

Urban education: challenges and possibilities

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Since I decided that my inaugural lecture would be on the theme of ‘urban education, a number of colleagues have, not unreasonably, asked me to define what I mean by ‘urban’. More particularly, they have asked whether ‘urban’ is simply a euphemism for ‘disadvantaged’ and, if so, why I do not simply come clean and say what I mean. Certainly, like many researchers taking a social justice perspective on the education system, the notion – more correctly notions – of disadvantage are of considerable interest to me. However, although ‘urban’ and ‘disadvantaged’ overlap in very important ways, I do not regard them as entirely synonymous. Moreover, I tend to agree with Balfanz (2000) that even if our focus is on educational disadvantage, we can only understand that phenomenon fully if we pay due attention to the fact that education happens in a particular ‘place’ – schools and families nested within communities and areas – and at a particular ‘time’ – constituted by the distinctive histories of those places.

It seems to me that, just now, this is a very crucial time and our towns and cities are very particular places for us to be seeking to understand and – just as important – to help develop a more just education system.

Defining the urban in ‘urban education’

There are many ways of differentiating urban from non-urban other than in terms of disadvantage. We can do so, for instance in terms of geography, economics, ethnicities, cultures, or in relation to areas of public policy such as housing, transport, health or labour market policy. Recent work in the field of urban studies counsels us against making simple uni-dimensional distinctions (Martin et al., 2003) and it seems to me that a mature study of urban education would need to take account of some of the powerful analyses of complexity that are now emerging. At this point, however, our field is far from mature and my starting point for analysis is therefore both simple and educationally-focused. It is in terms of concentration: in urban as opposed to non-urban settings large numbers of adults and children present themselves for, or are required to participate in, education within a relatively small spatial area. As a result, a multiplicity of educational organisations and institutions is packed closely together.

The consequences of concentration in this sense are by no means entirely negative. It brings with it additional resources – networks of professionals and professional support, the capacity to attract area-based initiatives, a readily accessible range of learning locations and learning opportunities. However, the concentration of people and educational activity is also located in the context of other sorts of concentration. Population density brings with it well-developed and complex transport networks, which means that learners can access a range of institutions from their home bases. They can, for instance, attend a school which is not their ‘local’ school yet is nearby. They will almost certainly have a choice of post-16 providers within easy reach. They may well have a choice of higher education institutions which they can attend without leaving home.

There are similar concentrations of employment and other post-educational opportunities into which the education system will feed – whether or not at particular times the number and pattern of opportunities matches the number and aspirations of employment seekers. In some places, education may lead on to, say, some heavy industrial jobs which have been traditional in the area. But there will also be a wide

range of types of employment available within a short bus or car ride – not to mention alternatives to unemployment such as training, or participating in the grey economy, unemployment or crime.

Most strikingly, from an educational perspective, the urban makes possible the concentration of people (and hence actual or potential learners) with similar characteristics and/or living in similar circumstances. These concentrations may share ethnicity or faith or more-or-less clearly defined culture, or may display similar patterns of advantage and disadvantage. We sometimes call them ‘communities’ and some – but by no means all - do indeed relate to each other in a particular way which merits this term. Sometimes these concentrations occur from choice, though frequently the choices people make are significantly constrained by the direct and indirect impacts of public policy. One thinks for instance of the impact of housing policy on the development of ethnic communities in many towns and cities of the north, of the concentrations of the middle classes in green-field housing developments, of the residualised working class communities stranded by the decline of heavy industry in particular belts and areas of our conurbations.

Three implications

What does all of this mean for education in urban contexts? It seems to me that the major implications are threefold. First, there is an ‘internal’ implication for educational organisations and institutions, most dramatically apparent in schools but not restricted to them. These institutions are themselves likely to draw their learners from areas with concentrations of this or that ‘community’. The concentration may be of learners with all sorts of advantages. It may be of learners from two or three groups whose characteristics, aspirations and approach to education are significantly different, presenting a major challenge of bringing coherence out of diversity. Frequently, however, the concentration is of groups whose characteristics and situations place them at a disadvantage in educational terms. We have to be careful not to assume that disadvantage concentrates in urban settings alone, nor that the distribution of various indicators of disadvantage within those settings is anything less than complex (Midgley et al., 2003). Nonetheless, we know that factors such as level of parental education, family income and ethnicity are strong predictors of how children will do in school and that some schools educate populations that are overwhelmingly drawn from the poorest, least well-educated families and/or from the lowest performing ethnic groups. We know, moreover, that these continue to be intractable problems for our education system (Bell, 2003).

For many years, we were told by both researchers and policy-makers that such concentration factors were irrelevant to how well learners learned and therefore to how well the institution performed (see, for instance, Ofsted, 1996, Woodhead, 1996). Low attainment, we were assured, was a passing phenomenon attributable to the pathologies in our education system which could be remedied if only leadership was sufficiently strong, teachers were sufficiently skilled and the right techniques were deployed (Reynolds & Farrell, 1996). This simplistic view is now giving way to a more complex and, I would argue, sophisticated understanding. Institutional ‘effectiveness’ does make a difference - and an important one at that – but it is also one that is limited. Best estimates are that the quality of a school, for instance, accounts at most for only a limited amount of the variance in outcomes for students

(Mortimore & Whitty, 2000). Moreover, we are beginning to learn – or, more correctly, to have our suspicions confirmed by research – that *concentrations* of educational disadvantage within a school create problems of their own, over and above the problems that might be predicted by aggregating the disadvantages of individual students. The processes of teaching, learning and relating within the school change as levels of disadvantage rise, to the point where deploying ‘effective teaching’ or ‘effective leadership’ becomes difficult or fails to make the differences for which we hope (Levacic & Woods, 2002, Thrupp, 1998, 1999, Woods & Levacic, 2002).

The second implication is that educational institutions in an urban context constitute a system in the technical sense of the word. By this I mean that changes in one component of the system – one institution – have direct or indirect impacts on all other parts of the system. This is particularly evident in the impacts of the ‘marketisation’ of the education system from the late 1980s onwards, with its emphasis on consumer ‘choice’ and the incentivisation of educational institutions to compete against each other for ‘custom’ in a quasi-market place. Although the impacts of these policies of the socio-economic stratification of institutions remain hotly disputed (Gorard, 2000), the impacts on families, on organisational behaviour and on the fates of individual institutions do not (Ball, 1993, Ball et al., 1996, Gewirtz et al., 1995, Reay & Ball, 1997, 1998). We know that families and students make choices and that the extent to which those choices are made between real alternatives varies significantly. We know that schools in particular behave in ways which are designed to attract families and students with particular characteristics, even if this means further disadvantaging their least advantaged students (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). And we know that in the competition which ensues, there are institutional winners and losers, schools which expand and schools which contract, schools which attract an aspirational population and schools which are left with only the most disadvantaged, schools which ‘fail’ and schools which are ‘turned around’.

We also know that, as the educational institutions which serve an area go into decline, they risk contributing to the decline of the area itself (Power & Mumford, 1999) – and this brings us to the third implication of concentration for urban education. If educational institutions are part of their own system, they are also part of a wider social system which is equally interactive. Whatever happens out in the communities they serve impacts on those institutions. This may well be institutionally positive. Regeneration schemes or new build may well bring a sudden concentration of advantaged and aspirational families into the area. Inward investment may bring new employment opportunities, new links between business and education and new hope amongst learners. Equally, the effects can be devastatingly negative, creating what the government currently calls ‘schools in challenging circumstances’, or, worse still, ‘schools in extremely challenging circumstances’ (Reynolds et al., no date). Disinvestment, neighbourhood decline, population mobility may all impact on who attends particular institutions, what they can do or hope to do and the sorts of problems with which the institution has to contend. Community disengagement from learning may become student disengagement. Street crime, drug misuse, family turbulence, cultures of violence and abuse may all wash back into the school or college .

By the same token, of course, what the educational institution does impacts on the communities it serves. It may offer a pathway out of disadvantage for some learners. It may itself attract new residents or inward investment. It may – as some of the recent work on full service and extended schools is beginning to indicate – offer new resources to the community, link people to new resources and opportunities or even begin to change deeply ingrained attitudes (Crowther et al., 2003, Dyson et al., 2002).

These three implications, it seems to me, do not make education different in kind from education elsewhere. Neither do they necessarily make it harder to do – since doing education well is difficult in any context. However, they do mean that urban education is highly context-dependent, that it is capable of spectacular and large-scale failures and that its own success or failure has major implications for the communities it serves. If, therefore, urban education is not a problem per se, there are undoubtedly significant problems *in* urban education.

Policy and theory in urban education task

The urban education task, as I see it, is to find ways of addressing these problems whilst at the same time capitalising on the resources which the urban context makes available and further enhancing what is already good in that context. These challenges have, of course, long been recognised. As I was preparing this lecture, I received a generous letter from Professor Gerald Grace at the London Institute reminding me that he had set up the first master's course in 'urban education' at King's College London as long ago as 1976. There was, of course, something of a heyday in responding to these issues in the 1970s when questions of educational disadvantage were taken seriously and an assumption was made that grand policy could somehow resolve these grand problems. One of the things we certainly need to do now is to reconnect ourselves to the thinking that took place then and to learn what we can from the last serious attempt to tackle the big questions in urban education.

In the intervening years, however, although the big questions have tended to be ignored for long periods of time, they have not gone away. As HMCI Bell noted recently, despite the large number of educational initiatives that have been targeted or have otherwise impacted on urban schools, and despite the successes that many of these initiatives have enjoyed, there remains a significant number of such schools which continue to struggle (Bell, 2003). Indeed, we can widen the definition of the problem, for these schools continue to struggle in the context of an education system which remains incapable of reducing its long tail of low attainment and, indeed, in the context of a society where improvements in overall levels of well-being mask an increasing polarisation between those who are prospering and those who are not (Palmer et al., 2002).

In this situation, it seems to me that there are two particular contributions which we in the academy can make to the development of urban education. The first is carry out empirical work – by which I mean both research as usually understood and various related forms of support for the development of policy and practice – in order better to understand what happens 'on the ground'. The second is to contribute to the theoretical frameworks and understandings which underpin such work. I am very much of the view that neither repeated hopeful initiatives nor disengaged and critical analysis will, *of themselves* be adequate to meeting the challenges we face. What we

need is a study of urban education which is located in what is becoming known as 'Pasteur's quadrant' (Stokes, 1997) – that is, in the area where practical and theoretical concerns intersect.

Looked at from this perspective, I am not certain that policy is currently well served by the theoretical perspectives through which its multiplicity of initiatives are organised. The New Labour government has made it clear that it views issues of social advantage and disadvantage through the theoretical lens of 'social exclusion' and 'social inclusion'. This has long been explicit in the way in which it has conceptualised the wider social role of education (see, for instance, Blunkett, 1999, 2000). As the government and its advisers appear to understand it, 'inclusion' refers to a condition in society where all citizens feel themselves to be stakeholders and hence feel able to enjoy the benefits which stakeholding brings and to participate in shared social and political processes. Exclusion, on the other hand is about the loss of this sense of stakeholding, the denial of common benefits and non-participation in shared processes (see, for instance, Giddens, 1998).

Both in this form and in its more scholarly versions, the inclusion/exclusion discourse offers a way of escaping more uni-dimensional analyses of disadvantage which focus on poverty and income inequality as the principal issues to be addressed (Cousins, 1998, Robinson & Oppenheim, 1998, Social Exclusion Unit, 2001, Young, 1999). In an urban context particularly, a multi-dimensional analysis has considerable advantages in understanding complex patterns of relative advantage and disadvantage that are cross-cut by cultural, ethnic, spatial, gender and other factors. However, as the social in/exclusion analysis has been acted out, it has proved to have some unfortunate consequences. In the sphere of education, these have taken what I think of as the 'single lever' approach to policy.

The very multidimensionality of the in/exclusion framework seems to have led to the view that every problem has its own solution, quite separate from the solutions that are needed for other, apparently related problems. This begins with the decidedly suspect view (Robinson, 1997, Wolf, 2002) that education has a single, overriding purpose, which is to contribute to national economic development and that it can achieve this by driving 'standards' ever higher. When groups and individuals then fail to respond to this standards agenda, they begin to be subjected to a multiplicity of initiatives, each designed to address one or other cause of their 'exclusion'. Hence, we have Sure Start for dysfunctional families, Learning Support Units for disruptive adolescents, Education Action Zones for schools in low-attaining areas, Behaviour Improvement Programmes for high street-crime areas – the list goes on. Needless to say, in some places these initiatives intersect in ways that practitioners find bewildering. However, at no point does the government choose to take an overview of the situation and construct some more robust theoretical account which would order exclusionary factors and inclusive processes hierarchically so that some more fundamental causes could be identified and some prioritisation of response be made possible (Crowther et al., 2003).

This approach is reflected in the sort of empirical research which the government has favoured. Despite a growing acknowledgement of the impact of context on educational institutions, the government has remained wedded to research in the fields of institutional effectiveness and improvement which emphasises the role of

leadership, organisation and (latterly) teaching technique in overcoming educational problems (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). Belatedly, by its own admission (Reynolds et al., no date) this field is itself beginning to recognise the impact of context, but its concerns continue to be overwhelmingly with 'attainment' and its prescriptions continue to be in terms of the internal processes within educational institutions (see, for a recent example, Harris et al., 2003). In other words, despite repeated government injunctions to 'join up' responses to social exclusion, this body of research remains resolutely un-joined-up with other perspectives on the challenges and possibilities within urban contexts.

It seems to me that one of the urgent tasks of a study of urban education is to go beyond these rather thin accounts. Although I do not believe we are yet in a position to do this authoritatively, I do wish to suggest two alternative theoretical frameworks which are, at least, indicative of possible lines of exploration. These are around notions of risk and resilience on the one hand and of capital on the other.

Alternative theorisations

The concepts of risk and resilience are simple, yet very powerful. They are familiar to us in the contexts of health and social care and are also widely used in these and in educational contexts in the USA, parts of Europe and elsewhere (Franklin, 2000, OECD, 1995, 1996, 1998). Strangely, however, they are largely missing from educational discourse in this country. They centre around the idea that, in regard to many aspects of well-being, the extent to which people are likely to have better or poorer outcomes can be calculated in terms of factors in their environments. Factors which tend to be associated with poorer outcomes are 'risk factors'. Hence, we know, for instance, that childhood poverty is a major risk factor for educational low achievement and for all the later life-problems which ensue therefrom (Ennals, 2003). This does not mean, of course, that we know with any certainty *how* poverty impacts on achievement, nor that we can predict with certainty how any particular *individual* living in poverty will do educationally. Indeed, some such individuals do rather well despite the risk to which they are subject and this capacity to do well is usually labelled 'resilience'. Moreover, we know that the presence of some factors in the environment of individuals – the presence of supportive adults, for instance, or of good quality schools - actually seem to reduce the impact of educational risk. Such factors are often labelled 'protective factors'.

The power of this conceptual framework has already been amply demonstrated in other, related fields (see, for instance, contributors to Luthar, 2003). Its significance from the point of view of urban education is this:

- It conceptualises the lives of learners as sites where risk factors operate and interact, rather than as bundles of deficits and needs. It invites us to consider how risks can be reduced or how their effects can be ameliorated rather than how we can change and improve the individuals who are subject to those risks.
- Essentially risk is a statistical concept and as such does not offer any explanations of the associations it identifies. The framework therefore begs the question as to how risk factors operate and in so doing leads towards potential interventions. For instance, knowing that certain ethnicities are associated with poor outcomes tells us nothing about why this should be the case and invites us productively to consider the possibilities of cultural and linguistic

mismatches between the education system and particular groups or, indeed, of institutional racism within the education system and beyond.

- Although statistical analyses of risk cannot fully explain process, they can and do offer sophisticated models of how different risk factors interact with each other both at particular points in time and over the life course (Schoon & Bynner, 2003). In so doing, they develop hierarchical models which offer some means of prioritisation for actions intended to address risk. They thus free us from the constant pursuit of multiple, unprioritised interventions.
- The notions of ‘resilience’ and ‘protection’ lead us away from a preoccupation with what is ‘wrong’ in people’s lives towards a concern with the positives in those lives which can be established or built upon. They encourage us to look equally at children who do well and at those who do badly. Indeed, some American work in this area talks about placing children ‘at promise’ and about ‘talent development’ as the principal aim of urban education (Boykin, 2000, Franklin, 2000). This approach seems to me particularly important if we are not simply to pathologise urban contexts and the people who live within them.

The second set of concepts I wish to explore are around notions of ‘capital’. Again, we are all familiar with the economic concept of capital and with marxian analyses which explain a wide range of social structures and processes in terms of the power bestowed by the possession of capital in this sense. However, for a number of years now, work has been proceeding to explore the many ‘forms of capital’ (Bourdieu, 1986) which operate and are accessed in ways that might be quite different from those which apply to economic capital. Three of these are particularly important from the point of view of urban education.

The first is the notion of ‘human capital’ understood as the set of skills, knowledge and capacities which individuals embody. This too is a familiar concept, given that it drives much of the current government’s economic, labour market and hence education policy. As we saw above, the policy assumption is that improving the human capital available in the labour market by driving up educational ‘standards’ will in turn drive economic development. Whether this is true or not, this is a rather impoverished notion of human capital. A broader view might also emphasise the personal qualities, the different kinds of ‘intelligence’ (Gardner, 1993), the sense of self as a learner and, more generally, as a purposeful human being that are more important to well-being and may even be more important to economic development. The evidence from some recent work in which I have been involved is that this broader view already informs much of what educators do, especially where the standards agenda sits uneasily on learners (Ainscow et al., 2003). However, much could be gained by making it more explicit and exploring its implications more fully.

The second sort of capital is ‘cultural’ capital. The idea here is that individuals do not exist as isolated bundles of skills and knowledge, but are located within and draw upon the cultures which characterise their society or the particular social groups to which they belong. This notion invites us to learn more about these cultures and, moreover, about the culture of which the education system is a part and into which we expect to induct learners. The potential of this approach has already become clear in the education of learners from minority ethnic groups. Whilst educational institutions may be far from perfect, there is now a much better understanding than in the past of the cultural mismatches and misunderstandings that can occur, and of the efforts that

institutions need to make to value and build upon learners' cultures. However, if we consider culture more broadly and we think in terms, say, of the cultures that may characterise economically or age stratified groups, our thinking is much less advanced. Indeed, there is a real sense in which these other cultures are viewed solely in terms of their deficit relationship to a dominant middle class culture. As one researcher puts it, the education system is essentially in the business of 'cloning the Blairs' (Gewirtz, 2001). The potential of a genuinely multi-cultural approach to education is, therefore, almost totally unexploited.

The final form of capital is 'social capital' (Coleman, 1988, Gamarnikow & Green, 1999, Israel et al., 2001, Putnam, 2000). The assumption here is that individuals exist within networks of other individuals and groups and that the nature and extent of these networks shape what an individual is or is not able to achieve. Such networks develop their own norms and practices. They bond some people together and exclude others. Above all, they give access to the resources of support, information, know-how and even material resources that their members control. An increasingly popular explanation for why some people do less well than others is that their social capital in this sense is limited or skewed in some way and therefore the options which open up to them are reduced.

The implication is that the education system needs explicitly to develop learners' social capital. Giving young people access to learning mentors, or to supportive adults other than teachers would be good examples of this. However, the corollary is that we need to know more than we already do about the social capital to which learners already have access. What are their networks? What resources do they or do they not draw down from these networks? Are they as impoverished as we believe or, particularly in urban contexts, have we simply failed to understand the richness and complexity with which we are faced.

These notions of capital are by no means the only ones we might bring to bear on issues in urban contexts. Recently, for instance, David Hargreaves has tried to conceptualise the task facing the London Challenge in terms of mobilising not just social capital but also intellectual capital and organisational capital (Hargreaves, 2003). He has, moreover, stressed creativity as an essential component of intellectual capital in great cities. The point is that seeing urban education in terms of identifying and mobilising different forms of capital within learners and within their environments offers us powerful ways of thinking about our task.

From theory to practice

In no way do I wish to imply that there are not complexities and problematic aspects of the theoretical frameworks sketched out here, nor that other, equally powerful theories might not be needed, nor that these frameworks will lead unproblematically to effective action. I note, for instance, that in his own inaugural lecture on urban education in 1992, Gerald Grace (to whom I have already referred) argued for the need to engage both with the old sociological problem of structure and agency and with the more recent developments in the understanding of the political economy of urban schooling (Grace, 1994). I do not demur. We are not so rich in theoretical work in this field that we can afford to become territorial about our own favoured perspectives.

However, in order to remain firmly anchored in Pasteur's quadrant, I wish to conclude by outlining what some of the implications for policy and practice might be of adopting these new perspectives on the urban task. Above all, they would involve moving onto a more nourishing diet than the rather thin gruel of the standards agenda, school effectiveness research and 'initiativitis' that has begun to seem increasingly indigestible. We could set ourselves different – and broader – aims. Instead of focusing so exclusively on 'driving up attainment', we would explore ways in which urban education could build the resilience and develop the various forms of capital of its learners, reduce the risks to which they were subjected and embed protective factors in their environments. This would have major implications both for the internal workings and external interfaces of educational institutions.

Internally, they would need to adopt a more holistic and humanistic approach than is currently the case. This would in particular mean shifting the focus from deficit- and needs-oriented thinking towards a more positive search for the resources which learners bring with them from their families and communities. Notions of 'talent' and 'promise' would become more prominent. Educators would build rigorously and systematically on the positive and valuing attitude to learners which many of them bring instinctively to their work. The curriculum would be reviewed in relation to some notion of what it means to be an 'educated adult' in the contemporary context rather than simply in relation to rather outdated notions of subject disciplines or impoverished notions of 'practical relevance'.

Externally, educational institutions would play their role more fully in a wide range of strategies targeting urban problems and possibilities. They would work closely with other agencies and organisations – including community organisations – to pursue common aims. This in turn would mean that the structures of governance and accountability would change to reflect this broader role. At some point, it would become necessary to consider whether, for instance, the model of the detached school working in isolation to pursue purely (and narrowly) educational goals, with only tenuous forms of accountability to the communities it serves was any longer sustainable.

These are, it seems to me, not merely pipe dreams. I note, with interest, a new primary national strategy which, whilst holding fast to the main planks of the standards agenda, nonetheless hints at some rowing back from 'targetology' and talks in what have (tellingly) become quite surprising terms of 'enjoyment' as an aim of primary education (DfES, 2003b). I note also, the emergence of 'full-service extended schools' which are intended to link more closely with their communities and host community agencies (DfES, 2002). Above all, I note a children's Green Paper which begins to promise the break-down of traditional agency boundaries with their separate funding streams, targets and views of what counts as the priorities for children's well-being (DfES, 2003a).

We have seen too many false dawns in recent years to be entirely convinced by these signs and signals. Nonetheless, it seems certain that the post-1997 model of education has run its course, particularly, as HMCI Bell has indicated, in urban contexts (Bell, 2003). It may be that a window of opportunity is now opening in which new models and new approaches will flourish. If this is indeed the case, then practitioners, policy-

makers and those of us who labour in Pasteur's quadrant need to find ways of working together – and quickly!

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