

The Role of Schools Play as Community Hub Facilities in Contributing to a Sustainable Community

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Abstract

The last decade has seen a shift of focus in every neighbourhood policy from physical renewal and economic development to tackling social and community-related matters concentrated in deprived neighbourhoods. People in local communities who live in deprived neighbourhoods are greatly disadvantaged in respect to both their social cohesion at present time and to their transition towards a sustainable community in future. Governments together with their partnership alliances have laid down commitments from strategic policies to monitoring aspects, in order to bring together from community facilities resources that will contribute to a sustainable community, such as social cohesion. This paper explores how the role of schools in providing community facilities can help the government to better understand the process in promoting social cohesion. The idea is to explore present school concepts, roles and efforts that have been undertaken in order to enhance the values of the social cohesion process; namely, personal development, diversion and social interaction/social networks within the relationships between its teaching staff, pupils, parents and the wider community. However, it is also important for every local community to understand how their school can extend its role in providing social cohesion benefits and how they feel about being part of something that benefits them all. Outside the walls of the school itself, this paper explains how building community-school connections with families and the wider community are important as equal as an educational resource. An in-depth review of most of the literature on Sustainable Community issues with school roles raised the perception of where the advantages and gaps are, contrasted the views of particular authors, and also raised questions. By showing a school's role as community hub and its significant relationships in creating a Sustainable Community environment with social cohesion agendas, this paper strongly recommends undertaking further thinking on local communities' experiences of perceiving the school as a community hub and of its role in adding value towards creating Sustainable Communities.

Keywords: school, social cohesion, community hub

1. Introduction

In the last decade, most parts of the United Kingdom has experienced much focus on every neighbourhood urban regeneration policies from physical renewal and economic development to tackling social and community-related matters like social exclusion. The focus was mainly on those people who live in deprived neighbourhoods and who are greatly disadvantaged in respect of their social cohesion at this present time. Since the Sustainable Community concept has been introduced widely into the UK, many things related with social development have been introduced, mainly from using buildings as community resources to opening up lots of opportunities for people to share their thoughts among others, understand their ways of life and the needs for their own future. Through the agendas of social cohesion, governments have prepared new policies and targeted strategies in order to solve as much as they could of most communities' issues and conflicts arising from deprived and problematic community areas. Social cohesion can be defined in many ways, given dimensions by economics, social and environmental factors that are required by the sustainable community concept (Vergolini, 2007). According to Cantle (2006), the term 'community cohesion' is regularly used in the UK as a term for a community:

- *To which people are proud to say they belong;*
- *Where people from different ethnic, religious and social backgrounds and with different incomes live side-by-side in peace and safety;*
- *Which is not disfigured by racism or other forms of prejudice, and where people treat each other with courtesy and respect;*
- *Where people support each other when they are in need, and where conflicts can be resolved rather than festering or growing;*
- *Where people receive, and feel they receive, fair treatment from organizations providing services, facilities and employment opportunities; people are able to contribute to decisions which affect their lives, and to participate fully in the economic, social and cultural life of the community*

(Cantle, 2006)

Understanding what cohesion means to a community assists a government in promoting social cohesion. However, with new policies and targeted strategies being delivered by an increasingly diverse range of providers, with correspondingly diverse opportunities for user and community involvement, Blake et al. (2008) identified that *"there has been less focus upon the implications of engaging service users and communities effectively when communities are themselves diverse, with differing needs and priorities"*. This could create challenges in promoting the social cohesion agendas. (Blake, Diamond et al., 2008). It appears that some of the initiatives that the government has taken so far have given many new opportunities for the future of all the people in the community.; opportunities such as having decent work, decent places to live, better schools for children, common infrastructure, quality in health and well-being and lastly freedom for community building. However, there is a need for people who involves with government commitment to serve its communities, to understand the importance of linking those opportunities that promotes social engagement processes with people experiences and perceptions (McShane, 2008). These perceptions need to heard. Government, through local authorities, has been planning and managing strategies to let the

communities to engage with the process. However, there appears to be less interest from the community. This may be the reasons why there are still signs of negative sentiment issues continuing such as social exclusion, segregated communities, ‘fear of difference’, unequal life chances, poverty and disaffection in communities, a lack of leadership, renunciation of community politics, lacking a sense of belonging and lastly, poverty and unfriendliness.

This paper explores how schools can play a role by being community facilities in order to help the government in getting community participations by promoting social cohesion not only from inside schools walls but more concerning people from outside its boundaries. Schools, either in urban or rural catchment areas, have recently been expected by the government to play their part in discovering the advantages of community elements through its pupils, parents and the wider community. Schools apparently have criteria that can be incorporated to optimize learning opportunities for the whole population, and most schools have started to begin social interaction projects which have resulted in bringing benefits in promoting social cohesion not only by activities within the school walls but further out beyond the normal school boundaries. This paper highlights the importance of building community-school relationships and why it is benefit for the communities if the right community facilities like local schools can carry the roles and responsibilities to promote it. The importance of understanding the relationships that schools can offer to local communities around one school’s area has to be taken into consideration when making use of community facilities like schools. However, the process can be much more complex and these potentially give some challenges to the schools as service providers. This paper introduces the concept of community hub facilities as part of a school’s role to promote social cohesion. Some explanations on social cohesion with related case studies have been put into this paper which considers schools’ roles as community hub facilities and their impact on a Sustainable Community.

2. Sustainable communities and social cohesion

The objectives of Sustainable Community concepts can be achieved as long as its economical, social and environmental dimensions are taken into the right processes of getting out of what most important back to the communities. Social learning and empowerment, social cohesion, social inclusion, social justice and equalities are just some of the outcomes of the whole process to enable the community to gain benefits in their lives (Smith, 2008). Furthermore, it is not practical when working on sustainable community agendas not to understand the connection with the resources that will be needed in order to support their objectives. In much of the literature, many authors suggest that physical resources need to be integrated with other resources, such as politics, economics and humans, social and environmental resources (Smith, 2008). Government together with its partnership alliances has laid down a commitment with strategic policies and monitoring aspects to bring together these resources in order to provide something meaningful back to community. The shift in focus in every neighbourhood urban regeneration policy (from physical renewal and economic development to tackling social and community-related matters concentrated in deprived neighbourhoods, such as unemployment, low income, low skills, poor housing, high crime rates, and poor health – in short, social exclusion) has become a major reason why social cohesion objectives need to be achieved in parallel with other Sustainable Community issues. Relying on numbers of government efforts and

commitment in overcoming social development issues from major capital resources would not give enough impact on sustainable community agendas in the long run. There must be some approaches which need to be formulated with other significant resources in order to give more positive outcomes, and these have to be recognised. In addition, issues in decision-making on different levels gives the same challenges as approaches trying to make Sustainable Communities more realistic. Decision-making in the future will require ways of listening to opposing points of view, and finding ways to accommodate deeply held and differing values. Usual decision-making mechanisms tend to exclude rather than include diverse interests and do not cope well with the complexities that issues of sustainability present (SPIDR, 1993). More than ever, decision-maker has to be understood that how decisions made today affect the quality of life for future generations. People are demanding more meaningful input to decisions that directly affect them or the place where they live. As in the United Kingdom, the role of local communities is becoming increasingly important, and as in much of the rest of the world, there is a move towards more decentralized decision-making. The UK government has continued to bear responsibility for bringing together diverse interests to establish national standards, goals, and priorities. These central roles are necessary because national interests may not always be represented in local decisions, and the effects of community choices are felt beyond one municipality. The government is providing greater flexibility and is expanding the roles played by local counties and communities in implementing policies and programmes to address national goals (DCLG, 2008). Indeed local governments have to play a key role in creating stronger communities - from planning and facilitating development, to creating community partnerships or to providing leadership (Mansor and Alexander, 2008). Much of what is needed to create more sustainable communities is within reach if people and their community institutions join forces. Many communities are beginning to be aware of, and to think of, the concept of a Sustainable Community as a framework to structure their living environment in the future. Big institutions in society - including federal and local governments, businesses, universities, and national organizations - provide support for local community efforts. Thus in some cases, these institutions need to review the barriers they have (sometimes unintentionally) erected that reduce the ability of communities to pursue a sustainable community. Apart from being one of the most realistic outcomes from sustainable community agendas, social cohesion should be a main focus for government in order to put right and enhance what remains good value in every community. For some their involvement is through political interest, however the true feeling of those people who live in deprived neighbourhoods and are greatly disadvantaged in respect of their social cohesion at the present time making it crucial to the need to instigate the right approaches to overcome the issues.

There are challenges and perimeters that need to be considered when tackling community issues in social cohesion. The first one is on when to break down segregated communities' issues and the occurrence of 'fear of difference' among themselves. The second challenge for social cohesion is on the issues of continuing tackling unequal life chances, poverty and disaffection in communities. The third one is the deficiency in numbers in community leaderships, these leaders being necessary in order to facilitate change. The fourth challenge is how to avoid any renunciation of community politics and having separate interests and how to create a sense of belonging has also become one of the biggest challenges in social cohesion (Roski, Perry et al., 1997). Lastly, there is the challenge of how to continue tackling unequal life chances, poverty and unfriendliness among neighbours, not to mentioned issues of race and faith which are often seen as the most frequent sensitive points between

communities and can cause the most visible sources of tension. Discrimination and prejudice experienced by other groups – including the disabled, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities and different age and gender groups can also create additional tension.

3. The role of school in social cohesion

In 2007, all schools in the UK were given a new duty to promote social cohesion. Most schools in UK, however, already considered this as a fundamental part of their role. At the same time, local authorities have been working alongside schools in order to promote social cohesion and have also been looking at the opportunities to support schools. Every school is responsible for educating children and young people who will live and work in a country which is diverse in terms of culture, religion and beliefs, ethnicities and social backgrounds. Different schools in different catchment areas will clearly facing different challenges. Social cohesion commitment starts when schools in this context are recognised and can be seen as providing opportunities to create themselves as a hub for community interactions - which embraces the concept of providing a ‘one stop shop’ in terms of education, health, childcare and social services for the community (Smith and Mark K., 2008). Schools in the heart of a community can provide a range of services and activities which often go beyond the school day; they should help the needs of children, their families and the wider community. In other words, schools can play a role of providing an open door to let more people come in and to interact with each other more frequently.

To show that schools can be provide a contributing role in promoting social cohesion, a study from New Zealand has shown the impact of a school closure on neighbourhood social cohesion (Witten, McCreanor et al., 2001). The findings showed that the impact of school relocation for low income families has more generally reflected on the place of schools in contributing social cohesion and on the broadly defined health of a community. In another research, Hennessy (2006) suggested that when the time has come to renew a community facility and its services, it is ultimately important to enable communities to achieve the outcomes they believe are important to them and potentially to their children (Hennessy and Platt, 2006).

Schools, therefore, can be seen as creating an opportunity to ensure that the benefits of the schools can be extended to the local community. In other words, the role of a school will add value by promoting social cohesion beyond just the characteristics of a building. This particular role of schools, however, has its own challenges, especially when implementing the idea of extending services beyond schools into an opportunity which can be expected to offer something back to a community covering all ages (Dryfoos, 1999). In addition, schools can be more than places just for creating a good learning environment for the young people. Centres or hubs can be created and conceived of as doorways to sets of resources that range from the informational (e.g. news of a neighbourhood) to the material (e.g. grounds and building for community use) to the social (e.g. networks and sources of support). Access to such resources and facilities could conceivably have a greater impact on the well-being of poor neighbourhoods because of cost and mobility barriers to other forms of community contact and resources.

The significance of the contribution that schools can make to social cohesion particularly in a poor neighbourhood derives from their status as one of the sole portals through which all communities and their families with children pass. For example, for the parents of young children, the local school is an amenity/service central to their everyday lives. Schools are well placed to become a focus for community interaction and identity, because of the common needs and life stage experiences of parents with young children and because of the existing social ties between neighbours who are also school parents and their location within the catchment neighbourhoods. They are informal meeting places where friendship networks form, reciprocal exchanges around childcare are negotiated and news of local events can be shared.

4. More school advantages that can promote social cohesion

This paper discusses the role of a school as a community resource that brings together community relations, community involvement, community engagement, community partnerships, into something brings about social cohesion. Regardless of how people may describe it, most people in a community deserve well-planned and well-structured programmes in place, to promote and nurture community understanding (Adolescence, 2009). The Education and Inspections Act 2006 introduced “*a duty on all maintained schools in the UK to promote community cohesion and on The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), the non-ministerial government department of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools In England, to report on the contributions made in this area*” (Ofsted, 2009). Since September 2007, many schools already work in ways that promote community cohesion and the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) has urged all schools to build on the best of that practice, so 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. Schools have characteristics that can contribute towards these aims through their teaching and learning, their work to raise standards and ethos, through engagement with the community and extended services (Ofsted, 2009). Schools play a major part in developing cohesive communities, for example in: 1) opening access to education and employment; 2) developing skills to overcome poverty and social inequalities; 3) promoting social and cultural diversity; 4) providing access to ICT; 5) facilitating the integration of new communities; 6) providing premises or facilities for use by a wide range of users, for instance people from various ethnic groups and of different ages. School roles in promoting social cohesion should not limit themselves to one particular dimension but the school may want to consider the initial dimensions first – acting within the locality of the school and move on with engaging the wider community (CIRCLE, 2003).

Schools have, therefore, to design their facilities in the sense of recognizing where other strands of the equalities agenda – including gender, sexual orientation, disability and age – are interconnected with the aspiration to promote community cohesion. Schools, on many occasions, should note that their focus should additionally promote community cohesion across different cultures, ethnic, religious or nonreligious and socio-economic groups. Schools could further support the concept that community-wide efforts need to be launched to effect changes in the normative, role model and

opportunity structures of community social environments in order to curb any social issues such as adolescent alcohol and drug use (Roski, Perry et al., 1997).

School roles, besides the need in giving opportunities to build up relationships between its pupils, parents and the wider community towards better future in education and social values in a neighbourhood, in a neighbourhood, there is also a need for school to spread their influence by helping out on social diversity issues from local communities' aspects either in rural or urban areas (Miller, 1993). Miller further stated that schools in these cases need to become more sensitive of their role in minimizing the impact of social problems and issues in the areas outside the school vicinity.

5. Building community-school relationships

This paper also explores the hypothesis that the role of school as a community hub will add value to the social cohesion process; namely to personal development, diversion and social interaction/social networks. This set of values can only begin with the process and outcomes from the building of community-schools relationships (Hull and Schultz, 2002). A lot of today's best leaders in community development, education, and business are coming to realize that schools themselves cannot bring the benefits of social cohesion to the youth, their parents and to the wider community. This is the stage when schools and communities should work closely with each other to meet their mutual goals. Extended schools, for example, can provide more support for students, families and staff when they are an integral part of the community. On the other hand, agencies can make services more accessible to local communities by linking with schools, and they can connect better with, and have an impact on, hard-to-reach people. Appropriate and effective collaboration and team-working are seen as key factors to community development, learning and family self-sufficiency (Higgins, et al., 2005).

School-community relationships should be considered as connections between schools and community resources. The meaning of the relationship may involve use of school or neighbourhood facilities and equipment; sharing resources; collaborative fund raising and grant applications; volunteer assistance; mentoring and training from professionals and others with special expertise; information sharing and dissemination; networking; recognition and public relations; shared responsibility for planning, implementation and evaluation of programmes and services; expanding opportunities for internships, jobs, recreation and building a sense of community (DCLG , 2008).

School-community partnerships can interconnect with other resources and strategies to enhance communities' values that support all youth, their families and the wider community. The outcome of the partnership could improve schools themselves, strengthen neighbourhoods and lead to a noticeable reduction in young people's problems. However, building such partnerships requires visioning, strategic planning, creative leadership and new multifaceted roles for professionals who work within the schools and communities context (Mitrofanova, 2004). All these are expected to enhance the values of the social cohesion process. In addition, schools themselves create communities – for example, the networks formed by similar or different types of schools, by schools that are part of the specialist schools' network, or by schools that work collaboratively in clusters or in other models of partnership (Adolescence, 2009). Many schools operate across all of the above

dimensions, for example by providing extended services for the local community and forging links with other schools regionally or internationally.

6. Community hub

A community hub provides space for community groups and local organizations to get each other and for a range of activities, programmes, services and events to take place which address the social needs of a community (Lock, 2008). A community hub typically involves with community facilities clustered with main buildings, should extend its function to make it as resources broadly available to the community, and should also be in a location where a lot of different services that are available in the community, can come together. While co-location of facilities and services is widely viewed as an important component of a community hub, in order to be successful a hub needs to be more than a cluster of services and buildings. The essence of a community hub is the concentration of activity that occurs and how the mix of those activities, is accessible to, and serves the needs of, a diverse range of community members.

In contemporary urban design and community planning, community hub is always being a used term. It also can mean different things in dissimilar contexts and there is no widely accepted definition. Rossiter (2007) suggests in examining the derivation of the term, 'community' implies something that is publicly owned and designed and used to address the needs of a local population. 'Hub' implies a central position where things come together (Rossiter, 2007). In short, a community hub can be defined as *a conveniently located public place that is recognized and valued in the local community as a gathering place for people and an access point for a wide range of community activities, programs, services and events* (Rossiter, 2007). Most community hubs needs a physical space like a room or buildings to support activities that can be accessed freely. It is interesting, when it comes about buildings; the perceptions of buildings are normally structured from part of a portfolio and are evaluated in terms of their asset value. The tools and metrics for considering the use value of buildings are less well understood and developed. However, the value added to the business, and the role of construction in this respect, has been the subject of considerable recent interest in the United Kingdom (Alexander, 2008). This is why community hubs are often defined in construction to be as community facilities rationally used by local communities for leisure and social purposes, including community centres and meeting places, community halls, community learning centres, adventure play centres and leisure centres (SPM, 2007). They always be seen as having the following physical attributes: 1) Physically and socially accessible; 2) Interactive, stimulating, vibrant; 3) A mix of consistency and variety; 4) A living part of the community; 5) Well regarded by the community; 6) Welcoming and inclusive, and; 7) A safe place for all. (Farrell, Tayler et al., 2007).

Community hubs, however, should bring a different meaning from different bases and principles. Community facilities that include a good mix of uses will demonstrate the challenges involved in creating a hub taking on board what is required for communities in deprived areas and attempting to create links between existing facilities. While a mix of use is good, the relationship between the facilities must also be strong. Improving the integration of use on the site is one of the best options to be considered because it has the potential of creating a link with different partners including those

who are considered to be traditionally within the community zone. Improving the integration of use is a need to be confirmed with discussions with key partners like local authorities or other providers. These key partners are also important in order for a community hub to improve a range of community support services and facilities. Community hub is also a place that encourage social gathering and is design to provide spaces for communities to assemble and meet together in both planned and incidental ways.

According to Farrell (2007), most of the concepts applied in most places have a policy framework which defines three broad types of community hubs:

- **Community gathering places** – sites for smaller neighbourhood based meetings that are also venues for recreation, sports, leisure, social and cultural activities and sites providing community group office space, e.g. community centres, sporting clubs, galleries, theatres, other club rooms, access to community information, adventure playgrounds, community gardens, etc.
- **Council and community service delivery hubs** – community locations for provision of Council and other services, e.g. maternal and child healthcare, meals and other social support programmes, child care centres, libraries, kindergartens, referral and support services, etc.,
- **Civic hubs** – sites for the delivery of civic and governance activities, i.e. town halls, information and administration services, large public meeting spaces, etc.

(Farrell et al., 2007).

In addition, Rossiter (2007) again recommended that accessibility has a strong element of a community hub and the hub's location in relation to activity centers and public transport is another key defining feature. Rossiter (2007) further explained that accessibility has an affordability component and to be truly accessible the activities, programs, services and events conducted from a hub must be affordable to the local community and the key target groups within it

7. Case studies

A wide range of case studies has shown the significant impact of relationships between teachers, pupils, parents and the wider community. Table 1.0 summarizes most of the recent case studies referred to by the Department for Children, Schools and Family.

Table 1.0: Case Studies Project on Social Cohesion and School. Source <http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/Communitycohesion>. (2008)

	Case studies	Summary
1	<i>School Linking: Cultural Detectives</i>	<i>Two UK schools with different locations and compositions linked and undertook a 'cultural detectives' project to look at their historical and geographical connections.</i>
2	<i>Ilderton Primary School</i>	<i>The aim of the project was to ensure communications between the elderly people of the housing unit and primary school children, to break down stereotypes and promote dialogue.</i>
3	<i>Making a Difference: Parental support and personalized learning</i>	<i>The project aimed to engage underachieving Foundation Stage 2 children and their parents living in deprived areas, to enable them to participate in learning. The aim was to remove barriers to access and participation.</i>
4	<i>St George's CofE</i>	<i>The aim of this intergeneration project was for children to interview their parents/grandparents to ascertain their origins. A 'Heritage Book' was developed which celebrates the differences and similarities within the school and local community.</i>
5	<i>Forest Community Primary School</i>	<i>The project used family history and movement to promote and celebrate diversity within the school. The community with English as an additional language (EAL) was welcomed and made to feel part of the wider community.</i>
6	<i>8 till Late Mentoring Project</i>	<i>The aim of the project is to build resilience around young people to prevent them from joining gangs and being involved in gun crime.</i>
7	<i>Durham County Council</i>	<i>This project uses theatre, arts and storytelling to promote good relations between different groups and challenge racist behaviour.</i>
8	<i>Seahouses Middle School</i>	<i>The aim is to provide community-based initiatives to ensure that pupils, in all four year groups, and their parents participate in activities which develop their social skills.</i>
9	<i>Yeading Junior</i>	<i>Yeading Junior School has put together a core team who are keys to raising ethnic minority achievement (EMA) through a matrix of outreach and support services.</i>

Schools provide community cohesion by the working together of teachers, pupils, parents and the wider community; this same community cohesion should be extended to the local community who live in the wider surrounding area.

8. The role of a school in providing community hub facilities

In this paper, the role of schools as community hubs can be seen to provide local communities with the opportunities to bring together a dynamic network of associations that bind individuals, families, institutions, and organizations into a web of interconnections and interaction within the diversity of a neighbourhood. There are various places and types of community facilities that can be used as a community hub by local communities in terms of health, education, leisure and social purposes,

including community centres and meeting places, community halls, community learning centres, adventure play centres and leisure centres (SPM, 2007). Schools, however, as one of community facility resource, need to be considered also as a place which can contribute a similar impact as that of other community facilities and which can also promote social cohesion as on-going process (Adelman and Taylor, 1996). The school's role as a community hub which will promote social cohesion, may not allow, in the beginning, each community sufficient ideas to use them as their personal functional unit but should – in time - give opportunities to open more social interaction with each other across differences in ethnics and personal needs. Schools will add value to the relationships within existing social cohesion purposes. Schools, therefore, have a potential role as a community hub and can give an impact on social networking in the wider community from the same neighbourhood (Dryfoos, 1999). The practical challenges will be how a school, as a community hub, will embrace the concept of providing a 'one stop shop' in terms of health, education, well-being and social services as part of the whole community concept (Smith, 2008) when at the same time, schools need to provide a range of services and activities within and beyond the school day. Importantly, the school's role as a community hub must run in parallel with working towards a society in which there is a common vision and a 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 which is strong and in which positive relationships exist and continue to be developed in the workplace, in schools and in the wider community.

9. Conclusion and recommendation

The government has been focused and taken responsibilities to resolve on social development issues in Sustainable Community agendas in most deprived neighbourhood areas in the country such as social cohesion. Promoting social cohesion could not easily be achieved totally if the actions undertaken are not perceived and accepted by the community. From the findings, this paper has strongly recommended further thinking is required on the critical perceptions by the local community; that the community should see a school's role in its wider context and by relationship in creating sustainable communities. It is strongly suggested that there is a need to understand the school's role as a community hub in order to assist in promoting sustainable community agendas. There will be different challenges in the future for the management of community facilities. There will be many challenges ahead, and management skills will be needed to work with different kinds of people in communities which can be very demanding. A school is a community resource and how it can be extended to make the most of those resources will depend on the need from the community itself and how they wish to become cohesive.

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