Revealing the community within: valuing the role of local community structures within evidence-based school intervention programmes

Schools and the families they serve are sometimes perceived as deficient and in need of fixing. One response has been the implementation of evidence-based family intervention programmes, which may be highly regulated and prescriptive as a condition of their (often philanthropic) funding. This article seeks to explore and bring to the foreground the often hidden role of the pre-existing, informal community networks with a view to more authentic evaluation of these externally imposed programmes. The article draws on a range of qualitative data reflecting the lived experiences of participants – including parents and other community members - in a family and parenting programme at an English primary school. The analysis uses the work of Tönnies as a theoretical lens. It suggests that while there are tensions caused by the rigid requirements of external programmes, these are overcome in many cases by the highly effective, but often unacknowledged, contributions of the informal aspects of community. It is argued that these operate within and complement the formal programme. Far from subverting the more overt procedures, they actually enable it to function successfully, leading to additional, unanticipated transformations among participants. The article concludes that these organic, often invisible connections need to be identified, documented and nurtured if their full potential is to be recognised and realised when evaluating similar interventions.

Introduction

Schools in socio-economically disadvantaged contexts and the families they serve can be perceived as deficient and in need of 'fixing', a stance often, but not exclusively, reflected in the literature on urban education (Tricarico et al. 2015). In response, an increasingly common remedy is a highly prescriptive, externally-funded intervention programme. This article explores how one such philanthropically funded, evidence-based programme, long established in the United States, was enacted in an urban primary school in England. Our observations of the experiences of the diverse facilitators, or 'partners', within this project centre on the ways in which existing school community structures interact with this externally imposed programme. In light of an increase in approaches to intervention predicated on quantifiable measures of impact, we offer in this article an additional, complementary perspective. As teacher educators and researchers with a commitment to social justice and empowerment within local communities, including that served by this school, we hope to demonstrate how such programmes can be more authentically evaluated by also acknowledging the existing assets and workings of the community.

We begin with a brief consideration of some of the literatures of policy directions, intervention programmes, philanthropy and community which we have found relevant before outlining Tönnies' ([1887] 2002) metaphors of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, a theoretical perspective that has been helpful in exploring the complexities involved in working with such a programme.

Community, intervention and schooling

Rather than existing in isolation, schools are best understood as part of a wider context. Ecological perspectives on schooling locate the learner at the heart of a complex set of social groupings extending beyond the school gates. Thus, families, like schools, form part

of the immediate 'microsystem' with most direct influence on the learner (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This provides one rationale for a growth in policy-making based on families and parenting as factors seen as directly influencing educational outcomes. Defining and regulating parenting skills and behaviours have become particularly prominent in both England (Gillies 2005) and the US (Mayer 2008) and it is notable that Cullen et al. (2013) identify in such policies internationally a shift towards a new notion of family welfare: one based on conditionality and responsibility.

A response to characteristically deficit perceptions of parenting behaviour has been an interest in external intervention programmes linked to schools. Lindsay and Strand (2013), discussing the implementation of a number of these in England, are clear that both the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of evidence-based [1]group parenting programmes, in terms of both parental and pupil outcomes, have been convincingly established internationally. They also, however, draw attention to the importance of local community context when scaling up such programmes, calling for further research into this aspect of 'real life practice' (p.16). In the US, Guerra and Knox (2008) report that educational policy-makers and funders are increasingly narrowing their focus to require such evidence-based programmes as a condition of funding. This is a phenomenon seen in England too, in the context of a wider government 'what works' agenda, which is designed to build on existing evidence-based policy-making to guide decision making in public services (HM Government 2013). This has a focus on disseminating information about interventions with a strong record of effectiveness, as seen in the evidence summaries produced by the Education Endowment Fund, including one on parental involvement interventions (EEF 2015). Despite this apparent consensus on the success of measurable outcomes, the very notion of

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[1] The term 'evidence-based' is not unproblematic. In the context of this project we are referring to a programme derived from research findings, systematically evaluated and widely replicated.

external intervention aimed at parents has been subject to criticism on a number of other levels and these merit some examination.

Firstly, as argued by Gillies (2005), while such intervention often purports to be aimed at all families, the rhetoric can suggest a focus on 'socially excluded' or 'disadvantaged' sections of the community (p.71). There is a danger, therefore, that school-based projects come to be seen as a simplistic panacea for what are deep-rooted and complex social issues. In reality, schools are likely to have a limited capacity to overcome societal problems (Cummings et al. 2011; Lupton 2014). Entwined with this is a suggestion that family-oriented intervention represents a moralistic agenda through which a middle-class conception of parenting is imposed on some form of deficient 'underclass' without a full understanding of that group's assets (Gillies 2005; Durand 2011). The focus on desirable parenting behaviours and on tightly prescribed conditions might be seen to support this view. Gewirtz questions whether socializing parents into middle class values is even desirable, claiming that 'there appears to be only one (valid) way of being an active parent.' (2001, p.376). This view is reminiscent of Lareau's (1987) argument that middle-class social relationships between families and with schools are not intrinsically better, but simply more consistent with schools' definitions of what is appropriate. To follow this line of thinking, there would seem to be a danger of failing to recognise and build on the assets of families within some communities.

Family interventions nevertheless seem geared towards building forms of social capital among groups of parents deemed to be deficient in this respect. By social capital we might refer to characteristics summarised by Flint (2011) such as shared social values and rituals, strong social networks, trust and interdependence. The assumption is that these characteristics are associated with community cohesion and beneficial social welfare outcomes. As Bagley and Hillyard (2014) note, communities in urban areas can be seen as less naturally predisposed to this kind of 'self-help' than those in rural settings and they may therefore be especially targeted for intervention projects. In contrast to this deficit view,

there are counter voices, however. From the US, Yosso (2005) urges us to broaden our definition of capital, giving many examples of under-acknowledged assets at work in Communities of Color, while Villenas (2001), referring to the Latino community, argues for foregrounding the strengths of education within the home in the face of 'benevolent racisms' (p.22). In England in recent years, social capital has sometimes been linked to the government's urging of communities to take responsibility for helping themselves, rather than turning to local authorities or national government welfare and funding, a policy popularly known as the 'Big Society' (Cameron 2011). Part of this vision is an expectation of private philanthropy, which is becoming increasingly prevalent in education.

We have observed how such acts of philanthropy may be linked to external intervention in education. These acts are usually associated with material giving, typically of monetary donations, which lead to various accountability measures to ensure the money has been well spent. Despite the potential benefits of these funding sources, such gestures need to be viewed with caution. Guthrie et al. (2007) have documented the rise in US corporate philanthropy for education. This is significant, considering Ball's (2012) argument that we have moved to an era of 'profitable giving' in which the line between the public good and private interests is increasingly blurred. Giving, in this paradigm, is associated with a greater expectation from benefactors of involvement in the ways donations may be used (Saltman 2015).   The clear implication is that, if school and family programmes draw increasingly on external philanthropy, this is likely to bring with it an added layer of direction, scrutiny and accountability. A final consideration is that funding may be predicated on programmes having a strong evidence base of effectiveness. By its very nature, a thoroughly researched, evidence-based programme necessitates a high degree of standardisation and, as noted by Guerra and Knox (2008), there may be an inherent conflict between such an externally evaluated programme and the importance of being responsive to local community needs.

In this paper we consider how a specific externally evaluated programme's successful implementation is dependent upon an existing local community network and have found Tönnies' theoretical concepts of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* valuable in this. We explore this before outlining the context for the research.

Theoretical underpinnings

Tönnies' ([1887] 2002) analysis of social groupings is a helpful way of understanding the ways in which an intervention might affect relationships with different groupings in school and the wider community. Tönnies offered a sociological reading of relational groupings according to a continuum, with *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft* inhabiting the extreme opposing positions. Whilst Tönnies was responding to changing times within nineteenth century Europe, as traditional agricultural ways of life were replaced by industrialisation and urbanisation, the metaphors of *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft* can be extended to more recent contexts. Tönnies' terminology was originally understood as a polarity between small, rural community groupings in the *Gemeinschaft* and large industrial competitive market societies in the *Gesellschaft.*

Tönnies' analysis of social groupings has been regarded as hugely influential in academic sociological traditions. It has had a broad following in Europe, Japan and in the US, where his work is considered to have 'sired the sociologics' of the Chicago School (Bond 2013, p.1) but, paradoxically, Tönnies is also considered to have both 'exercised a powerful and indeed cataclysmic ideological sway….[and] remained largely obscure in content and intent' (ibid). The obscurity referred to by Bond is likely due to issues associated with translations of Tönnies' archaic German and also of the terms *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. Tönnies attempted to try and provide some clarity by altering the subtitle in the later version of the text so that the focus became more explicitly about social relationships rather than economics and politics. Thus, *Gemeinschaft* is organic and dependent upon locational ties,

relational ties and ties of shared values whereas *Gesellschaft* is a top-down model of relationships usually applied to professional communities where individuals only come together in an imposed context: 'a mechanical aggregate and artefact' such as a workplace (Tönnies 2001 p.19). Community in the *Gemeinschaft* sense of the term 'means genuine, enduring life together' as opposed to *Gesellschaft* which can be 'transient and superficial' (2001 p.19). In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the romantic 'folk' memories of an agrarian community became hijacked in Tönnies' Germany by German nationalists and eventually the National Socialist party, whilst, in post-war usage of the term, *Gemeinschaft* became associated in the US with marginalised groupings within society seeking to assert community links and identities separate to, but part of, the main society. In England, the desire for community as a salve to society's ills has been variously taken up by political parties across the political divide. Most recently in government policy the focus is on initiatives designed to encourage 'social responsibility' with individual communities working together to create a ground up antidote to crime, fear and isolation in an attempt to bring about community cohesion.

The distinctions between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* are often represented as simplistic binary opposites. We would wish, however, to extend the notion to a more nuanced reading which embraces the notion of social capital. When Tönnies was describing the shift from community to society he was able to do so because, prior to industrialisation, 'everyday life consisted of local, face to face relations with a relatively small and stable set of persons in relatively fixed institutions' (Coleman 1993, p. 5). Similarly, the Chicago School were applying Tönnies (and Durkheim's) readings of society in localities to their understanding of modern America within the context of the 'growing rationalization of society' (ibid) or, in other words, the intensification of bureaucracy. Coleman, in particular, drew on the perceived loss of *Gemeinschaft* when he described the 'great transformation' of America (ibid). For Coleman, social capital differs from other forms of capital because it 'inheres in the structure of relations between actors and among actors' (1988, p. 98) and he explored the ways in

which families and close communities drew on their social capital to help grow human capital arguing that this was particular important in relation to the development of young people. This aspect of social capital which is of direct benefit to others, the next generation, is a form of 'public good' and Coleman warns that because:

> 'strong families and strong communities – are much less present now than in the past, and promise to be even less present in the future, we can expect that, ceteris paribus, we confront a declining quality of human capital embodied in each successive generation. The obvious solution appears to be to attempt to find ways of overcoming the problem of supply of these public goods, that is, social capital employed for the benefit of children and youth. This very likely means the substitution of some kind of formal organization for the voluntary and spontaneous social organisation that has in the past been the major source of social capital available to the young.'

<div align="right">(Coleman, 1988, p. 118)</div>

Putnam (2000) builds on Coleman's conceptualization of social capital arguing that this is linked to child development and educational outcomes. Putnam describes the ways in which relationships within families, communities and social networks are inextricably linked and so social capital is shaped by participation in different social activities and by local ties to areas in which people live, study and work.

Automation of businesses and working contexts has further evolved and become arguably more impersonal with the development of virtual work organisations and globalisation. This has led to sociologists drawing on Tönnies to look beyond the local to 'transcendence of place' (ibid) and to different forms of communities within societies. Of particular interest to us has been the focus on schools as communities and schools and communities in a globalized context. Hence it is now possible for an intervention aimed to develop family-school-

community links to be devised in the US and imported and implemented into a small urban community in a city in the middle of England.

Turning our attention more specifically to schools, we note that over twenty years ago Sergiovanni called for a metaphor change to help with readings of schools as communities. Sergiovanni's (1994) use of Tönnies's ideas suggests new ways of thinking about how *Gemeinschaft* features of communities can operate within an overtly *Gesellschaft* organisational structure (1994). Merz and Furman (1997), while also highlighting the contribution of *Gemeinschaft* within education, argue for an analysis that looks beyond school as a closed system. Furman (2002) traces the historical development of schools and communities in the US, linking this development to the changing function of schooling which has moved from developing individuals who contribute to the localized needs of their community to a desire for all pupils to become adults with broader skills sets able to contribute to wider society and to be mobile. She argues that this changing role for schools in relation to their communities, alongside a more bureaucratic depersonalised governance structure, has developed parallel to society outside of the school gates which is more divisive: 'In short we have less community in our lives' (Furman 2002, p.7). Furman asserts that schools have a role to play in building school-community relations arguing for ways in which schools can 'contribute to the *creation* of local community' (2002, p.10).

Croninger and Malen analyse schools who work to build community in this way:

> 'as attempts to blend the social glue of *Gemeinschaftlich* relationships with the
> individual safeguards and organisational efficiencies of *Gesellschaftlich* social
> structures.'
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> (2002, p. 290)

However they also caution that most school-community partnerships fail because they lack opportunities for 'meaningful parental participation' alongside a lack of recognition of possible 'conflicts of interests and values'. Similarly, Crozier and Davis observe that school-

parent collaborations are often unsuccessful because of the lack of ability on the part of schools to draw on the assets of particular communities within the broader community, failing to 'discern and acknowledge the potential that the parents could offer' (2007, p. 296). They suggest that some groups of parents are characterised as 'hard to reach' and argue that this exacerbates the problems by pathologizing those who sit outside of and are unresponsive to *Gesellschaft* modes of communications and expectations. On a more optimistic note, Gatt et al. (2011) apply the concepts of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* to a study of how successful home-school programmes can bring about a range of benefits for those involved. Finally, as we move on to explore the lived experiences of a school and community's involvement in a school-family intervention programme, we are also mindful of Martin et al.'s observation that:

'Collaboration will only be successful when institutional 'core' values and purposes can be reconciled whilst all the partners contribute their distinctive skills.'

(1999, p. 1).

This acknowledgement of partners' distinctive skills brings us back to the asset-based reading of the community's role in the programme that we hoped to achieve.

Research context

The programme in question took the form of a branded, externally-funded process, centred on family development and cohesion both at school and in the community. Phase one, which is the focus of this article, involved eight highly structured weekly sessions comprising prescriptive parenting activities and discussion and a communal meal, funded by the programme but cooked by a different family each week.   Phase two involved families assuming greater ownership of the programme through a commitment to continue to meet in

a self-directed manner. The programme took place at Evergreen School, an urban primary school in the Midlands region of England.   It was delivered at school by a team of facilitators drawn from the school's community, including staff, parents and community members. The process was initiated and subsequently monitored by a certified trainer who, in line with the programme's requirements, was a former parent participant from a different region. Evergreen's programme began with 25 families, recruited on the basis of having a child in Year 1 (age 5-6), who was to be the focus of the intervention. The largest family was made up of two parents and four children whilst the smallest was one parent of an only child. All families were to attend each weekly session, though attendance fluctuated slightly in practice.

After the initial training, the first phase of this programme followed a weekly structure for eight successive weeks. The families were grouped into two 'hubs', which was a requirement of the programme, as was the need for a minimum number of families, in order to avoid the negative impact of attrition. The hubs met in different parts of the school. Each week the sessions, which were held at Evergreen at the end of the school day, involved the groups congregating in their hubs and beginning with participation in a specific song provided by the programme and family-by-family introductions. This was followed by a sequence of activities strictly prescribed in the programme guidance, including family games, adult discussion time (including separate mothers' and fathers' groups), one to one time between parent and child, and a communal meal cooked by a different family each week. The meal was a key component of the programme, intended to encourage families to sit together at meal times. It also allowed families to reciprocate and fully participate through providing food for others, whilst enjoying not having to cook for one night of the week for the remaining seven weeks of the programme. On each occasion a different family received a raffle prize and the sessions concluded with a communal circle activity. All of this was supported by the four facilitators, known as 'partners', drawn from parent, school and community groups, together

with a number of volunteers.   The partners were encouraged to support the parents during the activities through coaching conversations rather than working directly with the children. One school partner was a teacher but, otherwise, teachers' involvement in these after school events was limited to occasional volunteering. Each weekly session was preceded by a team planning meeting for each hub where the programme partners reviewed the previous session and discussed the arrangements for the next weekly session. These planning meetings comprised at least one school partner, one community partner and two parent partners who were the facilitators for the activities in the weekly sessions. The subsequent phase, to which we were not party, was to involve families collaborating independently to forge sustainable relationships with much less involvement from the school.

Evergreen school was part of a family of schools[2] in which the secondary school was a university-sponsored academy; the local university worked closely with this family of schools in a range of ways. Evergreen had responded to an invitation from the university to a meeting at which a leading charity presented the detail of the intervention programme to the family of schools. The intervention programme aimed to improve a range of child outcomes, such as behaviour and attainment, at home and school through fostering school and family cohesion. Evergreen was the first to sign up and negotiated the next steps directly with the charity. The school was drawn to this programme partly due to its own history of family initiatives within the school and in no small part to the promise of external funding. The school coordinator who led the programme in the school said that she had been impressed by the presentation, by the supporting research and the focus on *'bonding and bridging processes'* within school and family and inter and intra-family relationships. The fact that it would be the first school in the locality to run the programme was an added incentive. As a specific intervention, the programme was part-funded by philanthropists sourced by the

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[2] The term 'family of schools' commonly refers in England to a secondary school and the group of feeder primary schools located within a geographical community. The expectation is the most pupils from those primary schools will progress to the secondary school.

university and partly by the national charity, well-known for its work with families. Due to these existing links, the school agreed for us, as university faculty, to conduct, simultaneously, small scale research on the adult experience of the programme.

Methodology

By the end of the programme the majority of families attended a graduation ceremony after successfully completing the programme. The outcomes were to be measured formally by an external body representing the programme organisation using questionnaires as standardised instruments. The desired goals or outcomes for the programme were measured and tracked through parent and teacher pre-and post-intervention questionnaires and these suggested that the programme had had some degree of success in each of these areas.

Our research, however, was not part of this formal quantitative process of evaluation. Instead, we aimed to explore the lived experiences of the adult participants in order to generate rich, qualitative data, attempting to evaluate the programme in a complementary and authentic manner as a result. In order for this research to be as unobtrusive as possible we volunteered as participant-observers in the programme. We sought, therefore, insights into the issues and dynamics at play within this sort of project; as such, the research was conceived as a form of instrumental case study (Stake 1995) concerned with principles beyond this specific case school. In keeping with Thomas' (2013) views that theorisation, rather than simple description, is the most powerful rationale for inquiry, we hoped to offer a new perspective on the interplay between spontaneous and contrived forms of community.

The research design was 'ethnographic in intent' (Thomson et al. 2012): we participated as voluntary partners during some of the weekly sessions in order to observe the programme at

first hand and capture a range of interactions and experiences. Positioned within the weekly events, therefore, as participant-observers, working alongside families in different aspects of the programme, we were drawing on ethnographic techniques, which, as Punch and Oancea (2014) point out, can be distinguished from the use of ethnography as an overall strategy. Nevertheless, White et al. (2009) have challenged any sense of a dichotomy between ethnography and case study, arguing that the case study researcher may legitimately share the ethnographer's concerns with direct personal contact and their own place in the unfolding narrative. With this privileged insider perspective comes ethical responsibility. Our role as researchers was made explicit to facilitators and families at the first meeting, participation in subsequent interviews was entirely voluntary and appropriate assurances were given about anonymity and confidentiality. Pseudonyms are used in the data extracts that follow and for the school itself. In addition to ethical considerations, we were conscious that our dual roles of participants and researchers may have compromised the responses of interviewees at the end of the process. We sought to minimise this effect by emphasising the forward-looking purpose of the data collection, which, it was hoped, would inform similar projects in future by bringing participants' voices and experiences to the foreground.

Data were collected firstly through extensive field notes made during each stage of the project itself: from initial meetings, through weekly family sessions, to final evaluations. Following this, at the culmination of the programme, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight participants. The questions compared expectations of and formal preparation for the programme with the actual experiences and perceptions of impact. These interviewees were selected purposively to reflect the voices of the various adult stakeholders and encompassed respondents drawn from school staff, local community members and parents as well as parents from the participating families. Our analysis sought to establish themes arising from the data, through repeated close reading and comparison of sources. Themes and associated data were suggested by one researcher and then verified or elaborated upon by the other in an iterative process. This process corresponded closely to

Miles and Huberman's (1994) steps of data reduction, data display and finally conclusion drawing and verification. In practice, these were not sequential steps, but overlapping and simultaneous: tentative conclusion drawing began early in the process, for example. The various themes emerging were clustered and eventually it was possible to identify three over-arching themes: relationships, routine and transformations.

In the next section of this article we present a discussion of the three key themes and go on to explore the ways in which the metaphors of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* have helped us to understand the interplay of different community elements.

Findings

Relationships

> *The co-ordinator, Rachel, explains the project to the parents. Questions and concerns are shouted from the back, but in a bantering tone. These are fielded in an understanding, good-natured way. Rachel is accompanied at the front by Sarah, a partner, but also a parent at the school. She seems to be known and trusted by other parents and supports with jokey but reassuring comments. There is a strong sense of Sarah bridging the divide between school and parents: if she, as 'one of them', is an advocate for the project, others will follow.*
> (Field notes, initial parent meeting)

In the programme documentation, the relationships between project participants are delineated by clearly defined, separate roles. We saw this enacted as a representative from the funding body and an accredited trainer conducted surveillance to ensure correct protocols were followed; trained partners delivered the programme and families, as

recipients, complied with the procedures. Beneath this veneer, however, we found other relationships at work.

The project was not an isolated venture for the school and built on existing initiatives through which Evergreen sought to collaborate with families. Indeed, a teacher in the school referred to it as *'just another strand of community support'*. As such, Rachel, the project co-ordinator for the school, was able to draw on a fund of existing contacts when assembling the team of partners, including the community partners, who were already involved in various ways with the school. The approaches that she made, affectionately referred to by partner interviewees as *'stalking'* and *'pestering',* were based on finely-tuned judgments. Some potential contacts, such as health visitors, were ruled out, for example, because of their perceived associations with formal, professional processes and the dynamics within hubs were carefully considered.   One of the parent partners chosen alluded to the benefits of her prior relationships with parents:

> '*I know that I'm quite confident because I work in school and I'm like, 'Ladies, come on,' and I can get them down.'*

The initial information meeting, as illustrated in the opening vignette, exemplified the power of informal, personalised explanations and word of mouth contact to supplement the official documentation. Most striking, however, was the co-ordinator's ability to intervene skilfully at times of crisis. The first week of the project, when there was a concerted effort to adhere closely to programme structures, proved extremely challenging, described by Rachel as *'horrendous'* and *'a nightmare'* and by one parent as simply *'boring'.* Following this, Rachel engaged in a process of speaking to parents in order to convince them to return. As she put it:

> '*If I was one of those families, I'm not sure I would have gone back. So I followed up with everybody…I got some feedback from them. Obviously it was all negative and I*

> *spoke to them about that, you know, 'I understand how you feel about it' and so then*
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> *the following week we had to think about a few things.'*

Parents interviewed afterwards clearly valued Rachel's actions. Similarly, an altercation between families during the second week of the project meant that partners again had to use their knowledge of local relationships to rescue the situation. The parental confrontation, stemming from an incident involving some of the children, was defused and the decision to exclude one family from the project was agreed by all partners. This then raised the prospect of a boycott by others, which in turn had to be managed by subtle interventions from Rachel and Sarah, a parent partner. Discussion with individuals at the school gates, at various points around the school and in a subsequent group session helped keep the group on track. Bethany, another school partner, explained:

> *'They all understood and said 'yeah you're right. It wasn't a child kicking off. It was a*
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> *parent and that's not acceptable.' I mean, they all came back so we must have done*
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> *something right.'*

For her part, Sarah went as far as seeing this event and the ensuing discussion as a positive, bonding experience for the group. This sort of contingent intervention can be seen as working beneath the prescribed programme as a hidden, supportive structure.

In contrast, any perceived failure, within the formal processes of the programme, to acknowledge existing relationships stood out and was negatively received. Concerns were expressed by partners from the outset, for example, about the capacity of the prescribed structure to accommodate a same-sex couple; these parents stayed for only two weeks. More generally, one family participant suggested that the pre-intervention questionnaires should have been completed well in advance and activities then tailored to the specific needs of this setting, in which she felt *'bad parenting'* , as she termed it, was less of an issue than elsewhere.

Routines

I arrive midway through this week's session. Outside the school is a small group of smokers made up of some parents, a school facilitator and a couple of others. It's striking that, amidst the formal division of roles and routines inside the building, the facilitator and parents are mixing in a different way outside and clearly enjoying one another's company. The smoking break, now built into the schedule, seems an important part of the process.

(Field notes, Session 6)

As well as further emphasising the resilience of existing relationships, the very existence of a planned cigarette break hints at the adaptations to prescribed routines that were implemented. These adaptations served to personalise the formal programme for this specific context and we go on to illustrate some of these. At the heart of the formal programme was a process of coaching, requiring partners to crouch next to parents and offer whispered directions in order to facilitate play with the child. When this was enacted according to the training, the approach, as recounted in later interviews, was deemed patronising by parents and partners alike. Rachel recalled how she crouched next to a parent only to be told to *'Get up, love'*. Over time, the activity was moderated through personal judgement, as Sarah illustrated:

'You just have to realise your tone and who you're speaking to…A lot of people think, especially teachers, that they somehow are above parents and they have this attitude that they know more.'

The unwelcome connotations of teacher-like behaviour are significant and the team decided that overt coaching should be used more sparingly. However, Rachel reported being *'pulled*

up on it' by the programme's trainer, despite her detailed justification based on parental annoyance.

The official song, part of a set routine prescribed as the opening of each session, initially resulted in visible discomfort among some parents and was variously described by partners as *'churchified'* and *'like a lead balloon'*. This process was not abandoned or undermined, however, but subtly developed week by week, as different approaches to the use of musical instruments and participation were tried out by the partners. Memorably, in this school setting which happened to have enhanced provision for deaf pupils, sign language was added to the words of the song. When we asked about this during our interviews, partners described it not as a conscious decision for the project but as something habitual within the school.

A further adaptation of the programme was particularly evident in the ritual of the shared meal, cooked by one family and eaten by all participants in strict family groups. This was central to the prescribed weekly programme and field notes attest to the great pride taken in the provision of food for others, but the logistics were far from straightforward. Reassurance was provided to particular families where needed and partners realised that they needed to take over the job of shopping for ingredients. In practical terms, they recognised the need to provide industrial-scale kitchen space at school and thus had to ask the school kitchen assistant to provide additional support. As volunteers ourselves, working within this kitchen setting, we saw first-hand the reliance on the considerable goodwill of individuals from both inside and outside the programme. One school partner reminded us that *'I only get paid til five o'clock and we're doing all the shopping outside in our own time'*. It was clear that, beyond these official participants, others, such as the school's kitchen assistant, had stayed as late as 8 p.m. at times.

In many ways, these examples of context-specific adaptations served to bridge the gap between the idealised image of the programme portrayed in training and the realities of its weekly enactment. This was evident from the partners' initial reactions to the formal pre-training which, at the time, was found to be inspiring and interesting. However, with hindsight, Rachel noted:

> *'It felt like we were learning so much but I think we've learnt so much more doing it and it's actually made most of us realise that the training didn't fulfil our needs to be able to deliver.'*

Constraints such as a lack of planning time, a packed weekly programme, and difficulties explaining the purpose of activities to families were all cited as potential limitations when the partners came to the implementation stage. In order, therefore, to deliver the programme, partners fell back on a range of informal forms of collaboration, including the use of a WhatsApp group, shared responsibility for shopping and devising their own folder of week-by-week materials.

The programme requirement to separate families into two discrete hubs was a further source of tension at times. One hub lacked an appropriate room that would allow families a degree of privacy, being housed in what one partner described as *'a really really claustrophobic small space'.* This was eventually offset by the location of the graduation in the final week:

> *'This is the first time the hubs have been together and it seems fitting that the hall is situated between the two hub rooms so that it is a meeting place with families entering from opposite doors.'*
> *(Field notes, Week 8)*

While these subtle adaptations had seemingly served to support the process, it was interesting to note during a review meeting that deviations from prescribed routines were referred to by the certified trainer as *'miscommunications'* that needed to be *'corrected'* in future training. Indeed, the fact that the trainer was drawn from previous programme teams was partly to ensure fidelity to the set processes. Certainly, her terminology suggested an enduring emphasis on conformity and reminded us of the perceived importance of uniformity for an evidence-based intervention.

Transformations

> *The parents sit in a circle and, one by one, the affirmations are read out. These include highly personalised observations about how they have interacted with their children and have been mounted in a frame. 'They've really been watching us,' says one mother with surprise.*
> *(Field notes Session 8)*

Change within this project officially centred on measurable improvements to family relationships and the functioning of target children, as determined by a series of pre- and post-intervention questionnaires. While such quantifiable outcomes against specified criteria were outside the scope of this study, we were interested to note additional, more immediate examples of transformation.

Throughout the process, it was clear that impact on parents went beyond the focus on relationships with their children. The coming together with other adults was important, not simply for mutual support and discussion; it represented the provision of time and space and, above all, an opportunity to be looked after. One parent exclaimed, *'What a treat! No-one ever makes me a cup of tea',* whilst another noted that these sessions were the only times she was ever fed by someone else. The provision of a meal was widely identified by both partners and families as the biggest incentive for returning each week. Such

pampering was also evident in the weekly prize draw, rigged so that each family would win once. The basket of gifts was carefully tailored to each family's characteristics, much to their initial amazement, showing a high level of personal attention.

The impact of this individual insight and care was particularly vivid in the final week. As a culmination of the programme and a means of reinforcing positive communication, parents had produced affirmations for their children about the progress seen. This process was modelled by the programme partners, who wrote their own affirmations for parents. When these statements were shared at graduation, some parents were visibly moved, sometimes to tears, to hear what partners had, in turn, written about them. In some cases, the contrast to the parent's outward, public image was striking and comments from Bethany, a school partner, reminded us that deficit models can exist within the community itself:

> *'I thought, oh, this is not going to go down well and they're going to think it's really cheesy, because they've got so much front and bravado…but when we actually gave it to them they were really emotional. Like the parent who was a bit scary, really abrupt, she really loved it and said 'Oh, I'm going to put this up in my house.' I just thought, I'd never expect that from a parent like that.'*

These affirmations, each carefully mounted in a frame, were not bland, generic comments, but highly personalised observations of individual moments of success, drawing on the specific knowledge of each family's context and journey.

Parental transformation was also apparent in attitudes towards school. Facilitators and parents alike reported improved parental engagement with the school as a result of the project but it was clear that a delicate balancing act was at work. Involvement of Evergreen staff as school partners was important and the weekly sessions themselves took place within the school's hall and classrooms: strongly associated, as physical spaces, with the school's daily activities. In light of early sensitivities about condescending interaction from the school

staff, roles were subtly reorganised. School partners and volunteers adopted a lower profile, absenting themselves, for example, during the parental discussion time each week and honing their use of almost invisible low-key interventions with parents. By the end of the project, Sarah, a parent partner, was able to claim a greater sense of ownership because '*it's about them and it's about their children. They just happen to be in school.*' Members of teaching staff in attendance had been:

> '*less 'teachery', for want of a better word; having a conversation with somebody as they appear, rather than as someone lower than them.*'

It appeared that, to a certain extent, the school building had been reclaimed as a site for families and that teaching staff had been seen to transcend their formal roles to become, as Sarah put it, *'more human'*.

While some of these changes might have been anticipated, we also noted transformations among the partners themselves. The programme required representation from school, parent and community groups. However, as Rachel astutely noted, the partners themselves needed to perceive personal benefit from their involvement if they were to be fully invested in the process. Benefits varied from person to person but a recurring theme was a growth in confidence. This was experienced, for example, by parent partners coming to take on much more prominent roles and revelling in their peers' recognition of this and by a school partner who had initially shied away from leadership but:

> '*By week eight I'd got my bossy hat on and did delegate a bit more and got things done.*'

One community partner was drawn from the local police force and, by her own admission, knew little about the school at the outset. By the end of the project, she spoke of feeling recognised and welcomed and being ready for involvement in future projects. She reported having a 'great connection' to the school and recounted how significant it was that members of the public could talk freely to and in front of the police:

'When I've been in sessions, they've been joking about it, saying, you can't say this in front of her! But they do anyway, so obviously they feel comfortable.'

Once again, formal roles seemed to have been transcended to a degree through the personal connections forged within the programme.

In drawing together findings around the emerging themes of relationships, routines and transformations, a common trend materialised about the ways in which those involved in the programme at the grassroots level made decisions either at a conscious or subconscious level to adapt processes of the prescribed programme to make it work in *their* context. Through processes which at times seemed small, such as the addition of the signing, it was clear that this was a group whose members were willing to take initiative, to assume agency and develop some ownership of the programme as it was enacted in their context. We go on to explore this, drawing on Tönnies' theory of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gessellschaft* as a means of understanding the wider significance of what we had experienced.

Discussion

We illustrated in our brief review of literature that parental interventions are situated at the intersection of a number of important themes: deficit models of parenting and communities; a move towards top-down, evidence-based intervention and the growth of education philanthropy. We now consider, through the lens of Tönnies' theorization of social relations and community, how the data gathered in this small study have enabled us to view these issues in a new light.

The assumptions of the programme in this study seemed to be that the parents and communities of the school had problems that were in need of fixing through external intervention. As such, the programme has a *Gesellscaftlich* intention and is 'a tool to be used in bettering' the school community 'condition' (Tönnies 2002, p. 252). This was evident in the

way that the structure of the programme and the implicit hierarchy of roles ascribed to it were clearly defined and delineated in the accompanying programme handbook and reinforced both in the training and the observation of sessions by the visiting trainer. Adherence to this 'authoritative type of relationship' (ibid, p. 259) is perceived to be key to the success of the programme, such that although the programme handbook states that there is flexibility to allow the sessions to be culturally responsive to specific site contexts, our experiences with those involved in this implementation of the programme suggest that this was not welcomed. As suggested by Gillies (2005), the assumption is that the programme's model of parenting is a desirable one and that the programme's intended outcomes will therefore be achieved through faithful implementation of the process. There were clear procedures for determining the success and outcomes of the project and these assumed the existence of measurable values which could be ascribed to successful implementation of this project. This heavily structured intervention would seem to accord with a *Gesellschaft* model of a top-down organisational approach to solving a 'problem'. We now discuss how this group developed ways of working, through some manipulation of the prescribed structures, to ensure that this solution was implemented with some degree of success. We argue that the processes for this were enabled through the emergence of (or development of an existing) *Gemeinschaft*.

One of the features of *Gemeinshaft* is the locational tie to a specific place. In late nineteeth century Europe it would be fair to assume that a community within one location would be fairly homogenous. This is not necessarily the case in a modern urban neighbourhood such as the one in which the school is situated. In such neighbourhoods, schools can function as a space where connections between various groups of people are made as they meet at the school gates, where networks are forged between different groups of parents and carers and between parents and teachers. However, for many, the school gates and playground are transient spaces on the boundaries of different communities where for brief periods of the day different networks in and out of school gather and overlap but then dissipate again.

What was interesting about this programme was the way in which the people we interviewed spoke about a changing relationship to this space through the time spent on the programme. We would argue that what had, for some, been a space serving a particular function and representing a particular set of authoritative practices took on a different meaning. The parents came together through their acts of adaptation of the programme, such as the smoking breaks in the playground and cooking in the school kitchen rather than at home, which became acts of reclaiming the place and imbuing it with new meanings. The place became one to which individuals could form an attachment or 'locational ties' (Tönnies 2002), making new meanings and associations with the place and building local social networks (Bailey et al. 2012) and becoming a 'community of place' (Tönnies 2001, p.27).

The timing of the programme, outside the school day, and the new configuration of the place as a meeting and eating place for families led to one interviewee describing it as taking on the role of a 'safety net' for some individuals as they realised they could have a voice in a space that had previously been thought of as bounded by hierarchical relationships in school (teachers) and out of school (parents). In such a way the programme and the deviation from its structures allowed for locational and relational ties to be created where new roles were negotiated and new kinds of relationship were formed.

As we have stated earlier, our observations of the programme and its structures suggest that the (albeit well-intentioned) intervention imposed a hierarchical model of networks and relationships and prescribed ways of working and communicating that at times caused tensions for the people involved in this project. Nevertheless, the overwhelming sense is of the positive contribution made by ties of 'kinship', far more redolent of *Gemeinschaft* than *Gesellschaft*. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the subtle and personalised interventions by Rachel who drew on her extensive prior knowledge of families and individuals to mediate the processes. She and another community partner, Sarah, used humour, sarcasm and gentle teasing, more akin to familial close relationships than formal

approaches, to keep everyone engaged. It should be noted at this point that, while efforts had been made to secure the involvement of harder to reach families, the participants, as volunteers, were ultimately self-selecting and those with good relationships with Rachel and others may have been over-represented. The group seemed also to recognise the need to go beyond the formal programme structures, in terms of caring and practicalities, to ensure that the cooking of the weekly meal was supported by shared shopping trips, by buying personalised gifts for the children in the family who won the hamper etc. As these relationships grew and were nurtured within the group it became clear that, for some participants at least, this community would continue to evolve beyond the time of the intervention. In this way, the intervention, which by its nature is a *Gessellschaft* 'transient and superficial' model bringing people together for the length of the programme, is seen to have developed into a community in the *Gemeinschaft* sense of the term drawing on a sense of genuine, enduring life together (Tönnies 2001, p. 19).

The shared decisions about personalising the programme, examplified by signing to include deaf students and the appropriation of family meal input, grew out of a sense of common or shared values. Such local traditions and organic developments are characteristic of *Gemeinschaft.* The resulting sensitive adaptations and minor deviations from the 'script' were not acts of subversion or necessarily at odds with the *Gesellschaft*-like programme but, instead, were attempts to mitigate the rigidity of the programme in order to ensure its success locally.

Our starting points for this research were fairly open-ended, as we wished to prioritise the voices of the participants. We both, however, admit to beginning with a sense of unease about the level of prescription within the programme and the lack of flexibility to respond to local needs and contexts. We were also somewhat uncomfortable with an intervention that was not targeting the causes of social exclusion and disadvantage and with the notion of a standardised solution based on a clear model of parenting as a response to a local problem:

following on from Lindsay and Strand's (2013) comments, we wished to investigate the mediating influence of the community in question. Nevertheless, we recognised that, over time, the intervention did seem to have a positive impact, albeit not only in the ways envisaged by the originators of the programme. However, the challenge arising is to reconcile this evidence with the need for quantifiable impact data expected for philanthropic giving of the kind described by Saltman (2015).

Perhaps a more authentic evaluation of the programme would consider more subtle qualitative indicators of impact. For example, interviews and informal comments during observed sessions showed that, for some parents, there was shift in their relationship to the school and particularly the teachers; there was a degree of reciprocity within this as teachers recognised the commitment of the parents to their children's success. The metaphors of *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft,* whilst not unproblematic, have helped us to make some sense of this. The structures of the programme and the need for this group of people to come together to work within the contractual organisational demands of the intervention are at the *Gesellschaft* end of the continuum. However the behaviours, relationships and loyalty of the people within the community of people from within and out of school ensured that the programme did run successfully. It would seem that the bringing of people together with a shared commitment and purpose is an act of *Gemeinschaft* and it is the existence of this that helps the intervention to succeed.

Outside the school gates there is a range of networks and informal groupings that come together as a community of parents and carers; some relationships and ties exist beyond the parent community, many overlap, some only know others in the group through the parent community. This parent community frequently meets on the space signifying the borders of school and home at the starts and ends of day - the playground - so there are locational and temporal ties linking them together. For some, the end of their child's school career will also mark the end of their involvement with this community. For others, their links with members

of the parent community will continue and develop into new forms of networks and groupings linked by a shared experience of having children at the school. Within the school gates are other networks bound together by a connection to a specific place. At different times this will be made up of different bodies; for some the link is to a workplace from which friendships and bonds are made which might exist beyond the school gates and the school day; for others their connection is through their child and the relationship between teacher and parent is towards the more formal end of the scale.

We perceive, therefore, a series of overlapping waves where different communities emerge, connect and then dissipate. Similarly, there was an ebb and flow of subtle and skilled interventions on the part of participants such as Rachel. The programme brought the different communities together, blurring at times the previous demarcations of school and home for some children and their parents. Often it was the collective need for localised adaptations to the programme itself that facilitated this developing community. Through the shared experience of the *Gesellschaft*-like intervention emerged a *Gemeinschaft* body.

Conclusion

Our intention in this article has been to challenge existing conceptions of impact by foregrounding the role of the informal aspects of community at work in these externally-imposed programmes, with a view to exploring how impact might be considered in more varied and meaningful ways. Somewhat contrary to our preconceptions, this has proved to be a 'good news' story about the interplay of these different forms of community. As such, it raises a number of considerations about possibilities for future evidence-based projects. Evaluations need to seek to understand and give voice to informal aspects of community that are not easily measurable and to challenge deficit assumptions of parenting and communities in socially deprived areas. A productive starting point for more authentic evaluations would be to acknowledge that within some informal communities there is a

longstanding 'richness' that counters the dominant deficit depictions of economically disadvantaged contexts. Alongside this, there might be an expectation that interventions, such as the one described in this article, require resources beyond money, such as time and space, to allow them to be successful. Above all, interventions which are prescribed from afar need to have flexibility within them to allow for local interpretations and agency. Rather than top-down directives from intervention guidance simply requiring the programmes to be culturally sensitive, we argue for recognition of the importance of space for each individual community to develop their own interpretations of the programme. This needs to go beyond acts of cultural adaptation to value local expert judgement and ongoing contingent responses as bespoke programmes unfold in each community setting.

We have suggested Tönnies' metaphors as a way of understanding this. It would be unrealistic to propose that the existing community surrounding the school was wholly *Gemeinschaftlich*. We suggest, however, that there is a continuum and that the programme's successes have depended on *Gemeinschaftlich* characteristics to counter-balance some of the *Gesellschaftlich* pressures imposed on the members of this community and their school. In this way, families have been able to participate meaningfully in the emergence of a co-created local community in which school and families can acknowledge and build on each other's contributions and assets.

This valorising of local lived experience leads us to call for broader, more authentic evaluations of the effects of philanthropy. In this reconceptualization, evaluating the impact of benevolence moves beyond measuring quantifiable impact on recipients as objects of intervention towards acknowledging the experiences of participants in broader terms. This contribution towards the understanding of impact would allow an asset-based view of communities which is rooted in humanity and generosity of spirit as well as generosity of material resource.

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