly focused (within the schools' day-to-day practices) and outwardly directed (towards the community) and based on the premise that the leadership of the school does not reside in one person: the headteacher or principal. In terms of the three component parts of the theory of action presented earlier (see Figure 1), the actions of the two principals are manifested in a number of ways, including the following:

- *Bridging*. City School undertakes a bridging role through working closely with the local feeder primaries to offer 'drop in' sessions for primary parents about the school. Discussions range from school uniform to drugs. Families are brought together in ways that will encourage them to develop their relationships, for example, by inviting sets of parents from local primary

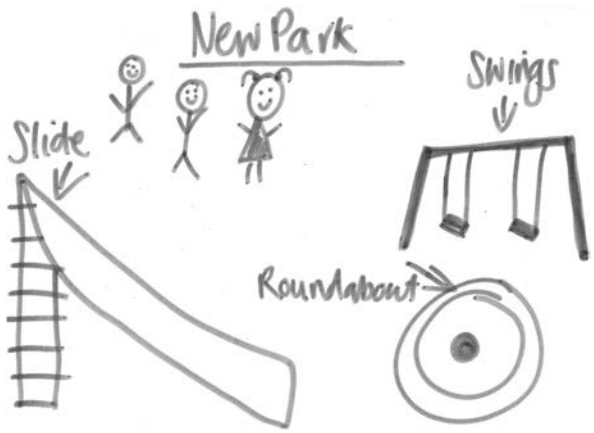


Figure 3.

Figure 4.

schools to attend a residential weekend. In both schools, a range of key personnel exercise this role. In one, the deputy headteacher has a specific remit to develop connections with the local communities which represents a significant resource commitment on the part of the school. In the other, the inclusion manager works with disaffected students and their families to create an 'enabling space for people'. Island School has an on-site community house, a friendly and welcoming space which can be accessed easily from the street without entering the main school building.

- *Challenging*. Both principals see their role, and that of the school, as confronting prejudice and working to reduce racial tension. This determination to challenge springs from a commitment to social justice, not from the demands of national legislation, or the exigencies of the school inspection framework. The challenges to students' perceptions and prejudices are embedded in explicit messages to the community. At Island School, the young people involved in the Belfast Project are encouraged to use their knowledge and skills within the school (as peer mentors and leaders in team-building and icebreaker workshops with younger students) and within the wider community (by making presentations at youth centres, local events, other schools, conferences and to companies who had funded the project). At City, the visit of the Scary Guy was given a high profile in the local community through local newspapers, and the principal made it clear that the values espoused by the Scary Guy mirrored those of the school.
- *Building*. As full-service schools, both schools provide a range of services, resources, activities and opportunities directed towards enhancing opportunities for hard-to-reach and disadvantaged communities and building community capacity.

The implicit beliefs that shape the approach of the two school leaders to their work with communities are based on a social capital perspective, which aims to build on

social networks and relationships while also recognising the tensions and constraints of working with communities with diverse views and perspectives. This mirrors Hirschmann's view (discussed earlier) of social capital as a form of 'social energy', which harnesses the creativity, values and relationships within a community for a shared purpose (Hirschmann, 1984) and highlights the ways in which a social capital perspective encourages a positive response to different cultures and communities (Brunn & Delaney-Barmann, 2001).

A theory of action that is underpinned by this emergent notion of social capital enriches our understanding of the potential of school-community relationships. It emphasises the fluid contributions of community social networks and relationships to the functioning of the school (Hill, 2001; Morris & Morris, 2002) and signals a new departure for leadership.

### *Walking the tightrope*

Schools have long been expected to *build tolerance* within communities. However, with the emergence of the community cohesion agenda, they are now expected to *challenge intolerance*. This gives school leaders community responsibilities that go far beyond educating students and has implications for how leadership is exercised and policy operationalised. Community engagement is hard (Berg *et al.*, 2006). Communities do not necessarily bind together in a free and relaxed manner. Where communities are cohesive but diverse, they may merge or interconnect over time. Where there is intolerance or hostility, individual communities will tend to cling together. Given the diversity of views, perceptions and beliefs, this raises a critical question: Whose views count, why, how and when? (Riley, 1998).

This question in its turn takes us back to two important issues: *trust* (the basis of positive and deep-rooted changes in schools) and *social capital* (the networks and relationships, the untapped resources of communities).

Trust does not appear out of the ether. It may emerge from respect for a profession (medical), or a calling (a priest or Imam), or a role (tenants' leader), but even then it is dependent on the relationships that people have with those individuals. In our complex and fast-changing world, trust cannot be assumed. It has to be created. It has to be earned (Riley & Stoll, 2005). And, once broken, it is difficult to repair. There are issues about reciprocity. Parents may be distrustful of schools. Staff may be distrustful of communities. Yet the beliefs that school staff hold about communities are critical to the lives of young people—see the earlier discussion on trust (Hoy, 1997; Goddard *et al.*, 2001).

In closely-knit village communities, trust is the *super-glue* that holds together. In the modern urban context trust can be the *lubricant*, enabling groups to engage with each other with less anxiety and friction and ideally on more levels (economic, social and cultural). However, if schools are seen as having a surveillance role, it is harder for them to demonstrate their belief in communities. Thus the leadership tightrope is a precarious one, demanding a high level of skill and confidence.

The cultural and community diversity of many of our city schools is often a source of great strength. Schools reap the benefits of the multiplicity in our societies: the creativity, the energy and the resilience and exuberance of the children; the rich cultural understanding and experiences. However, there are also issues about the ability of newly arrived immigrant groups to engage with society; the concentration of socially disadvantaged children, and the demands these create on resources; how to work with an 'underclass' with very low expectations, high levels of disaffection from society and a dismissive attitude towards learning; as well as poverty and mental health problems, for both pupils and their families. All of these serve to increase the complexity and nature of the challenges.

It is this amalgam of complexity, profound need, diversity and speed of change that generates significant challenges for urban schools. It raises issues about their role in relation to community cohesion. It raises issues about the extent and ways in which it is the role of schools—or other agencies—to build on social capital. And it raises issues about the role of school leaders.

There is an undoubted tension between adopting a strong social justice role, which is respectful of communities and which aims to build social capital (as exemplified by John Shea and Marian Wielding), and taking a surveillance role, which sets out to identify potential extremists. However, schools can foster independence of thought and self-belief, which can be the foundation stones for community cohesion. They can be experimental grounds for building trust in young people. If the experiment works, then young people will extend it to the wider world. If it fails, young people will be more likely to revert to previous forms of behaviour and to prior beliefs and expectations.

To navigate the tightrope successfully, school leaders—and those who aspire to take leadership roles—have to be fleet of foot: confident of the ethical values and beliefs that underpin all they do. Retaining their balance is about taking into account the national policy agenda, as well as the impact of those policies on the day-to-day practices of schools (Bangs *et al.*, 2010), and adopting an outside-in approach to leadership which starts from the needs of communities. Such an approach requires a strong assertion on the part of school leaders about issues of equity and social justice[14] but ultimately creates the space for the voices of the marginalised and disenfranchised to be heard.

Schools can create something very precious in a crowded world: namely a sharable space that encompasses the physical, the intellectual, the cultural, the linguistic and the emotional and that is available for people of all types and all beliefs. Those that challenge that sharable space have to be prevented from distorting or destroying it. This is why walking the leadership tightrope will never be an easy task. Nevertheless, the prize for staying on is a rich one indeed, for all concerned.

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## Notes

1. In response to these conditions, housing initiatives have been introduced in some deprived neighbourhoods, aimed at influencing the interactions between families, developing social networks and building social capital (Smrekar & Bentley, 2011).
2. However, questions have been raised about the extent to which young people in the most disadvantaged communities will benefit from a raft of new policies, such as the development of 'free' schools—a policy designed to give parents and communities the opportunity to set up their own distinctive models of schooling with state-funded support (Millar, 2011).
3. The Inquiry drew on the work of Forrest and Kearns to define community cohesion as having five domains: common values; social order; social solidarity and reductions in wealth disparities; attachment to place; and social networks and social capital (Forrest & Kearns, 2001, p. 8).
4. Explanations for the 2011 riots have been wide ranging and interpretations include: a 'wake up call for the criminal justice system' (the view of the Mayor of London [Sparrow, 2011]; and an example of defective consumerism (Bauman, 2011).
5. Alan Johnson, speaking in Parliament on 2 November 2006.
6. Under the terms of the Education Act 2002 (Section 78) (HM Government, 2002), schools already had a duty to 'promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society, and prepare pupils at the school for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life'. Under the terms of the Race Relations Amendment Act (HM Government, 2000), schools also had a duty to 'eliminate unlawful racial discrimination and to promote equality of opportunity and good relations between people of different groups'.
7. The Office for Standards in Education, the Government Agency responsible for inspecting schools.
8. The duty on schools to promote community cohesion came into effect on 1 September, 2007 (DCSF, 2007).
9. This is based on Ofsted data for 2008–2009 (Ofsted, 2009).
10. This discussion is informed by earlier work on schools and communities (Louis & Riley, 2004).
11. Four illustrative explorations of schools in socially disadvantaged communities were funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. Two of the studies were carried out in London, one in Paris and one in Greater Manchester. For the purposes of this article, the author drew on two of these schools to provide a comparative and contextual comparison. The Paris study was excluded because it was not possible

to verify the principal's perceptions of the data. Only one of the two London schools has been included, as the findings are broadly similar and the London/Greater Manchester focus offered some helpful contextual comparisons. Data was based on documentary evidence; guided walks in the community surrounding the schools, led by key personnel; interviews with school principals, senior leaders and staff with a specific community brief; group discussions with students and an imaging (drawing) exercise; and a workshop that brought together participating school leaders.

12. Students worked in groups of 8–10 (two groups per school) and were asked two questions: What's it like living round here? What's it like being in this school? They were asked to depict their answers as a drawing or image.
13. The article was sent in draft form to the two principals. Any assertions on the part of the author were tested with them in phone conversations and exchanges of emails.
14. It also raises critical issues for leaders in terms of how they develop their organisations and the staff within them (Pedder & MacBeath, 2008) to take on this broader agenda.

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