

Rethinking school community – Insights from the New School

Paper presented at the UKFIET Conference 2005 on Education and Development
Oxford University, Oxford
13-14 September 2005

Scherto Gill
Research Fellow
Guerrand-Hermes Foundation
Email: scherto@ghfp.org

ABSTRACT

The concept of schools as learning communities has been used widely in many educational settings, and meant very different things depending on the specific contexts. These may include extending schools educational practice into the community; involving parents and other members of community in the school's educational process, or allowing learning to take place simultaneously amongst all; children, staff, parents, and others.

This paper focuses on the notion of school community as developed by Michael Fielding (2000a, 2000b), central to which is a set of reciprocal human relations. By analysing the experience of the New School, an urban small community-based school that sees itself as a 'community of learners', this paper sets out to explore what Fielding refers to as an emancipatory and inclusive notion of community. It also investigates what characterises and constitutes of school community, and how it impacts the learning of all its members. It argues that a school community is not fixed or end product, it is in constant renewal and transformation. It is an ongoing and evolving process driven by learning, which aims at personal growth and development.

1. THE CONCEPT – A FEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE SCHOOL AS A LEARNING COMMUNITY

The concept of schools as learning communities has been used widely in many educational settings, and meant very different things depending on the specific contexts. These may include extending schools educational practice into the community; involving parents and other members of community in the school's educational process, or allowing learning to take place simultaneously amongst all; children, staff, parents, and others. To explore the characteristics of schools as learning communities and their impact on learning, it is fundamental to first understand what community is and constitutes of.

Smith (2001 online) uses this quote to remind us that community is to do with human relations:

the use of the term community has remained to some extent associated with the hope and the wish of reviving once more the closer, warmer, more harmonious type of bonds between people vaguely attributed to past ages (Hoggett 1997: 5).

This view echoes Fielding's articulation of Scottish philosopher John Macmurray's view on community:

At root Macmurray's account of community is coterminous with his account of what it is to be and become human. In providing an account of the one you must

inevitably be providing an account of the other because our being as persons is essentially mutual (Fielding 2000b:398).

Based on his articulation and interpretation of Macmurray's account of community, Fielding reflects on the insights as follows: (1) 'community consists in certain kinds of relations between human beings, relations in which we encounter each other in both our vulnerability and our creative capacity as persons' (2000b:400); (2) it encompasses two fundamental principles of freedom and equality, which are the conditions for a community to be emancipatory and inclusive.

Fielding summarises that community is essential for our development as persons. He concludes:

community is not fundamentally about place, time, memory, or even the belonging or significance found in close relationships. Community is rather the reciprocal experience people have as persons in certain kinds of relationships; it is an experience of being that is alive in its mutuality and vibrant in its sense of possibility. Community thus turns out to be adjectival, not substantival; it is not a group of people, nor is it the mere fact of a relationship; rather it is the shared mutuality of experience that is constitutive of it. Community is a way of being, not a thing. Community is a process in which human beings regard each other in a certain way (love, care, concern for the other) and in which they relate to each other and act together in mutuality as persons, not as role occupants. Further more, the mutuality is informed by the values of freedom (freedom to be and become yourself) and equality (equal worth) which condition each other reciprocally (Fielding 2001:401)

Fielding's perception that community is 'a way of being and not a thing' has provided a good basis for re-conceptualising schools as learning communities, especially to explore those qualities that confront commonsense understandings of the concept.

The notion of learning through engaging in a community has recently been developed by a number of authors, including schools as learning communities (Senge 1990, Clark 1996, Sergiovanni 1994) and communities of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991 and Wenger 1998). Fielding's notion of schools as person-centred communities takes the perception even further. These diverse but inter-related perspectives suggest that the concept of community is significant in transforming education.

Schools as learning communities are referred to by Peter Senge as

where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together. (Senge 1990: 3)

Senge lays emphasis on developing the capacity of the school learning community as a whole and on the meaningfulness of individuals' experience and a shared vision through dialogue and reflection (also see Boud et al. 1985). Despite the critiques from Fielding (2001) about Senge's lack of cohesive philosophical underpinning of the concept of a community, I still think it an appealing aspect to explore in terms of Senge's conception of learning community as the process of human development and personal transformation. That is also to say that

family interactions and adult-child relationships within the learning community are vital to individual members' development as human beings.

Sergiovanni (1994) expresses a sense of urgency in the loss of community in contemporary culture. He suggests that schools may help create authentic community where the relationships between all members reflect those found in families, neighbourhoods and other social organisations. He highlights shared norms, commitment, purpose, values, professional socialisation and collegiality, and inter-dependence as defining characteristics of schools as communities. He writes:

In communities . . . the connection of people to purposes and the connections among people are not based on contracts but on commitments. Communities are socially organised around relationships and the felt interdependence that nurture them. . . . this social contract bonds people together in special ways and binds them to concepts, images and values that comprise a shared idea structure. This bonding and binding are the defining characteristics of schools as communities. Communities are defined by their centres of values, sentiments and beliefs that provide the needed conditions for creating a sense of *we* from a collection of *Is*. . . (Sergiovanni 1994:217)

Inclusiveness, meaningfulness and democracy are the features of Sergiovanni's conception as the structure and framework of the school as a community. Sergiovanni adds that the key is a shared leadership which defines a set of shared beliefs and roles and statuses of individuals within the school. Respect and trust for each individual's competence and potential for making a contribution for the well being of the community is central to his argument that everyone is empowered to take responsibility in a learning community. Hord (1998) also emphasises the importance of shared leadership. She reports that there are major dimensions of the professional learning community include supportive and shared leadership, collective learning and application of learning, shared values and vision, and shared personal practices.

Nel Noddings links care closely with leadership. She points out that caring should be the foundation of any ethical decision making (Noddings 1984). Her argument starts from the assumption that all human beings want to be cared for and caring is the basic in human life (Noddings 2001). Education, which she defines as 'a constellation of encounters, both planned and unplanned, that promote growth through the acquisition of knowledge, skills, understanding and appreciation' (Noddings 2002: 283 quoted in Smith 2004), is seen as being central to fostering care as a fundamental element to human relations. This leads to Noddings' view of home being the primary educator for children and its implication that core elements from home life, such as material resources and attentive love, must be included in school life and curriculum. She concludes that 'schools should, as far as possible, use the sort of methods found in best homes to educate' (Noddings 2002: 289).

From the perspective of care, Noddings (1992) has identified four key components in educational context: modelling, dialogue, practice and confirmation. According to Noddings, teachers must show in their own relations with the children and those around them what it means to care; and essentially, it is through dialogue that we can critically reflect on our relationships with each other; further more, to foster caring, it must be part of the school's practice through trust, affirmation and encouragement.

Learning and community are closely connected. Wenger (1998:45) writes:

Humans are constantly engaged in enterprises, private and public, in which they interact with others and learn in the process. These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise. It makes sense, therefore, to call these ... communities of practice.

Learning therefore occurs through participation in different communities of practice. This involves a process of convergence with the practices, discourse, values and worldviews of the members of the community. Further more, learning is more than just through interaction with others, it requires a context where activity is directed towards some sort of shared goal, which is geared towards negotiating meaning, personhood and ongoing growth (Wenger 1998).

Although the context which Wenger initially used was in the corporate organisations, it is, however, highly relevant to the situations such as schools as learning communities. Within school contexts, the convergence of values, discourse and practices becomes exceedingly important in my discussions about learning. Often, in schools, it is found that the values (for instance, in Britain, the teaching and learning that is defined and dictated by the national curriculum and sets of measurement that is imposed by OFSTED) can not be converged with those of the teachers (often hopelessly defined by their own lack of resistance towards what is happening within the educational systems) and those of the parents (some are struggling to define and to conceptualise education and learning and what they hope to achieve for their children). Finally, children and young people often have absolutely no say regarding the kind of education they want, what they wish to learn and how they want to learn it. They are, however, constantly located in a huge debate of diverse interest for 'their own sake'. Everyone else seems to 'know' better what the children and young people should be doing at schools, more than themselves. Therefore, the convergence of values is impossible to achieve unless there is a process for all to reach this shared value and common vision. This raises a question as to how different agencies engage with each other in order to agree on a common goal.

According to Fielding (2000a), a school can only achieve its goal of learning and growth when it functions as a person-centred community. In the context of the dilemma facing most British schools between the government's constant request for accountability and pursuit of effectiveness and high performance and schools' responsibilities to educate and enable growth of each individual, he argues that

With regard to teaching and learning, teachers operating within the person-centred framework ... actually help students to become better persons (Fielding 2000a:54).

Taking the above different premises as its basis, this paper sets out to explore what a learning community is using the case study of the New School. Based on a research in progress, this paper attempts to explore the way that the New School had seen themselves to have achieved as a community of learners. My main interests have been on how the school community was established, what is the nature of relationships of members within the communities; if and how they managed to converge values and practice towards a common goal and purpose that is defined by learning.

2. THE CONTEXT – THE NEW SCHOOL

Small independent schools are emerging in the UK along with the increase of the number of people who are not entirely satisfied with large impersonalised state schools. Parents are often the main driving force for establishing small independent schools and hence in the formation of school learning communities (Cotton 2001). The New School is one such an example.

The New School is a pseudonym for a small independent school located in the centre of a county town in England. This kindergarten through grade 3 school serves 70 children aged between 3 and 11; and caters for a community of 60 families from multicultural backgrounds, with a majority of these families being middle-class. The school is adjacent to a pond, park, wetlands and an open-air swimming pool. It is a peaceful environment and yet just five minutes walk to the centre of this charming county town.

The school was started in September 2000 by a group of parents who wanted a different education for their children, i.e. an education that aims at the holistic development of each individual child including physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual. These parents managed to find patrons and raised the funds to buy the school premises and have ever since been working together to develop an education that they believe is best for children. It says on the school website:

We look to discover what is unique about every child, and to support that uniqueness by creating a range of teaching and learning opportunities for the different styles of learning.

The school claims itself as a community of learners:

We are a “community of learners” creating a safe space where each person is valued and respected for themselves and where we work together to develop and grow. Our approach to learning strives to stimulate fun, creativity, energy and challenge, to support a love of learning that will be life-long, and a sense of wonder and joy in discovery.

Encouraging children to be themselves and stay connected with their true selves is seen as one of the school’s important goals. Its website also says:

We encourage children to find their own spirit. When someone is themselves, they’re happy. We help children become truly themselves, which is one of the greatest gifts of education.

According to the school’s website, the community centring on the New School is a vibrant, committed group, with good friendships between families. Parents are encouraged to be involved in the school’s educational process.

As a community of learners we acknowledge that we adults are also learning, alongside the children, to develop as authentic human beings.

As a member of Human Scale Education, the New School is proud of its human-scale community.

We believe that by creating small classes and a smallish school we have created a community where relationships are valued and where it is possible to ‘know’ each other and our gifts. It’s also far more possible to include children in the process of learning and making school-wide decisions. Our human-scale community gives us more scope to be creative and flexible in all areas of school and human development (The New School Brochure).

This concept of community is also emphasised at the core of the school’s aim:

1. We aim to create a community of children, parents and staff where there is mutual love and support and to provide the highest quality learning experiences for our children.
2. All adults employed in the school will be supported in their commitment to this Vision and Mission; they will model the approaches we use and the outcomes we aim for in their own relationships, in their love of learning, in applying this wide range of learning strategies themselves.
3. We aim to develop everyone, both staff and children as true human beings, nurturing spiritual growth, and the development of each one's talents, self-confidence and inter-personal skills (The New School Mission Statement).

The school's view of itself as a community of learners, it is to suggest that there is no boundary between the school and the community. It is in fact implying an integral and mutual relationship between the school and the community: the school is integral of the community and the community is expressive of the relationship amongst all centring round the school. Hence, in this paper, it is termed as the school community.

3. THE RESEARCH – THE EXPERIENCE OF THE NEW SCHOOL

My research took an ethnographic narrative approach to understanding the school as a learning community. I visited the school many times and had conversations with the administrator, teachers, some parents and students. Much of the research data in this paper was in the format of narrative life stories of individuals and their experience of the school, as Bruner (1996) has argued narrative as a mode of thinking and is fundamental for articulating our lived human experiences.

The following are few life stories of some individuals' experience of the school and what they see as the learning community. The names mentioned are all pseudo names.

Alison – ‘*The community has a life of its own and will grow organically as we learn*’

Alison was one of the founders of the school and worked as the school secretary for a couple of years. She is now the school administrator. Before starting the New School, Alison had already organised a school in her own house which was entirely run and managed by parents of the children attending the school.

It was really successful in that children were happy, they were progressing well and we all had a really good time.

This home school was closed due to failure to get planning permission from the local council. However, that experience gave Alison and a few other parents a very cohesive idea of what kind of learning experience they would like their children and themselves to have.

I think we all had an understanding of children as being souls who come with their own purpose for life. A good education will allow that person to unravel and free itself, obviously with the right kind of guidance and boundaries ...

This shared ideal of education was then developed into the vision for a new school, which Alison says that it was more than just a school, it was a learning community they aimed at:

We are all learners, children, staff and parents. That was what we aimed at.

Together these parents began to promote this vision and through nearly two years' 'painfully hard work', with the patronage of a local foundation, some donations for purchasing the school building, and a team of committed parents and supporters, by September 2000 their effort bore fruit and hence the birth of the New School. The logo of the school depicts under a framed blue sky, birds flying from a tree. Alison explains the metaphor is that the school is an organic entity where freedom is nurtured, but within boundaries. The boundary is embedded in the school itself as a community. Both children and adults are encouraged to be free to be who they are and yet they must learn to live with each other, with each others' interests and well-being in mind. Alison says that it is not a simple process and requires much questioning, reflection, experimentation and exploration.

I mean, these are the things which many schools aim for but which are actually very difficult to achieve in reality. I cannot even say that we are achieving those things; but it is certainly a very deep intention to hold this vision. To constantly question how better to provide for what we say we want to provide; and it is not at all obvious, especially when we ourselves have come from a fairly rigid Victorian model of education. ...

For the first two years the school had a head teacher, who later resigned from the school due to the pressure of having to combine teaching and leadership. After discussions amongst the staff, governors and trustees, a decision was made that the school would be run by the staff collectively, with teachers taking on responsibility for children's learning and Alison taking on managerial and administrative responsibilities. Alison and the teachers call this structure collaborative leadership and she thinks that in some ways, it has worked:

The teachers really stepped up in their ownership of the school, although the process took time.... We have now moved completely into a new way of being as far as I can see which is really taking on responsibilities together and it has worked really well ...

Being the school administrator, Alison's job extends from being the lollypop lady outside of school gate through helping kitchen to source food supplies, to organising staff training and chairing meetings for the school's development plans. She says that her job is all about communication:

Being the lollypop lady at the school gate every morning gives me the opportunity to touch base with all the parents and children. It could simply be 'hello' and 'how are you today'. But for me, it is all about communicating with one another, it is about human relationships.

Alison sees human relations as vital for the whole school. The Staff have lunch together at least once a week, with a homemade soup prepared by one of them. Alison reflects that positive human relationships help develop good collegueship, which is the basis for collaborative leadership:

It is important to look after each other. You know, I think we can do a lot more if we are learning actually to be good colleagues to each other.

The school's collaborative leadership is complimented by the support from three other bodies: the school trustees, the governors and the parent group. The school has an open forum every term for staff, parents, governors and trustees to discuss openly any issues or concerns about the school, and how to work together to make the school a better place for learning.

Our termly Open Forum discussions between trustees, governors, staff and parents, enable parents' opinions to be heard and acted on. Parents are particularly empowered to be involved in the educational process and the community, and they do play a big part in the school. The parent group meets monthly. They also run fundraising fairs and other school events.

According to Alison, learning in the school is personalised, based on fun and individual experience. Parents and local community have been important resources to the learning in the school. For instance, every Thursday afternoon is a whole school workshop time, where parents and locals come to run a diversity of specialist activities: sports, science and nature, art and crafts, drama, storytelling and literature, and many more hands-on and experiential activities. Children attend the workshops out of their own choice. Therefore each workshop caters for a mixed age group. The one that is most popular at the time was a knitting workshop, which was run by a child's grandmother. It was attended by a dozen girls aged between 7 and 11.

Alison sees these workshops and other learning activities in the school as integrated whole community learning projects:

We have whole school topics every half term so the entire school is launched into this whole explosion of ideas.... It was that sort of integrated learning experience, the integration of the whole school and community.

Alison regards the school being at the forefront in pioneering a positive relationship with its own local environment and global environment. Coming from a scientist background, Alison is very enthusiastic about living this culture and suggests that her attitude about environmental issues and nature is expressed through the community's own way of being. The school provides healthy organic food for the children which is sourced locally.

Most of the adults involved in the school love nature and we want to extend ourselves to look after our environment. The children helped design the school's wildlife garden and the playground. Plants and other natural things are brought into the classroom and it ties in with honouring the nature of the child. I think that actually, the nature of each child is a reflection of our honouring the whole of the earth.

The school liaises with a local camp where older children go in the summer and camp for a few days. Children and adults work together and learn to build shelters, build fires, collect wild food and have a really positive experience of nature. Alison says that they are now working to provide a whole process of taking children out to the woods and developing nature skills, observation skills and learning about birds and trees and the local environment.

I believe that no amount of classroom teaching about lifestyle can replace that sort of deep experience that children have with nature.

Within 5 years, the New School has gone through a journey of ongoing change, with parents, children and staff coming and going. Alison says that despite the changes, the community that is the school itself is becoming stronger.

The school community has a life of its own and will grow organically as we learn. For instance, recently, some of our oldest children wanted to go out and help the younger children in the playground, in the classroom and at lunchtime. They basically wanted to be mentors for the younger children, teach them to draw, or read with them. So these children themselves started this communal culture at the school...

This communal culture has also been emphasised by the school's taking on a peaceful communication structure which has been developed under the guidance of Sally, a founder and parent.

We feel that Sally's work has definitely helped change the school's culture. The community is becoming more humane and respectful. We have always wanted to do that and now it has actually evolved as part of the natural flow of where we are going.

This evolving nature of the school and community is what gives hope to Alison.

It is very difficult to really think or completely re-imagine education in one step. ... but we are on the journey of exploring, evolving, changing and trying ways which work. And you know we are called New School. I hope being New, by attempting something different, by anchoring the things that work well, we are possibly fulfilling our vision.

Sally - 'The human relationship is what underpins the curriculum of this school'

Sally was also one of the founders of the school and has remained a major driving force that created and has been continuing to re-create a culture at the school. Sally is a parent (all of her four children attend/attended the school), volunteer and governor at the school. She told me that because she had a very difficult relationship with her own parents, she wanted a very different upbringing for her own children, especially a very different relationship with them.

My family was very bad at communication. I think in my parents' generation, they fed, clothed and housed children, but never took their emotions and feelings seriously. I know very well for myself the emotional effect that had on me and what it tells me about the importance of communication...

I believe that many ordinary people like myself have had similar experience in that ... in many little ways, people are not fulfilling their potential due to a lack of security, lack of self worth and lack of sufficient emotional support from those around.

From the early stages, it was noted that the founders were interested in establishing a peaceful culture throughout the school so that children would have a positive environment. Having some experience at parenting course and an awareness of the importance of communication, Sally volunteered to come and work as lunch time playground supervisor. Since then, as a parent and school governor, Sally has been pushing forward a structure of communication within the school. This led to Sally taking further Teaching Effective Training (TET) training and introducing and developing, with staff and children, their own collaborative model/structure for communication which the school terms as effective communication.

Here we believe relationship is the key to life. What we are learning and developing is not simply a model of communication, it is a way of developing

personal relations. The human relationship is what underpins the curriculum of this school. Many other schools also have it, such as an emotional intelligence programme and they would occasionally have circle time and teach the children the technique of conflict resolution. But what we do at this school is that we live it: we are using it everyday in the way we relate to the children, in formal classroom situations and in the playground; in the way we relate to each other. And we are all still learning.

This effective communication model has been evolving since the school had first begun to work on it. Now it has been expanded into more than just an approach to communication, it is part of the way of their being, being with each other and interacting with each other. Parents are encouraged to participate in the development of this model of communication and many have requested to take formal training in order to start living it.

It is more than just communication between teachers and parents, parents and children, but is also proven to be useful between adults at home. Sally has been requested to provide parenting courses to the community.

I am getting so much demand for the parenting course. This was due to so much positive feedback from the previous group I worked with...

Sally says that as a parent, she is very much encouraged to be involved in the school's activities and decision making process.

I have been to all the open forums since it started. I always feel very moved at the end of an open forum. People are always very honest, able to express sometimes really difficult feelings and I feel proud of the school for being open enough to allow it to happen. ... You really feel that you are part of a community that is working together, and your opinion matters and your voices are listened to and that you are heard.

Sally has been very positive about all that has happened at the school. She says that in order for the school to grow, it must commit itself to positive change.

We don't want to have a fossilised school philosophy, based on one man's theory that is no longer relevant to the ever changing situations. To be alive, vibrant and healthy, the school needs to be growing. It is about to be open to new things, to be willing to change. As adults, we are models to the children. We must show children that we are learners ourselves: we are learning all the time, especially from working with the children. It is an important mutual process.

All the work that Sally has done with the school has been in her capacity as a parent, school governor and a member of the community. She says that this work has been a good learning experience for herself:

I have learned so much from working with the children, teachers and the parents. From doing the work I have found meaning in all that I have been doing, and found myself with more self worth, confidence and feeling of connectedness with people.

Rebecca – ‘The school is my second home’

11 year-old Rebecca says that she is the oldest child at school and one of the longest standing members of this community. She was at the school when the wall was being painted and the whole building was being decorated to be the New School. She remembered that she was very proud to have painted one block of the wall and that ever since, the school has been a second home to her.

The school is my second home. You know most children complain about going to school. For me, it is just what we do. I would definitely feel that I'd miss out on something if I didn't go. Everyday is different and it is full of fun.

Rebecca says that she feels comfortable at school and enjoys being there. She has made many good friends with both children and adults.

We now have playground buddies and I get to do things with little ones a lot. I really like that. ... I also enjoy talking to adults. For instance, P, our class assistant, she sometimes sits with us and tells us the things that happened to her when she was our age. It is a lot of fun.

Rebecca was considered to be very slow in reading at the first school she attended. Her parents were told that she had special learning needs. Because the New School respects individual's learning pace, Rebecca was given the time to develop and now she is very much on top of all her work. She has a particular interest in literature and she loves writing stories.

I like doing lots of stuff at school. For example, it is fun when we have circle time in the morning: we are asked how happy we are out of ten. Then we can talk about why we are feeling upset or feeling happy. Sometimes, M (classroom teacher) will ask us what we would like to do in the morning, and we will decide together how to learn something.

According to Rebecca, children recognise that they are not only respected in their feelings and opinions, they are also respected and encouraged to be who they are. Rebecca points out that the school does not have a uniform and that all adults and children are addressed using their first name.

We like it that we don't have uniforms, because we are not soldiers, we are individuals. Also, it is easy to tell people apart, from the clothes they wear you can see some of their personalities. It is also nice to call each other first names, because we can all be friends, really, we are all equal.

As a student in the New School, Rebecca has noticed a great deal of changes. She said that the learning activities have become more structured as she becomes older and she really enjoyed the structured approach. She sees these changes as a part of a natural process:

The changes in the school are very natural. It is like a person, there are many changes as they grow older.

Rebecca was amongst several children who are leaving the New School. She says that she would continue staying in touch with the school by writing to her class. She is moving on to a local secondary school and she sounds really confident:

I feel nervous, excited, stirred and all that. I am really nervous. I know that things will be very different in other schools than from here. But I think I am prepared. I have been here for five years and I am ready to move on...

Rebecca says that what she would miss most about the school is the communal atmosphere. She showed me the gift given to her by her class teacher. It was a small young tree that children planted last year with a paper folded bird attached to it:

I know what it means to me: it means to stay natural, to grow and remain free.

Michelle – ‘There is no gossip here because there isn’t anything we can’t talk about’

Michelle taught in an ‘upper class’ prep school for five years and found that she was not inspired by working there because ‘no one cared about the educational ethos. It was all about being comfortable’. She was also bullied by the head teacher and was happy to leave. Bullying happened throughout Michelle’s childhood and into adulthood.

I was bullied because I was a bit slow at school. I had special needs, but this was never identified. Only when I graduated from university with an honour’s degree, people then started to look at me differently....

I now work both as classroom teacher and special needs teacher. It is very much in me that I want to help children in that way.

She joined New School a couple of years ago as a lower primary teacher.

When I came to the interview at this school, Alison, after learning about my experience (of being bullied) at my other school, said that I got to look at my own role in my past situation. I was really offended.

Working at the New School for some time, Michelle came to understand that she might have allowed herself to be bullied in the other school because she was used to being a victim in her early life.

Here, we respect each other and my understanding is that it first comes from respecting oneself.

Michelle told me that the New School has provided what she needed at the time for her transition and transformation. The school is an open and warm community and so she is able to open herself up more.

Having worked with Sally and attending parenting course myself, I became much more open with myself and other people. If someone says something that hurts me or makes me feel uncomfortable, I am now able to let that person know it straight away. There is no gossip here because there isn’t anything we can’t talk about.

Michelle works with a group of children aged 7-9, whose learning abilities vary, including a few with special learning needs, such as severe dyslexia and dysfunctional behaviours .

This is what I enjoy most – helping children to overcome life’s challenges. Many of our children were removed from state schools as they found it difficult to cope with the learning environment there.

Having a mix-ability class, Michelle is keen to use the school's communication structure to establish a more equitable relationship with the children.

Emotional intelligence enables everyone to communicate equally and with respect. For example, children in my class may come to me and say: this is not fair Michelle and then we will discuss it.

Michelle describes the school as ever-evolving. It changes with the different people that are joining and leaving the community and changes in accordance to the needs of the children and parents.

Everything is evolving, constantly evolving. It never quite stays the same. One thing that I found working here is that you have to be really adjustable, adaptable and flexible.

The biggest concern that Michelle has about the school is where the children should go from here. She was concerned that children are being so embraced in this small community that they might find it difficult to cope with the challenge and pressure of secondary school.

4. UNDERSTANDING SCHOOL COMMUNITY – INITIAL INSIGHTS FROM THE NEW SCHOOL

From analysing the lived experiences of the above individuals and those of other participants of my research, these insights came to light. The school community

- is established through a shared vision and commitments towards a common purpose;
- embeds inclusiveness and freedom
- grows and transforms through democratic participation and a cultural collaboration;
- enables all members to become learners and have something to contribute to other's learning; and
- has at its core, a set of human-relations identified as fundamental to the development of each individual as persons

A shared value and purpose

The first insight from these individual's experience is that a learning community like New School unites people through a shared value and purpose. This community was born out of the needs of its members and has been joined by those who share a similar value and belief. Alison, Sally and a few other parents started this school because they all shared a very similar educational value, what they called a 'vision'. This vision reflected their needs of such a school, a community where their children could be brought up to flourish as human beings and to develop their full potential.

The following quote from Sergiovanni (1994:217) highlights the centrality of shared values and beliefs:

In communities we create our own social lives with others who have a similar intention to ours . . .

From the experience of the New School, it suggests that once the community has been established, the shared value would then be translated into their committed ways of being. Alison's environmental consciousness shared by many other members of the school community was translated into the school's ecological principles, including serving organic

school lunches, using eco-friendly cleaning materials and reducing, reuse and recycling where possible all materials including energy; Sally's belief in the significance of mutual respect in human relationships; Michelle's recognition in the importance of being ourselves and standing up for ourselves; Rebecca's appreciation of individual's uniqueness; are all shared and lived by other members in the community. The school community is therefore responsive to the ways its members are. 'It's just what you do', summarises Rebecca.

The common purpose of all is in the pursuit of holistic education and learning experience and the realisation of personal growth. This common purpose brings people together and attracts members' commitment, active engagement and willingness and readiness for change. Thus, the school engenders a culture of continuous evolution, learning, innovation, growth and transformation.

Freedom and inclusiveness - A unity of all

Seeing itself as a learning community, the New School encourages its members to be fully themselves, while at the same time, responding creatively, flexibly and adaptively to the needs of the people and the community it serves.

As illustrated in the stories in the previous pages, staff, parents, children and others come together to share a common way of being. Alison, Michelle and Rebecca's experiences suggest that through this community they are able to be and become more fully themselves. Alison and other teachers' organic view of the school as a community echoes Fielding's (1995:153) summary

The individual and the community are organically related: the one is not opposed or antagonistic towards the other; they are better understood as an interdependent, living unity.

Rebecca illustrates this in suggesting that the whole community is like a person with all members merely parts of the organic being. Again, this view does not contradict what Fielding (1995) suggests as a new model of community – community as unity of different individuals. Within this unity lies the profound human relationship that Sally mentioned as 'a hidden curriculum of this school'. According to its members, this human relationship is central to this vibrant, alive, healthy and ever-evolving community.

A culture of collaboration

AT this point of my research, the New School was a very rare example of collaborative leadership. Needless to say, leadership in a school community is vital. This study sees a culture of collaboration being created and maintained by the school community collectively. Because there has been no one authoritative figure, the staff and other members who are taking up the responsibilities for leadership, such as trustees, governors, are able to take ownership of the decisions and directions of the development of the community.

Dialogue

According to the study, 'open forum' is a way of inviting parents, students and all members of the school community to be engaged in genuine dialogue. Open Forum suggests openness and trust in the dialogue and the open space also suggests that members are encouraged to 'speak, without fear of retaliation, of concerns, passions and interests which are rooted in their developing sense of justice and of self' (Fielding and Rudduck 2002:4). The flat structure of collaborative leadership, despite all the challenges, is achieved through reflective dialogue. Fielding (2000b:410) argues that real dialogue 'values personal encounter,' speaks 'of

personal knowledge, informed and detailed concern'; as necessary for the school community's 'transparency and flexibility'.

Genuine dialogue reflects the essence of the ethic of care. Noddings (1991, 1992) views dialogue as an essential part of caring. Dialogue is fundamental to the development of human relationships, a seeking for a common ground through understanding our differences. In a learning community, dialogue enables genuine collaboration amongst all members.

Collaborative leadership

Collaborative leadership at the New School is also seen as a means to be responsive to the changes and challenges facing education and school community. Starratt (2003) points out that collaborative leadership cultivates meaning, democratic community and moral responsibility. Using Alison's metaphor of the school as a living document, the school community invites collaborative authorship of such a document, through developing the capacity to lead collaboratively, to take responsibility for the growth of the community and to share wisdom, insight and self reflection.

Therefore, everyone is part of the force that creates a culture of collaboration in the school community and everyone models learning, be it to develop new skills, new understanding or to foster new ways of thinking. The school community embeds in itself a culture of democracy, equality and just; a participatory, collaborative and emancipatory process. A shared power is essential for empowerment.

Emancipation through love, care and appreciation

It has been recognised that in the New School, each individual, including children, staff and parents, are encouraged to be and become themselves and/or to develop themselves through enhanced skills and understanding, improved capacity and greater awareness of who they are and will become.

These positive human relations are achieved through love, genuine concern for each other and appreciation of someone for who they are. There are plenty of examples of this loving and caring relation in action in the New School. Circle time, as Rebecca says, is about sharing feelings, where staff show genuine concern about children's well being; playground buddies are expressions of true friendship as the basis to resolve problems and conflicts; soup made by a member and shared staff lunch is also gesture of love, care and appreciation; Alison being the lollipop lady every morning is yet another way to show care and extend that genuine human relationship.

Fielding summarises two essential qualities of school community: freedom and equality. He says:

For community to become real the mode of relation characterized by freedom to be and become ourselves in the through relations of personal equality, must take place within the context of certain dispositions and intentions towards other persons. Community is neither constituted nor maintained by organization. It relies on motives which sustain the personal relations of its members. It is about human beings caring for one another reciprocally (Fielding 2000b:400).

The school community is emancipatory in the way which allows all members to fulfil themselves and flourish as human beings.

Mutuality of learning

At the heart of the concept of the school community lies the total commitment to the value of learning for all its members. This commitment is underpinned by the belief, as Alison puts it, that learning is inherently fun, enjoyable and exhilarating, that all members have the capacity to learn and that each person brings to the community unique abilities which must be acknowledged and utilised.

At all levels, learning in New School is about continued development of each individual as human beings. However, this learning is a social and dialogic process and is achieved through engaging in the school community, and therefore, the essence of it is about learning to be human beings who can live together with freedom, equality and joy. As Alison describes the metaphor of the school symbol, the school is a community of learners, learning to be free and become themselves, and learning to live with one another in harmony.

Therefore, in a learning community like the New School, learning focuses on the process and the content is determined by the relevance to their goal, i.e. to live in harmony with each other and allow all to flourish. In this sense, children are encouraged to be self directed learners and to follow their own pace for learning and development. Similarly, school staff are committed learners who are in constant inquiry and reflection, and parents are learning by engaging in the school's activities, from services they provide and from their own children. 'Always learning, learning all ways', says the school's slogan.

A process of ongoing growth

As Fielding argues, the school community is essentially useful for its members' development as individual human beings. For me, what happens in the New School suggests that this is also a process of identity formation and re-construction. Individuals find themselves and re-establish themselves as they engage in the school and in the community.

Michelle's growth made her aware that she didn't have to carry on seeing herself as a victim; Sally became more confident by working with the children and adults and learning from her relationship with others; one teacher at the school transforms herself from a family nanny and classroom assistant into a competent classroom teacher. Examples like these are numerous. Each individual has something to say about their own development through their engagement in, and the support from the community.

In this sense, community is a culture that is being created and re-created collaboratively and continuously through the growth and transformation of all members. It is driven by a search for betterment and meaningfulness of experience and motivated by a critical reflection on existing values and beliefs. Thus school as a learning community is an ongoing transformational process, an identity being constructed and re-constructed, a vision being established, nourished and enriched as members come and go, with new input and development of new aspects of ourselves.

The term, 'school community' suggests the centrality of learning across any boundary between school and community. Such a notion is embedded in Fielding's 'schools as person-centred communities', where being part of the community is 'given meaning through a reciprocal commitment to dialogue and mutual respect as the driving force of educative encounter' (Fielding 2000a:54).

5. CONCLUSION – RETHINKING SCHOOL COMMUNITY

The notion of school community is embedded a dialogic and transformational process driven by ongoing learning, development and growth of all. In the case of the New School, the

school community has been created and developed by those individuals seeking for dialogue and reflection, which is explicitly directed at promoting human relationships, meaningful ways of being and continuous transformation.

However, current educational system that is based on testing and ‘accountability’ portrays a picture of contrast, being lack of care and trust and mutuality of human-relations as found in the New School. Noddings (2005 online) summarises

The present insistence on more and more testing—even for young children—is largely a product of separation and lack of trust. When parents do not know the teachers of their children and teachers have not formed caring relationships with their students, it is predictable that demands for “accountability” would be heard. If no adult has time to spend with a child—shared time that yields dependable and supportive evaluation—then society looks for an easy and efficient way to evaluate: test, test, and test year after year. Then fear and competition take the place of eager anticipation and shared delight in learning. Although we may find out by such methods whether children have learned (at least temporarily) certain closely specified facts and skills, we do not get a full picture of what each unique child has learned and how he or she has built on the gifts we offer. What we learn in the daily reciprocity of caring goes far deeper than test results.

Indeed, in a society that tends to be isolating people rather than allowing closer human relations, we should be wary of educational schema that put children’s humanity to one side in favour of approaches that are intended to be at the service of the nation’s political agenda, productivity and economic growth. Perhaps we should turn to examples like the New School where we may learn to understand ways in which a school learning community can unite individuals through an integrated goal – a goal that aims at enabling all to flourish and to grow as persons.

Finally, it is reasonable, however, to express several notes of caution. First, the data of this research is based on the one school community only, which is very limited. Second, the notion of school community that is presented here may be a rather idealistic and even romantic one. This is a criticism which is frequently levelled at the concept, in particular, in terms of issues such as power and conflict. In fact, there are many aspects of the school community that could be explored further in terms of power dynamics and conflict. I have already noted that parents’ involvement in the New School is an area for further exploration. Third, the New School being small, alternative and ‘human-scale’ may have made it possible for individuals involved to establish a more intimate and more humane relations. This characteristic might be impossible to develop in larger and state schools.

Research such as this about the New School may begin to shed light on the essence of human relationships within small learning communities, but if we move the perspectives towards teaching and learning and the effect on the development of individual students, much more work is yet to be done.

REFERENCES

- Boud, D., Keough, R and Walker, D (1985) *Reflection: Turning experience into learning*. Kogan Page, London
- Bruner, J. (1996) *The culture of education*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Clark, D. (1996) *Schools as Learning Communities*. Cassell, London

- Cotton, K. (2001) New small learning communities: findings from recent literature. Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.
<http://www.ccsso.org/content/pdfs/APF03NewSmallLearningCommunities.pdf>. Last visited August 2005
- Fielding, M. (1995) Beyond collaboration: On the importance of community. In D. Bridges and C. Husbands (eds.) *Consorting and collaborating in the education market place*. Falmer Press, London
- Fielding, M. (2000a). The person-centred school. *Forum*, 42(2), 51-54.
- Fielding, M. (2000b). Community, philosophy and education policy: Against effectiveness ideology and the immiseration of schooling. *Educational Policy*, 15(4), 397-415.
- Fielding, M. (2001) Learning Organisation or Learning Community? A Critique of Senge. *Reason in Practice*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2001, pp 17 - 29
- Fielding, M. and Rudduck, J. (2002) The transformative potential of student voice: confronting the power issues. Paper presented at the *Annual Conference of the British Educational Research Association*, University of Exeter, England, 12-14 September 2002
- Hoggett, P. (1997) 'Contested communities' in P. Hoggett (ed.) *Contested Communities. Experiences, struggles, policies*, Bristol: Policy Press.
- Hord, S. (1998) Creating a professional learning community: Cottonwood Creek School. *Issues About Change*. V2 No. 2, 1998
- Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated Learning - Legitimate peripheral participation*. University of Cambridge Press, Cambridge.
- Noddings, N. (1991) Stories in dialogue. In C. Witherall and N. Noddings (eds.) *Stories lives tell: Narrative and dialogue in education*. Teachers College Press: New York.
- Noddings, N. (1992) *The challenge to care in schools*. Teachers College Press: New York.
- Noddings, N. (2005) Caring in education. *The encyclopaedia of informal education*, www.infed.org/biblio/noddings_caring_in_education.htm. Last updated: April, 2005
- Senge, P. (1990) *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday.
- Sergiovanni, T. (1994) Organizations or communities? Changing the metaphor changes the theory. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 30(2), 214-225.
- Smith, M. (2001) Community. *The encyclopaedia of informal education*.
<http://www.infed.org/community/community.htm>. Last visited on August 2005
- Starratt, R. (2003) *Centering Educational Administration: Cultivating Meaning, Community, Responsibility*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc. NJ
- Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of Practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.