

New Community Schools and Inter-Agency Working: assessing the effectiveness of social justice initiatives

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ABSTRACT This paper considers the meaning of social justice as reflected by New Communities Schools (NCS). It reviews the role of NCS in the modernisation of welfare, considers the criteria used to judge their effectiveness and assesses the outcomes of the NCS programme. Problems in assessing social justice outcomes are explored in terms of pilot or mainstream approaches; the focus on the most disadvantaged; local diversity versus over-arching approaches; soft or hard measures. It is concluded that there are major problems in addressing major problems of structural inequalities through pilot initiatives. However, although the NCS was not transformative it was sustaining for the schools that participated in it and led to modest improvements in the lives of staff, pupils and parents.

Introduction

In this paper we consider the way in which social justice has been understood in Scotland and reflected within one particular educational initiative, New Community Schools (NCS). The key elements and broad goals of the NCS programme are discussed. It is argued that NCS focused on the twin goals of raising attainment of the most disadvantaged and modernising the delivery of welfare through inter-agency working and active engagement of parents and children. These were very major objectives to achieve over a three-year time frame, and evidence drawn from national and local evaluations suggests somewhat ambiguous outcomes in both areas. The paper concludes by asking what lessons can be drawn from the NCS pilot that might be applied to future initiatives and evaluations.

Education and the Social Justice Agenda in Scotland

Over the past decade, there has been ongoing debate about the meaning of social justice and social inclusion. In 1994, prior to its first term of office, New Labour launched the *Report of the Commission on Social Justice*. The report emphasized the following key points:

- Social justice cannot be achieved through the social security system alone; employment, education and housing are at least as important as tax and benefit policy in promoting financial independence.
- The welfare state must be shaped by the changing nature of people's lives, rather than people's lives being changed to fit in with the changing nature of the welfare state; the

welfare state must be personalized and flexible, designed to promote individual choice and personal autonomy.

There are ongoing uncertainties within New Labour concerning the nature and extent of choice and autonomy, and the extent to which the realization of these principles is compatible with the maintenance of collective social welfare provision delivered by securely employed public sector workers. Such dilemmas are evident in the unfolding of the NCS pilot projects.

There is also ongoing uncertainty about the extent to which social justice involves equality of outcome or equality of opportunity. Driver and Martell (1998) argued that a key difference between Old and New Labour was the latter's belief in equality of outcome and the former's more moderate goal of achieving equality of opportunity. Analysis of policy statements produced by New Labour in Scotland suggests that the government is committed to the goal of equality of outcome, but that this is to be achieved through equalizing opportunities. A publication entitled *Everyone Matters: delivering social justice in Scotland* (Scottish Executive, 2002) states:

Social justice is about every one of us having the chances and opportunities that will allow us to make the most of our lives and to use our talents to the full . . . We want to stamp out inequalities—where you live should not determine your health, well-being and employment chances for your whole life. We want to close the opportunity gap between those who succeed in life and those who fall behind. (p. 1)

This clearly attempts to combine 'soft' and 'hard' approaches to equality. However, as Goodlad and Riddell (forthcoming) have argued, major questions need to be addressed. For example, if the equality of opportunity approach allows that some differences between groups may (legitimately) remain following efforts to equalize access to public services, then what scale of difference is socially acceptable? Similarly, if particular groups are found to persistently experience inequality, then should further efforts be made to improve outcomes for this group? Finally, what balance should be struck between promoting identity politics that celebrate difference, or should the focus be on redistribution policies, which emphasise equal outcomes as the goal? This is of course a major dilemma in relation to the state's response to the traveller community, where enforcing school attendance might improve children's educational outcomes, but threaten aspects of traveller culture.

In order to facilitate the measurement of progress towards social justice goals over time, the Scottish Executive produces an annual report which summarises data in relation to five groups: children, young people, families and working age people, older people and communities (Scottish Executive, 2003). In relation to children and young people, goals include closing the gap in performance of pupils, improving attendance and getting more 16- to 19-year-olds into education, training or employment. It is acknowledged that little progress has been made in relation to each of these goals since 1996. In relation to pupils not in employment, education or training (referred to as the NEET group), there is a marked association with poverty. In terms of Standard Grade achievement, the gap between poorest performing 20% of pupils and the performance of all pupils has widened.

The Scottish Executive has set itself the task of narrowing or eradicating social inequalities through a process which combines redistribution with the equalisation of opportunities. New Community Schools, along with other initiatives such as Sure Start and early intervention, are part of this strategy. However, NCS had an additional goal, which was to contribute to the modernizing government agenda which sets out a different relationship between public sector workers, including professionals, and the state.

New Community Schools and the Modernisation of Welfare

The NCS approach is very much part of New Labour's modernising agenda where accountability is to the fore, with the goal of delivering public services which meet the needs of the citizens rather than the convenience of public service providers (Riddell & Tett, 2001). Addressing the culture and power of professionals, which may be construed as inimical to the efficient delivery of public services, has been a recurring theme over the past two decades. The expansion of the welfare state after World War II produced a growing number of public sector professionals, who portrayed their role as working for the greater social good to deliver efficient public services (Cole & Furbey, 1994). McPherson and Raab (1988) argued that professional autonomy was greater in Scotland than in England because Scottish semi-independence rested on the autonomy of its professionals.

The position of professionals, parents and children in education is interactive, so the idea of radical change in the role of professionals is linked to changes in the position of parents and children. Vincent (2000) identified the following three positions which parents may adopt in relation to state education: partner/client, consumer or citizen. Most current education policies recognise that parents have a distinctive role to play in their children's education and many education policies today seek to develop partnerships. However, Vincent is critical of the notion of partnership since it implies an equal relationship, when in fact parents' relationship to education is structured by social class, gender and 'race'. She argues that partnership initiatives are unlikely to bring about radical social change because of the limited range of parents they attract and the difficulty of focusing on general rather than individualised issues. Mordaunt (2001) also casts doubt on the idea of equal partnerships between parents and professionals in the field of SEN, although she also notes that partnerships do not have to be equal to be effective.

The relative position of children with the educational power structures has arguably been the slowest to change. The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 placed a duty on all agencies to consult children and have regard to their wishes in relation to important life decisions. The document *For Scotland's Children* (Scottish Executive, 2001), which set out the Scottish Executive's plans for integrated children's services, referred to the cultural shift needed to incorporate a children's rights perspective into service delivery. However, schools have found it very difficult to engage with children as active agents rather than passive recipients of welfare. In the following section we briefly outline some key characteristics of NCS, in particular the way in which they were intended to promote the modernising schools and raising attainment agenda. We will then consider the criteria used to judge the effectiveness of the programme and the conclusions on outcomes to date.

New Community Schools: key characteristics

It has long been recognised that agencies must work in close cooperation if they wish to provide an effective seamless response to the needs of socially excluded communities (Dyson *et al.*, 1998; Webb & Vulliamy, 2001; Tett *et al.*, 2003). Furthermore it is recognised that schools on their own cannot solve the problems associated with social exclusion. The long-term objective is to develop ways of working 'which integrate programmes not just within Government, but at all levels of action right down to local neighbourhoods and communities' (Scottish Office, 1999b, p. 1). According to Semmens (2001), writing from an Australian perspective, placing the school at the centre of efforts to engage 'at risk' students is highly practical because 'schools are usually located in accessible places, and services can be delivered either at school or through school acting as the referral agency'.

In addition, the strength of this way of working is that no one agency is expected to deal with the complex range of difficulties such students face. In setting out its prospectus for NCS, the Scottish Office referred to the international evidence:

Initiatives and programmes such as High/Scope, Head Start and other learning programmes have shown that children's learning and development can be significantly improved through early support, family participation and encouragement for both child and parent. Greater parental involvement leads to higher expectations and better results. (Scottish Office, 1998, p. 1)

With these considerations in mind, the New Community Schools initiative was launched in 1998. The Phase 1 pilot programme included 37 projects, involving over 170 schools or institutions in 30 local authorities. Most projects involved clusters of schools, with funding in the form of a specific grant from the Scottish Office Excellence Fund to fund activities associated with the integration of services. However, the majority of funding was to be drawn from existing education, health and social work programmes. The majority of Phase 1 pilot projects commenced in April 1999 and ran until March 2002. A national evaluation of the Phase 1 pilot was commissioned from the London Institute of education in April 2000. More projects were introduced in Phases 2 and 3 in 2000 and 2001 and a programme of roll-out across all schools in Scotland began in 2002. By 2007, the Scottish Executive plans that the integrated community schools approach will have been rolled out to all schools in Scotland.

NCS were defined as having the following essential characteristics:

- A focus on the needs of all pupils at the school.
- Engagement with pupils.
- Engagement with wider community.
- Integrated provision of school education, social work and health education and promotion services.
- Integrated management.
- Arrangements for the delivery of these services according to a set of integrated objectives and measurable outcomes.
- Commitment and leadership.
- Multi-disciplinary training and staff development.
- (Scottish Office, 1998, pp. 7–8)

In addition to this, there were expectations that NCS would seek Health Promoting School Status would provide extended family childcare and engage with informal and formal adult learning. A key area was the introduction of Personal Learning Plans (PLP), in which each pupil would set their own learning targets, supported by the class teacher and parents. These PLPs would then become the mechanism for involving parents/carers in their child's learning (see Elliot *et al.*, 2003).

There was no overall 'model' of NCS promoted by the initial pilots based in each Scottish Local Authority. Some were based around a single school, others around a nursery and a few primary schools, whilst others were clustered around a secondary school and local feeder primaries. How NCS projects operated also differed greatly. Some local authorities chose to use NCS funding to restructure Children and Families Services whereas others used the funding to identify and deliver services to meet the essential characteristics of NCS and to meet their own priorities. This flexibility has been encouraged because approaches have been sought which were:

Radical and designed to secure a step change in the attainment of children. Key to this will be integrated working focussing on the needs of pupils at the school. Successful pilots will therefore be innovative; bringing together a number of services focused on the needs of the child and engaging with families. (Scottish Office, 1998, p. 1)

Whilst the Scottish Executive commissioned a national evaluation (Elliott *et al.*, 2003; Sammons *et al.*, 2004a, b), it was envisaged that local projects would carry out their own evaluations to reflect the achievements of their particular initiative. However, whilst welcoming the opportunity for local diversity, very few projects managed to carry out local evaluations, with the result that lessons from local experience were lost.

To summarise, the Scottish Office had a number of goals in mind for NCS. First, the programme was driven by the modernization of welfare agenda, based on the idea that professional boundaries should be broken down to provide flexible and user-focused services. Secondly, whilst raising the attainment of disadvantaged pupils was not flagged up initially as a major goal, a range of statements indicate that delivering effective inter-agency working and achieving the active engagement of children and parents would automatically result in improved levels of attainment. Other documents, such as the Scottish Executive's social justice publications, identified NCS as one of the principal means by which the Government was seeking to eradicate the achievement gap between the most and least deprived. From the start, therefore, it was evident that different aspects of the initiative were being foregrounded for different audiences.

Outcomes of the NCS Programme

In this section, outcomes of the NCS programme are considered under the following two main headings: (a) the modernization of welfare agenda; and (b) the social justice agenda. As noted above, these encapsulate the Scottish Executive's vision of what the NCS programme was intended to achieve. Data are drawn mainly from the national evaluation commissioned by the Scottish Executive (Elliott *et al.*, 2003; Sammons *et al.*, 2004a, b). The national evaluation drew on the following sources of evidence:

- Surveys to secondary, primary and nursery schools involved in NCS to provide indicators of NCS activities. The surveys were conducted at baseline (i.e., prior to NCS status 1998–1999), Year 1 (1999–2000) and Year 3 (2001–2002). A separate survey focusing on vulnerable groups of children was administered in Year 3.
- Six case studies of NCS pilot projects to represent different management and organizational models. The case studies involved visits, interviews, staff surveys and analysis of documentary evidence.
- Analysis of school-level statistical indicators obtained from the Scottish Executive Education Department covering levels of pupils attainment, attendance and staying on rates. The analysis focused on pupils with low attainment, because of the Scottish executive's interest in enhancing the performance of this group.

The Modernization of Welfare Agenda

Overall, it appeared that teachers welcomed the idea of multi-agency working, although secondary school teachers appeared to be somewhat sceptical about its efficacy. However, questions remained about the scale of change which had occurred. Social workers and health staff positions were usually advertised as short-term appointments and problems

occurred in recruiting suitable individuals. There was little evidence that teachers had changed their work culture and were learning from the culture of other professionals, and some evidence of culture clashes, for example, the more informal approach of community education and social work staff was questioned by some teachers (see Tett et al., 2003). Barriers to multi-professional working persisted, including those associated with different lines of management, holidays and the pressures of finding space to work in busy schools. The responsibility for smoothing the boundaries between professionals lay with the designated integration manager (IM). Case study evidence suggested that IMs encountered major difficulties in fulfilling their role.

In terms of achieving a more active relationship between pupils, parents and schools, results were also somewhat mixed. There was progress towards the establishment of pupil councils in many schools, but vulnerable young people still felt that their voices were not heard. Personal Learning Plans (PLPs) were envisaged as a major means by which children and parents would become much more engaged in the process of education. However, only half of the secondary schools reported some progress towards developing PLPs and substantial numbers of schools appeared to have encountered great difficulties in developing these documents. This finding is in line with research conducted on Individualised Educational Programmes (IEPs) for children with special educational needs (see Riddell, 2002, chapter 5). The research found wide variation in the extent to which IEPs were being used, with secondary schools slow to develop them. Subject teachers, parents and pupils were only marginally involved in their construction and review. Teachers' views were that there was simply not enough time in their working week for discussion of education targets with parents and pupils, and some felt the involvement of parents could be counter-productive if they pushed for unrealistic targets.

Case study evidence suggested that NCS had variable success in engaging families, and that contact might be limited to the social worker or home-skill link worker, rather than permeating relationships with all staff members. Community engagement was similarly limited and difficult; for example, few schools had routine mechanisms in place for involving communities on proposed developments. The most successful initiatives enabling children and parents to engage with the school on a different basis tended to take place outside the main school day. These included breakfast clubs, out of school activities and clubs, holiday activities and support for parents. These were often run by staff other than teachers, and did not involve major change in school culture and ethos, since they ran alongside, rather than permeating, mainstream school activities.

The Social Justice Agenda

As we have already noted, narrowing the attainment gap between more and less deprived pupils was not flagged up within the NCS prospectus as a major goal. However, other Scottish Executive publications, including those associated with the social justice agenda, saw this as the main purpose of the NCS programme. The national evaluation findings indicated that very little progress had been made in narrowing the gap between highest and lowest performing pupils. Primary schools in the NCS pilot generally showed reasonable progress in raising pupils' attainment in relation to the 5–14 programme over the three years of analysis, but so did all other schools in Scotland. Less improvement was evident in relation to Standard and Higher Grade outcomes, with NCS schools sometimes failing to keep up with improvements being made in more socially advantaged areas. There was some evidence of modest improvements in staying on rates and progression into further and higher education, though the trend was not statistically significant. There was also no improvement in attendance rates in the NCS over the three-year period.

In relation to supporting vulnerable children, there was again mixed evidence. Many schools were involved in a range of alternatives to exclusion initiatives and there was evidence that the additional resources associated with NCS was helpful in ensuring that the appropriate agencies were on hand to respond to crises, with the result that more vulnerable children were being retained in mainstream schools. However, there was no evidence of improved monitoring and recording of pupil progress and outcomes.

Overall, in relation to modernizing welfare and social justice goals, the evaluation did not produce evidence to demonstrate the success of the NCS programme. However, these findings raise a number of issues with regard to how social justice indicators should be assessed, which are outlined in the following section.

Problems in Assessing Social Justice Outcomes

Pilot or Mainstream Approaches

When it was elected to power in 1997, New Labour launched a very large number of pilot projects, with a view to learning lessons about what works before making major investment. From 1999, the Scottish Executive followed suit. Whilst these initiatives are capable of providing useful evidence on which to base future development, the danger is that they lead to short-term thinking, disappointment amongst service users and staff disaffection. Short-term pilots present particular problems for evaluation, since there is often a delay in getting the project underway, followed by an unfeasibly short timescale for the manifestation of outcomes. In the case of the NCS programme, improved pupil attainment might well have taken far longer than three years to become evident. On the other hand, if a project is billed as a pilot, then its lifespan has to be finite.

Focus on the Most Disadvantaged

In order to achieve social justice goals, it is necessary for resources to be focused on the most disadvantaged. A possible problem here is that layers of multiple disadvantage may mask the effect of positive interventions. For example, the positive impact of an educational innovation may be negated by the overwhelmingly negative effect of workless households. This does not, however, mean that the educational intervention was without value. Measuring small but significant trends is a major challenge for large-scale evaluations.

Local Diversity Versus Over-arching Approaches

In many of its innovative programmes, the Scottish Executive has been keen to allow local authorities and schools considerable autonomy in interpreting the initiative and tailoring it to local circumstances. This partly reflects the determination of local authorities to maintain their own priorities and resist the Scottish Executive's centralizing tendency. Whilst this approach may increase local ownership, the danger is that the core goals of the national initiative become dissipated as local actors interpret the programme differently. Comparisons across different authorities also become increasingly difficult. Local evaluations are intended to pick up on local variation, but, in the case of the NCS programme, few effective local evaluations took place.

Soft or Hard Measures

New Labour is committed to the idea that welfare programmes must be based on hard evidence so that investment takes place where there are grounds to believe that social justice

and quality of life goals will be achieved. In relation to those at the social margins, there are often fears that measuring hard indicators, such as educational attainment or employment outcomes, may fail to capture the progress which individuals may have made towards attaining the ultimate goal. Soft indicators, which usually consist of assessments of 'distance travelled', are often advocated as better measures of programme effects. The NCS programme combined the use of hard and soft indicators, and these sometimes produced very different findings. For example, teachers believed pupil attainment had improved, but this was not borne out by the quantitative data. There are clearly grounds for combining hard and soft indicators, with a view to triangulating findings from different sources.

Capturing the Achievements

Whatever measures are used it is important that we do not lose sight of the gains that have been made. These have included the extra resources that being part of the NCS had brought to schools that enabled ideas and activities otherwise out of reach to be attempted. These included increased levels of awareness of ICT and use of ICT by all staff and increased community access to school facilities. NCS has also made a difference to the way support services are delivered through offering and coordinating a range of supports both within and out-with school including breakfast clubs, out of school activities and clubs and support for parents. Jon Nixon has argued that:

The Breakfast and After School Club provision creates a 'border country' between private and public in which children are encouraged to develop their sense of responsibility for themselves and for others. (Nixon quoted in Baron, 2001, p. 102).

Schools in all sectors also reported increased involvement in education, health policy and social policy initiatives. The increase in all three types of initiatives suggests that joint ways of working, bringing together education, health and social work in the delivery of services, have substantially increased following the start of NCS work (Sammons et al., 2004a).

Conclusion

On the basis of the national evaluation conducted, it would have to be concluded that the NCS programme attained only a modest degree of success in terms of its twin goals of modernising schools and enhancing social justice in educational processes and outcomes. In many ways, the programme highlights many of the problems encountered in a range of initiatives introduced by the government to tackle social exclusion. The first term of the New Labour government saw a proliferation of pilot programmes, which were duly evaluated in line with the government's commitment to evidence-based policy. Subsequent actions did not always appear to reflect the evaluations findings. For example, the decision to roll out the NCS programme does not appear to be entirely justified on the basis of the national evaluation, which suggested only patchy success. However, the fact that a pilot programme has not been an unreserved success does not necessarily imply that it should be abandoned. It might be that the evaluation was over too short a time-scale, the investment was inadequate or problems arose with aspects of implementation.

The outcomes of the NCS programme also serves to remind us of the difficulty of using relatively small-scale interventions in public services to address major problems of structural inequalities. The Scottish Executive has committed itself to tackling social exclusion and continues to affirm that progress is being made. However, in relation to key indicators, it appears that progress is minimal. As noted earlier, major gaps in educational attainment exist

between the most disadvantaged 20% of pupils and others. Educational disadvantage is concentrated in particular geographical locations that map onto areas of long-term industrial decline (Glasgow, North Lanarkshire, North and East Ayrshire). Low educational attainment is later reflected in very low employment rates, for example, in Glasgow about a fifth of the working age population is economically inactive, the majority claiming incapacity benefits (Riddell & Banks, forthcoming). Tackling social disengagement on this scale clearly calls for radical solutions. However, a common pattern in Scottish education is to pilot initiatives in areas of social disadvantage (e.g., the early intervention programme) and subsequently roll the programme out to all areas, thus diminishing any positive advantage which might have been gained by the most disadvantaged area.

Some commentators cast doubts on the likely success of the NCS pilot from the start. Baron (2001), for example, argued that the full service schooling idea had been imported from the US with insufficient understanding of the factors which made it work well in one geographical location, but were not reproducible in Scotland. The absence of a strong welfare state in the US made the development of services in one location an attractive and unusual possibility. In Scotland, the problem has not been an absence of welfare, but the social disengagement of large sections of the community and the rejection of services such as education. Having acknowledged the problems, however, the indications of progress that also emerged from the evaluation deserve to be recognised. Even if a given initiative proves relatively powerless to bring about major social change, this does not mean that its contribution is worthless. In this case there were a number of achievements but they were not transformative in the sense that social exclusion was tackled or social justice enhanced. Nevertheless they were sustaining for the schools that participated in that they were able to implement a number of initiatives that led to modest improvements in the lives of staff, pupils and parents. These kinds of initiatives do not have same visible impact that a measurable increase in attainment might have but nonetheless they make it possible for small-scale changes to happen. The NCS funding and philosophy appears to have at least supported the combination and integration of different initiatives in health and social policy and thus acted as a catalyst to promote change more effectively.

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