

# SCHOOLS IN THEIR COMMUNITIES

TAKING ACTION AND DEVELOPING CIVIC LIFE



Edited by Dr Sebastien Chapleau

Foreword by Dr Karen Edge

Postscript by Professor Liz Todd

A collaboration between  
Citizen School and Blg Education



# SCHOOLS IN THEIR COMMUNITIES: TAKING ACTION AND DEVELOPING CIVIC LIFE

**Dr Sebastien Chapleau, Editor**

Research for this publication was undertaken as part of The Big Leadership Adventure, a two-year, deliberately different, leadership programme designed and delivered by Big Education Trust, to empower, enable, and inspire the leadership required for a Big Education. The programme is for leaders working in education and social enterprises who are ready to think differently about the challenges faced by schools and their communities.

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*In memory of Josephine Mukanjira, a great friend and colleague, as well as a leader who touched the lives of so many through kindness, compassion, and courage.*

*There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the practice of freedom – the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with the reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.*

Richard Shaull, in his preface to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

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# FOREWORD

## REFLECTIONS FROM BEYOND THE SCHOOL GATES

Dr Karen Edge

When I was first asked to write a lead-in chapter for this amazing collection of essays, it was January 2020. The opportunity to celebrate the power and practice of *schools in their communities* and *education beyond the school gates* was exciting. Our schools and educators tirelessly support their students, staff, parents and carers. Schools are central to the health, wellbeing, and success of their communities. More personally, I revelled in how the book would influence my own knowledge and insight as Year 4 parent and Governor in my son's three-form entry London primary school.

By the end of January, I was preparing for a research trip to China's Shanghai Normal University. As news of China's initial COVID-19 outbreak rippled across the globe, I watched Chinese schools and universities close from my local colleagues' vantage point. Weeks later, University College London (UCL) suspended all work travel and closed most of our London campus. My 9-year-old, Isaac, and I retreated to our new 'work and learn from home' normal. From early on in lockdown, the role of our schools as essential agents of care and cohesion became more evident each day.

As we move through lockdown, schools and leaders now have the nation's attention. They educate our families through emergency remote teaching and learning strategies developed almost overnight. Schools coordinate catering and food delivery to offsite families who need it most. They remain open to care for the children of keyworkers. Teachers and leaders are checking in on their students and families. Our schools' roles as central to our communities have never been clearer to the wider public. I am heartened that the nation appears to have woken up to the power and possibility our schools offer their students and communities.

These scary and challenging conditions make the timeliness and importance of this collection even more paramount. The authors' reflections on creating stronger, more cohesive, schools and communities will provide food for thought for readers as we contemplate our 'new' ways of working and living. We will all need to be even more inclusive and understanding as we build back to our new education realities. It is with this in mind that I share my own reflections on education beyond the school gates.

### REACHING PARENTS AND CARERS: MY LIVED PARENTHOOD

Pre-lockdown, I began to sketch out how my own parental struggles to fit in and support our school shaped my reflections on community and advocacy. Most people would never imagine my own parental engagement journey and challenges. In the spirit of honesty and moving us collectively forward, I share my views as a community member of one of the most engaging and caring schools I have ever worked with.

**The not always at school parent/carer.** As Isaac's mum, like many parents and carers, I strive to be an active member of our school community. My ambitions often fall embarrassingly short due to being a 70% solo-parent and holding down a full-time job involving international travel. Playdates, school bell pickups, daytime parental learning sessions and evening socials are a struggle. However, in Reception, Isaac and I agreed that I would move mountains to attend concerts, plays, parent-teacher meetings and sporting events. While I can proudly report my outstanding record on these priority activities, I often feel I am not truly integrated into what is truly a welcoming school community. I am often, in the eyes of others, absent. Too often, parents and carers who are not regularly present are seen as disinterested. For me, it is not disinterest but timing, work and caring duties. As we explore throughout this book, schools that successfully work with their communities regularly challenge their own assumptions about engagement. They believe all parents and carers have an interest and desire to engage. These schools relentlessly create meaningful and creative ways to nurture connections with different segments of their population.

**The ‘other’ or international parent/carer.** I am the first to acknowledge my position(s) of privilege in my school community and this drives much of my contribution at school and in my work. However, it is complicated. On many counts, I just don’t fit in. While British since birth, I lived in Canada until my mid-30s. I speak English as my first language – pretty well I would like to think. However, I am still regularly told I talk ‘funny’ or my accent gets regularly mocked. I lack many of the cultural references I would have from growing up here. After 15 years in London, people regularly hint that, ‘**here** we do things like **this**.’ It is hard to believe this happens, but it does. Everywhere. At least a few times a week! I am white, have a PhD, and English is my first language. Combined with work and travel, I am not a ‘normal’ mum – if one actually exists. That said, my struggle to feel like I belong perpetually challenges my will and ability to engage fully in our school. Feeling like you are a member of at least one group of people ‘like you’ will greatly influence your likelihood of engagement. For schools trying to find ways to engage parents and carers, there are lessons from these essays that demonstrate how to create ‘in groups’ that shape meaningful belonging.

**The transnational parent.** To make things even more complicated, it can sometimes be complicated engaging transnational parents and carers as many of us do not have the cultural capital to understand ‘how things work’ in the UK. We may need different kinds of reminders and understanding that English ways of working are layered, complex and, often, impenetrable. Many of us live across at least two countries. We may have strong lifelong ties elsewhere. Our former lives have taught us different ways of being and interacting with schools. Here, we may not have, or feel we have, the authority or invitation to advocate for ourselves and our families. Our communities are not only local but global. Sometimes, our strongest ties are the ones that reach the farthest away. Maintaining our legacy ties often require the greatest investment of time and resource. Our dual lives may influence our local ties. Yet again, as parents and carers, we have much to offer our schools and communities. However, understanding us and reaching us creates complex challenges for schools. We need to look no further than the examples in the book to find ways of working that create connection and celebrate the true diversity of our communities.

## HAND, HEART, AND HEAD

I have always been inspired by Surrey Square Primary School, School 21, now part of Big Education, and their aspirations for all students’ education of the *Head, Heart and Hand*. The essays in this collection advocate for the need for this robust approach to development and the importance of strive for all three within schools. However, even more importantly, the essays highlight how engaging the *heads, hearts and hands* of parents, carers, and communities can create meaningful and sustainable change beyond the school gates. I acknowledge I am stretching the concept. Nevertheless, I think it is a helpful frame for exploring engagement beyond the school gates.

**Hand: Support and contributions.** Most schools are well versed in offering support to their parents, carers and communities. In England, families and communities often rely on schools for emotional, linguistic, academic and even, at times, economic support. Relationships developed during these supportive exchanges often provide inroads for community members to become more closely engaged in the school. At the same time, parents and carers are often asked to lend a helping hand: to provide; to prepare; to fix; to volunteer; to bake. These important functions often curate short-term transactional interaction. For parents and carers, these moments may provide gateways to more substantial engagement. With the right pathways in place, these points in time become powerful levers for stronger community partnerships.

**Heart: Trust and relationships.** Many schools deliberately build on these lighter touch connections to build deeper relationships. Often, relationships evolve due to the many finite and serendipitous interactions that bridge communities and schools. Schools that welcome their communities are able to create conditions that accelerate the likelihood of these interactions. I experienced this first-hand when my former partner and I moved forward with our separation. I knew that Isaac would want his teachers to know. So, the night before we told him, I took paper copies of the letter I had written for Isaac to the school. The Assistant Headteacher looked at me with care and said: ‘Do not worry. We are here for you. We can support Isaac. Will you need two report cards? If you do, that’s fine!’ I looked at her in shock. Two report cards? However, that small gesture became a landmark moment that created new inroads for me into my school community.

As when we told Isaac about our family's new arrangements, his second question was: 'Do my teachers know?' My 'yes' was met with great relief on his part. His third question was: 'Do I need two report cards?' At this moment, I realised as a parent my school had supported me in ways I had never imagined possible. Our school families' turning points are regularly dropped into our educators' work day. Teachers and leaders are expert in spotting them, holding them and using them to support us and build our school communities. At that moment, we became true allies with the joint mission of supporting Isaac through his next transition. Our allegiance has continued and now, I can see how small acts of trust building have nurtured relationships between other families and our school. These relationships have sparked great points of change in our community. Schools that successfully reach beyond the school gates view each segment of their community as an ally. They work, without judgement, as they strive to mutually identify how best to support their communities.

**Head: Big ideas and co-creation.** As our current pandemic crisis illustrates, we need everyone at the table with all of their knowledge, insight, and wisdom to find solutions to our most pressing local and global challenges. We also need creative ways to communicate, with all of our different communities, widely and accurately. To this end, more broadly, many schools are making strides to ensure students understand their power and prepare them for their roles in the world.

Students, like Isaac, are learning how solve problems while thinking about fairness, caring for others, and advocacy. I cheered (quietly as not to embarrass anyone) when he described why the new child in class would be successful. He said: 'she has a great thinking partner.' When I asked him what he meant, he replied: 'her partner has good ideas, is a great listener, is very helpful and makes things possible.' I was ridiculously proud of his definition and I was reminded of it when I read the essays in this book.

The book provides vivid illustrations of how schools can engage their students, educators, parents and carers, and wider communities as thinking partners in the truest sense. These schools do not approach their communities as problems but as partners. They nurture community connections by actively working with parents and carers to identify needs and interests. They build trust and strong relationships over time. Schools and communities demonstrate respect for each other's priorities, challenges, and contributions. Parents and carers are met and accepted where they are, and everyone works together to shape future possibilities and create actions for improvement. Co-constructing solutions are essential. With practice, and the right support and encouragement, communities become able to work through the thinking and design strategies on their own. Schools can create a culture in which challenge is received as an opportunity to make something better and where the challenger is an ally and an advocate, not an opponent.

## CONCLUSION

My reflections are written from lockdown as a researcher of global cities, leadership and education systems. I am also an increasingly frustrated emergency learning-at-home supervisor. I remain amazed and proud at how quickly we have all pivoted to this new normal. However, not an hour passes in which I do not worry about the members of our school communities that are being socially and economically devastated by this current crisis. How this moment in time, our shared pandemic pause, will influence our new normal remains to be seen.

As we prepare for, construct, and move through our new way in schools and communities, we will all have a role to play in caring for and nurturing each other. Creating spaces for sharing ideas, constructing new ways of working and coming together to advocate for awareness and real change will become even more important. Building on the lessons shared by these schools, it is my hope that we each strive to remember that engagement and advocacy are predicated by a sense of belonging, membership and a belief that working together will lead to something better.

I don't think any of the authors of this book could have foreshadowed the importance of their experiences. The lessons from the stories shared herein may well provide examples of how our schools and communities can come together to heal and move forward in our new normal. This book, in my view, sets out to showcase new and innovative ways of working with communities as a celebration of our schools and leaders. Collectively, the essays demonstrate that there is not a one size fits all model for schools working to catalyse



and nurture community action. Individually, the essays provide a set of helpful roadmaps for those desperately seeking another way to engage, build and celebrate their communities beyond the school gates. As you read this collection of essays, I challenge you to reflect on what you and your colleagues can do to create opportunities for contribution, nurturing belonging and truly engaging those around you as purposeful thinking partners in supporting our schools and communities.