

Rural schools, social capital and the Big Society: a theoretical and empirical exposition

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Abstract

The paper commences with a theoretical exposition of the current UK government's policy commitment to the idealised notion of the Big Society and the social capital currency underpinning its formation. The paper positions this debate in relation to the rural and adopts an ethnographically-informed methodological approach to provide an in-depth look at two contrasting English rural primary schools and their relationship with their village communities. The empirical investigation seeks to explore the extent to which the potential for building social capital is evidenced in current rural school–community relations within these two locales. The findings reveal a highly differentiated countryside in which any attempt to essentialise the abilities of rural schools to generate social capital in order to build the Big Society should be avoided.

Introduction

The work of Tonnies (1887) established a social scientific tradition of rural research. Subsequent literatures considered the rural in relation to the urban (Frankenberg, 1957; Cloke, 1977), the global (Cohen, 1982; Champion, 1989) and contested notions of rurality and rural governance (Mormont, 1990; Woods, 2005; Giarchi, 2006). Recent research traced the decline of agricultural economic dominance including the vastly reduced economic viability of smaller farmers (Cocklin & Dibden, 2002; Halpin, 2004) and the rationalisation of perceived uneconomic local commercial services (Warner & Hefetz, 2003). The current literature now stresses the interplay of economic, social, political and cultural forces, perceiving the 'rationale for prioritising agricultural interests in policy making has been questioned... as many of the growth industries including tourism, rely on a different representation of rural space to that of productivist agriculture' (Woods, 2006, pp. 582–583). The present state of the countryside is further complicated by counter-urbanisation and demographic tensions in some rural communities. Middle-class urban migrants (often with no connection to the locality or agriculture) attracted by aesthetic notions of the "rural idyll" within a consumption-based countryside' (Woods, 2006, p. 587) have moved to or bought second homes in rural areas. This in-migration is compounded by an outward migration of younger people from these same local communities, seeking employment elsewhere and leaving elderly relatives behind (Giarchi, 2006; Woods, 2006). The result is a blurring as to what constitutes rural living, rural spaces and even rural occupations. It marks the possible existence of a 'differentiated countryside', that resists any ready essentialism being ascribed to rural localities (Murdoch et al., 2003). As such the ideal of England's 'green and pleasant land' has increasingly become challenged and problematised within a shifting social, cultural and political landscape, as rural spaces are being reconstructed at both policy and grass root levels.

On the everyday level, despite theoretical and policy ambiguities, rural inhabitants face fundamental challenges including: access to transport and postal services; affordable housing; the availability of good health care and; perhaps most notably education (Giarchi, 2006). Moreover, as Woods (2006, p. 587) notes, 'debates over the provision of rural services revolve not only around their functional properties but also around their symbolic properties, as core components of an idealized notion of the rural community'. At the heart of this resides the rural school:

The village school plays a multidimensional role in a rural community. It is not only an educational establishment, but also a focal point for community life. It can be used as an avenue for community meetings and events, and fundraising activities, and informal

school-gate conversations between parents contribute to the structuring of community engagement. Local schooling reinforces identification with a community and friendships formed in the classroom may shape the social networks of a community for decades.

(Woods, 2005, p. 587)

For Woods (2005) the rural school is situated at the cross-section of a multitude of roles both educational and community-orientated (Forsythe, 1984). Yet, barriers to potential synergies are often found at the local level. The small rural school, by its very nature, may be unable to affect the same economies of scale as urban schools. The 'greying countryside' (Lowe & Speakman, 2006) can place pressure on the viability of school numbers alongside human resource issues of attracting workers to potentially extremely remote rural locations. The government's school choice agenda has ironically increased competition between schools in rural areas, in some cases forcing amalgamation or closure (Moser, 2004). As Moseley and Pahl (2007) note, 'unintended consequences of forms of rationalisation in the name of efficiency can produce real costs far in excess of putative savings' (Moseley & Pahl, 2007, p. 9). Yet the threat of school closure might also unify disparate constituents (incomers and long-term residents alike) inside rural communities once mutual interests are threatened (Moser, 2004). Collectively, these issues make rural schools a unique site of intersecting—and potentially conflicting—policy and social dynamics.

Our research (funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC grant number RES-000-22-3412), engages with this shifting social, cultural and political landscape to examine how rural spaces are being reconstructed and repositioned at policy and grass root levels. In this paper we seek to engage critically with the UK coalition government's notion of the Big Society, its perceived potential for 'unlocking social capital' (Green et al., 2011), and the ideational assertion that rural communities, particularly their schools, are in a strong position to respond positively to this social capital building project (Commission for Rural Communities, 2010). In the first part, the paper examines the policy antecedence and dominant discourses associated with the Big Society, paying particular attention to the ways in which these are aligned with the generation of social capital and the positioning of the rural. In the second part, the paper ethnographically explores the extent to which the creation of social capital is evidenced in the actions of two contrasting English village primary schools in their relationship with the rural communities they serve.

Our understanding of the rural is informed by research within rural geography and the work of the US academic Bell (2007) and the UK academic Halfacree (2006, 2007). Bell (2007), in addressing the ontological and epistemological antecedence of the concept, makes an analytical distinction

between what he refers to as first and second rural; a distinction akin to Halfacree's (2006, p. 47) reference to a material 'rural locality' as opposed to ideational 'representations of the rural'.

The first rural, the dominant ontological and epistemological standpoint informing American rural geographical scholarship, is 'the material moment of the rural' (Bell, 2007, p. 405). In essence a bounded modernist conceptualisation of rurality, which draws on normatively referenced relative definitions or structural factors such as demographic or statistical variables, related to the labour market or population density, to determine what is rural. According to Bell (2007), in the quixotic desire of modernism to provide the rural with a presence, it 'sought boundaries in the boundless' (p. 409) and as such, while offering a materially defined object for study, opened the way for postmodern scholars, to reformulate a position which he referred to as the second rural:

I mean the rural we often have trouble knowing, and that we typically regard as a secondness, even when we do know it: the epistemology of rural as place, as unconfined to lower population density space, as (at times) consumption, as socio nature, as meanings which we may never unambiguously see —the ideal moment (in the philosophical, not the evaluative, sense) of the rural.

(Bell, 2007, p. 412)

For Bell (2007), the key issue in delineating between first and second conceptualisations of the rural, and drawing on Halfacree (2006, p.47), is that they 'intersect in practice'. In this crucial sense 'first rural and second rural, are equally first—and equally second—in the lived experience of the rural' (Bell, 2007, p. 412), and should be analytically conflated to constitute the notion of the 'rural plural' (Bell, 2007, p. 412). In determining our theoretical understanding and ethnographic engagement with rural space, we feel the work of Bell (2007) and Halfacree (2007) to provide a valuable ontological and epistemological standpoint, in which to situate and view our work.

The social policy backdrop

Reform of public services continues to be a fundamental component of the British political landscape. The 'modernising' agenda of the previous UK Labour government distinctively focused on the needs of individuals, groups and communities, as opposed to the traditional approach of conceptualising needs and service provision in terms of professional group interests and bureaucratic boundaries. The locally focussed goal of the previous government was to facilitate a more socially engaged citizenry (particularly in areas of social disadvantage), capable of pro-active involvement in community-based decision-making (Moseley & Pahl, 2007).

The current UK Coalition government has seemingly picked up on the previous government's themes of localism and empowerment and embedded them within a broad policy notion of what it terms the Big Society. The UK's Prime Minister David Cameron summed up the Big Society idea in the following terms:

You can call it liberalism. You can call it empowerment. You can call it freedom. You can call it responsibility. I call it the Big Society. The Big Society is about a huge culture change.... where people, in their everyday lives, in their homes, in their neighbourhoods, in their workplace... don't always turn to officials, local authorities or central government for

answers to the problems they face... but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities.

(David Cameron, 2010)

Crucially, the notion of the Big Society in desiring to scale back the state must be viewed alongside governmental economic plans to markedly reduce public expenditure, and for the gaps in provision created by the reduction to be taken up and filled by individuals, local communities and the voluntary and community sector (VCS). In advocating a shift in emphasis from government action to community action the Big Society idea is making several critical policy assumptions. Firstly, if VCS budgets are reduced this will not impact negatively on their ability to fulfil their role in the delivery of the Big Society. Secondly, charities, social enterprises and local communities will collaborate rather than compete in bidding for diminishing resources. Thirdly, people have the time, desire and compulsion to help each other and engage in local action, and fourthly individuals possess the abilities and competencies to help themselves and others. In essence the Big Society objectives are smaller government coupled with reduced social expenditure (Green et al., 2011). As Green et al. observe:

For the Conservative Party the 'Big Society' is about more than just voluntarism, it is about unlocking social capital. For them social capital is about personal links and networks which are not controlled by the State.

(Green et al., 2011)

Or as put by Rowson et al. (2010, p. iii) the generation of social capital can be perceived as the 'currency of the Big Society' with the ability to transform communities, empower citizens and encourage a sense of collective efficacy. In essence civic trust and norms associated with engagement in social networks and the structure of relationships (Portes, 1998; Gamarnikow & Green, 2009) enable the production of social capital which in turn leads to successful social outcomes (Gamarnikow & Green, 2004) associated with the Big Society ideal.

In making this very broad assertion on the merits of social capital building, it is important to make a theoretical distinction between a neo-Marxist perspective on social capital as signified by Bourdieu (1986) and a neo-Liberal perspective as signified by Putnam (1995, 2000). For Bourdieu (1986) an analytical understanding of the social networks associated with social capital is able to provide critical insight into the complex mechanisms by which the powerful are able to gain and sustain competitive and material advantage in society. Bourdieu's concept of social capital perceived as forms of valued social relations with significant others, needs to be viewed as part of an individual struggle over resources and rewards, which occur in relation to other forms of capital namely economic capital (money), cultural capital (legitimate knowledge), and symbolic capital (prestige and social honour). For Bourdieu, the class-based nature of a society is taken as given, and social capital is concerned with an individual's (dominant) position within that inequitable social structure; the dominant class defining what counts as legitimate knowledge, what social relations are valuable, and what symbols confer prestige and social honour. For Bourdieu only the bourgeoisie possesses social capital. In contrast, for Putnam (1995, 2000) the existence of social capital can be identified, developed and utilised within all communities—including those deemed socially disadvantaged. It is this conceptualisation of social capital which featured in the policy thinking of the previous UK

Labour government and which continues to underpin the current coalition government's thinking on the Big Society. From this standpoint the concept of social capital may be further delineated into more specific types of networks that arise from social interaction in informal and formal settings such as families, clubs, neighbourhoods, the work place and schools. A further analytical distinction is made between what is termed bonding, bridging and linking social capital (Granovetter, 1973). Bonding social capital describes closer connections between people, e.g., among family members or among members of the same ethnic group. Bridging social capital relates to more distant connections between people, e.g., with business associates, acquaintances, friends of friends, etc. Linking social capital describes connections with people in positions of power and influence outside of immediate social networks and associations (ONS, 2003).

The social networks associated with each of these forms of capital consist of both strong and weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). Strong ties are usually related to bonding capital and are associated with homogenous social networks between individuals who share an intimate relationship and/or social identity such as family or close neighbours and friends and who share common interests and values and interact frequently (Ashman et al., 1998). Portes (1998) observes how strong bonded ties can potentially operate in a negative and exclusionary way resulting in individuals and groups who are not members of a particular social network being perceived antagonistically as outsiders. In contrast, bridging and linking forms of capital tend to be associated with weak ties, based on a wider heterogeneous social network of relationships, which while less intimate and not necessarily based on shared values, may nonetheless prove more beneficial in providing access to a greater array of useful and powerful contacts, information and resources (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004; Putnam, 2000).

The existence and deployment of social capital so conceived is subsequently associated with a wide range of beneficial social welfare outcomes for communities and individuals including: better health (Martin, 2005), improved child welfare (Cote & Healy, 2001), increased educational achievement (Coleman, 1988), a reduction in crime (Putnam, 2000), improved local governance and increased civic engagement (Moseley & Pahl, 2007). It needs to be noted however that the concept and its alleged beneficial applications is not without a degree of criticism. For example, the deployment of social capital in certain contexts such as social networks and norms associated with gang membership and organised crime may be put to negative effect (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2001). In addition, the presence of social capital does not always mean that it is equally accessible to all members of the community (Horvat, 2003). The distribution of different forms of social capital is related to the degree of cohesion within a locality (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 2001) and what makes a healthy community is not just the quantity of social capital but the forms of capital being generated and their interrelationship (Carroll,

2001). For the UK's coalition government social capital is seemingly intended to be generated through voluntarism or the philanthropy of private individuals or companies, rather than targeted capital investment by the state. The underlying rationale for this is the conviction that central government should not and cannot solve the social problems affecting society. In essence, the social capital building project largely resides with individuals and local communities utilising existing resources, networks and institutions to help themselves. Significantly, this self-help approach to the generation of social capital to help build the Big Society is one in which rural communities are idealised as having a predisposition. For example, a position paper produced by Action with Rural

Communities in England (ACRE) (2010, p. 1 entitled Implementing the Big Society makes the claim 'The rural "Big Society" is already well developed'. Similarly, the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) observed in its 2010 'State of the countryside' report:

... national survey results we have analysed show that people living in rural areas have a strong sense of community. They are more likely to give unpaid help, to participate in local decision-making and to feel that people in their area share values and pull together, than people living in urban areas. This evidence indicates that rural people are in a strong position to respond positively to the new agenda around community-based activity and local empowerment.

(Chairman of the Commission for Rural Communities, Forward, State of the Countryside Report, 2010)

Interestingly, this ideational assertion that citizens in rural areas—in contrast to urban areas—have a stronger 'sense of community' and are predisposed to unpaid self-help are not new, and feature strongly in policy debates around tackling rural deprivation in the late 1970s (McLaughlin, 1997). At that time the introduction of market forces into public arenas of health, housing, social services and education threatened the existence of already limited rural public services, which resulted in a resurgence of locally-based self-help strategies (Edwards & Woods, 2004; Herbert-Cheshire, 2000, 2003; Murdoch, 1997). Subsequently, these rural self-help 'survival strategies' came to be discursively captured and repositioned by the Conservative government in the late 1970s and 1980s as constituting a popular policy option in the search for solutions to the problems of increasing deprivation in rural communities compounded by cuts in public expenditure (McLaughlin, 1997). Moreover, the notion of self-help increasingly featured as an idealised part of the rural tradition, one of close-knit rural communities possessing a natural tendency to solve their own problems and help themselves (Woollett, 1981; Development Commission, 1982; Dunning, 1985).

In terms of utilising existing local institutions, networks and associations in rural areas to build social capital, one of the first literary appearances of the notion is attributed to the work of Lyda Judson Hanifan's discussions of rural school community centres dating back to the first quarter of the twentieth century (Hanifan, 1916, 1920). Hanifan, discusses the ways in which forms of social interaction in this setting have the potential to generate positive community-based outcomes. In order to achieve this the role of the school is expanded from focussing simply on the education of children to one in which as an institution it plays a direct role in wider social development.

In a similar way the term 'public value' is currently used to describe the ways in which school-based activities may be engendered by schools to engage the wider community to positive effect. The idea here is that schools not only provide a wider social service, for example through the use of their premises for community association meetings, but that the service itself creates social outcomes with a wider community or public value (Leadbeater & Mongon, 2008). report, Small schools, big communities: Village schools and extended services. The report highlighted 'the crucial significance of schools to rural communities and their role in creating an inclusive or "big" society' (p. 3). It acknowledged the government's policy emphasis on wider public engagement in the delivery of services, suggesting 'closer integration between the functions of schools and other structures, including community associations, social enterprises, other statutory services and families' (p. 9).

Picking up on this theme, the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services published in 2011 a report entitled *Schools, communities and social capital: Building blocks in the 'Big Society'* (see Flint, 2011), exploring the role of schools in the generation of social capital in accordance with the Big Society ideal. The report notes:

The ability of social capital to transform communities is at the heart of the 'Big Society' vision which is described as seeking to empower citizens and increase their capacity to take up such power while encouraging a sense of collective efficacy. Schools are centrally placed to promote aspects of social capital such as reciprocity, civic engagement, trust and collaborative action (Melaville, 1999; Trevino & Trevino, 2004; Taylor, 2007). This is no surprise as healthy schools, like healthy communities, create purposeful and constructive relationships, and it is through relationships that we build social capital (Field, 2003; West-Burnham et al., 2007).

(Flint, 2011, p. 6)

The school is thus perceived as having a pivotal role in the generation of social capital in the communities they serve. In the subsequent section the paper reflects critically on this viewpoint, drawing on empirical evidence from ethnographic research in two contrasting rural schools and their village communities.

The ethnographic study

Two English villages with differing economic and agricultural backgrounds were chosen for the study: one in the North East with a mining heritage, a population of circa 2500 and a village school of 164 pupils, and one in the East of England with an arable farming heritage, a population of circa 600 and a small village school of 50 pupils. The villages have been given the pseudonyms Minbury and Cowhill respectively. The fieldwork was conducted between September 2009 and March 2011. The research employed participant observation inside the village schools and the village, semi-structured interviews (circa 29 in each setting), with key groups including school staff, parents, the governing bodies and key members of the local community, and 'in-the-field' interviews (circa 40 in each setting) with village residents individually and collectively (long standing and new arrivals) in a host of informal settings including social clubs, public houses, community centres, shops and personal homes. A strong use was also made of documentary material including school inspection reports, ordnance survey maps, residents' websites, parish newsletters and social history records and accounts relating to each village.

Flint (2011) observes that those schools most effective in building social capital have been found to be led by a head teacher with a 'clear, holistic vision that extended beyond the standards agenda to meet the wider needs of individuals and communities' and viewed 'the school as an agent for social change across the whole community' (p. 21). Similarly, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) a non-Ministerial government department charged with improving standards in education and childcare in England through mandatory school inspection has from 2007 required schools to show the contribution they make to community cohesion. The transition of this policy into practice identified as being heavily informed—if not largely controlled) by the professional philosophy of the head teacher and the kind of relationship they perceive their school as needing to develop with the local community (Bell & Sigsworth, 1992)

In Cowshill the attempt to consolidate a more holistic community-facing vision was hindered by the fact that the school had experienced a significant turnover in senior teaching staff, having had six different heads since 2005. As a consequence teachers had little local knowledge of the village, or experience of engaging with it. Further, the attitude and relationship towards the village forged by the last long-term head had established a legacy that had resulted in school–community relations becoming somewhat insular and limited. A former Cowshill head described the situation in the following terms:

The school... wasn't perceived to be a school that was open to the community... it was very much a closed shop... I was told that when they had things like assemblies and the parents were invited in, the rest of the school was locked so that people couldn't stray!

(Former head, Cowshill primary)

In Minbury, the village school had experienced greater stability and continuity of staffing and leadership. The current head teacher had been in post for five years. The Minbury head teacher had a clear philosophy with regards to the school and the local community, which she outlined in the following terms:

I wanted to establish a school that was an integral part of the community, that was open to parents and one which they felt comfortable visiting. I think the school needs to have that all encompassing and embracing ethos. It is really important that local parents see this as their school, that it is part of their community. This is why we have made such a strong effort to make parents and other villagers feel welcome.

(Minbury head teacher)

Whereas the head in Cowshill was relatively new to the school and was trying to formulate relationships with pupils and parent, many of whom were not from the village, the Minbury head was very familiar with pupils, their families, their history, the interconnections with other families and their association with the village. The community awareness and inclusiveness, witnessed in the attitude and approach of the Minbury head, echoed the research of Bell and Sigsworth (1992) who in their study of a small rural primary school observed:

... as you listen to [the head teacher] talking about the family of each child, it dawns upon you that she is describing people who are not merely the parents of her pupils but people who are members of a community—community to which she belongs, and one she values as highly as they do. It is not merely the voice of the school head teacher we can hear when we listen...but the voice of the community.

(Bell & Sigsworth, 1992, p. 4)

In turn parents were found to hold the head teacher in very high and warm esteem. As one parent remarked:

Mary [current head] makes you feel welcome, part of the school. I used to feel a little bit intimidated, scared about coming into the school, as if it was a place outside or separate from the village. Mary has done a lot to change those feelings and now I feel the complete opposite; she has done a great job of making parents want to get involved and be part of their kid's education. It does feel like the village school.

(Parent, Minbury)

Parents frequently emphasised the stake they held in the village school and a feeling of equality in their relationship with teachers. The school operated an open door policy, providing a regular opportunity for parents to see their child's class in action, with parents able to use the school to meet and chat with other parents anytime they wished, and to this end the school had a designated room which parents used as a social drop-in for coffee and biscuits. Minbury also ran a breakfast club for pupils from 8.00am charging 60p per day attracting a mix of regular attending children and one off's. Parenting support opportunities including one on numeracy and one on literacy ran on a Wednesday evening and Monday afternoon respectively. There was an active parent-teacher association with a regular newsletter sent to parents each term.

In Cowshill there was a parent teachers association and all parents were made welcome when visiting to the school. Nevertheless there wasn't the same depth or sense of belonging and shared interests amongst pupils, staff, and governors as found in Minbury, where there was a sense that the school was akin to a community association, where all had a part to play. In this way, the in-school position mirrored the findings of a CRC (2010) case study report on positive community-school relations in rural areas:

...an interlocking pattern of just human relationships in which people have at least a minimal sense of consensus, within a definable territory. People within a community actively participate and cooperate with others to create their own self-worth, a sense of caring about others and a feeling for the spirit of connectedness.

(Friere, 1998, cited in CRC, 2010, p. 71)

In Minbury school, a sense of belonging had been generated amongst parents who had trust in the school through feeling genuinely valued and included. And whilst it is difficult to gauge the extent to which the positive nature of these in-school relationships informed and transferred to behaviour outside of the school, their potential for impact is worthy of note. Especially, as we consider later in the paper, the formative impact the primary school in Minbury appears to have had on shaping personal relationships over generations. In terms of school-based community-facing activities in Cowshill, whilst it was reported that in the past projects had focussed upon the village, current projects were observed as focussing on the global rather than the local. In contrast in Minbury there was visual evidence that the school's curriculum sought to explore the relationship between the school and the village or look at the history of the local community. For example, the corridors within the school featured an exhibit of photographs and other material generated from a local history project conducted by Year 6 at the school.

While it would be misleading to portray Minbury as having a community-based curriculum, research by Flint (2011, p. 21) suggests schools which in some way 'explored the local community were more

likely seen to develop a sense of identity in their pupils' and to engender a 'a sense of individual and corporate responsibility for the locality, resulting in civic engagement and a strong sense of local pride'.

Further, in identifying schools which appeared to generate social capital Flint (2011) observed that such schools tended to have a desire to share their resources and facilities with the local community. In Minbury the head teacher was extremely keen for the school to engage and be utilised by the wider community, the reason this didn't occur was due in large part to the geographical location of the school. As the head teacher observed:

It is very difficult to function as the centre for community life if you are not physically in the centre of the village. I think it's important for the school to have a physical presence, to be seen and walked past by the community, and in this location we are a bit away from things.

(Minbury, head teacher)

In addition, located in the centre of Minbury was a well-used community centre fulfilling many of the roles the school would have been prepared to take on such as evening classes etc had the community centre not already done so.

In Cowshill, a large extension to the school building included a sports and arts hall, 'in principle' shared with the local community. The cost of hiring the new hall, as well as bureaucratic procedures, was cited by certain villagers as prohibitive. As one remarked, 'there were so many rules... women weren't allowed to wear heeled shoes in there and things like that because they might damage the floor'. Consequently, even associations once closely linked with the school had become distanced and any initial impetus for more extensive village use had seemingly been lost. Further, the village's own attempts to raise funds to build a hall on the village playing fields were effectively undermined by the school's extension success, and thus created additional tensions between the primary school and sections of the local community.

In essence the physical structure and location of the school hall, which unlike in Minbury was geographically in the centre of the village, didn't function as a material space, in which to bring the school and community together. Rather, due to its locally contested antecedence, financial drain, and under usage, it functioned symbolically as a signifier of school-community disharmony and disassociation.

Consequently, in Cowshill a culture had developed in which relations with the village were strained and managed through restricted activities that included Christmas events such as village churchgoers visiting the school to make Christingles and the Sports Day. This is not to suggest that visitors to the school were prohibited or made unwelcome, rather that the timing and extent of such visits were carefully stage-managed and controlled.

In both Cowshill and Minbury there tended to be very few external events held involving the community that were not school related. So for example in Minbury harvest festival hampers were made and delivered to elderly residents in the village.

The children participated in the turning on of the village's Christmas tree lights and performed a carol service at the community centre. Whilst these activities were limited they nevertheless played an important and traditional part in village life and enabled younger inhabitants to engage with more elderly members of the community.

Moser (2004, p. 4) contends that the extent to which a school will interact and interrelate with its local community will in part be determined by 'the proportion of local and incomer pupils that belong to the school community; the more local pupils the stronger the bond'. In this regard it is noteworthy that whereas in Minbury the overwhelming majority of the pupils came from the village and therefore had predetermined connection with it. In Cowshill only a small number of pupils lived in the village. Interestingly, when as part of the research Year 6 pupils in each school were asked to highlight 'what they liked best about the village', pupils in Cowshill focused almost exclusively on the school whereas in Minbury the pupils referenced areas or places in the village such as a particular playground or a local sweet shop.

The population in Cowshill had expanded rapidly in the post-war years, and did not have the same level of long-term residence in the village, nor occupational community, that Minsbury possessed in relation to coal-mining. The village had contained some temporary housing in the early 1950s, but with the demolition and redevelopment of those sites, those who had attended the school were no longer village residents. So, whereas Heley (2011) talks about the importance of having attended the school for being local, the older generation of Cowshill primary's former pupils had left the village which consequently lacked that generation of long-term embedded locals. Moreover, the new executive housing developments in the village for the most part attracted middle-aged newcomers who did not forge new links with the school as their children attended schools elsewhere.

In contrast in Minbury the highly stable, long standing village population meant that even those residents who didn't currently have a direct association with the school had themselves very likely attended it. Moreover, relations established at the school were not only consolidated in the community through proximity of living and socializing (20 years ago they would more than likely have worked as coalminers together) but return to the school when those former pupils themselves become parents and grandparents of children at the school. To this extent there existed a strong temporal bond between the village and the school. In interviews and conversations with parents and young people who had attended the village school, almost all referred to the lifelong friendships and associations they had first forged at the village primary. As the following quotes signify:

Me and Bob met at the primary school. Used to walk there together as young kids and I can still remember us playing football on the school field together and we are still hanging around together. But that is how it is in this village, people are close, they grow up together and still live around here. My kids are going to the village school now and so are his.

(Minbury resident)

I've known Mick since I was six; we went to school together, played football together, just known him all my life really. But that's what it's like round here, you go to school together, you grow up together, my mam knows his mam, they went to school together, his gran knew my gran, our granddads went down the pit together... you're just from the village. The pits closed years ago but the school's still here and that is where we first got together.

(Minbury resident)

For these residents their attendance at the village school represents a common experience which spans generations and helps establish and solidify interpersonal relationships and a sense of community. The Minbury village school provides a reference and meeting point in and through time which invokes memories and emotional attachments that 'can invest rural primary schools with a peculiar symbolic significance for the communities they serve' (Bell & Sigsworth, 1992, p. 2). The primary school is socially and culturally positioned as an integral part of a tight knit community. To this extent a symbiotic relationship seemingly exists whereby the school reinforces identification with a community and the community reinforces identification with the school. The friendships formed in the classroom and co-solidified in wider formal and informal village-based associations, arguably informing the social networks of the Minbury community for many years if not generations (Woods, 2006). The fact that the overwhelming majority of parents from Minbury with school age children chose to send their child to the school, and that a majority of those — if the existing trend continues — are likely to ultimately come to live in the village themselves, means the school is arguably fulfilling a particular role in the engendering of social capital. Namely, helping to establish and reinforce the social networks built initially around close bonded ties of family and friends living together within a neighbourhood, which facilitate a shared understanding and co-operation between people and a sense of shared identity, a common sense of place and a mutual sense of pride and obligation (OECD, 2001).

Building social capital?

In this paper the aim has been to reflect on the concept of social capital as appropriated and utilised by the UK's Coalition government as a building block in its desire to create the Big Society. The paper has signalled how the government's discursive policy emphasis on localism, voluntarism and self-help heralds a return to a position which in part predates social capital promulgations of the previous Labour government, and echoes that of the Conservative government elected in the late 1970s.

Moreover, in the economic downturn of the 1980s, as in the present day, rural communities are presented in an idealised way as having a predisposition to solve their own problems and a desire for self-help. The fact that such rural-based qualities, in so far as they exist at all, could be perceived as socio-economically-driven survival strategies born out necessity at a time of deprivation and disadvantage, is politically either completely missed or deliberately overlooked. The government's view is one of creating the Big Society through a rolling back of state intervention — including financial intervention; a withdrawal which enables the recovery and engendering of self-help qualities previously subsumed within communities. A key institution identified as having a pivotal role in achieving this goal and building social capital is that of the local school (CRC, 2010; Flint, 2011).

In seeking to align theoretical reflections on social capital with ethnographic evidence from two rural villages and their primary schools, the research findings reinforce the contention that 'assumed closeness of the rural school–community relationship is a modern myth' (Hargreaves et al., 2009, p. 81). Indeed, what was clear from the empirical findings was the marked difference in school–community based relationships and the potential for any concomitant generation of social capital within those settings.

For example, in Cowshill for reasons including large school staff turnover, local community tensions around use of school premises, and a school population largely not from the village, the relationship between the school and the local community was somewhat strained and distant. In particular the legacy of an occupational community, that was so clearly writ large in Minbury through coal-mining, was absent in Cowshill as people had worked both on and off the land, and the resident population had been somewhat transient. As one life-long village resident recounted:

I've lived in the village all my life and nothing ever runs long in this village. That's never been a village that hung together. ... I always say I would never buy a house in [villagename]. I mean I was born here and I'd never buy a house in [village name]! Just you know that's had so much development...we don't know anybody.

(Resident Cowshill)

So, Cowshill never had an established core, from which bonded social capital—if it is to be seen in largely positive terms—could have further flourished.

In Minbury, local schooling did appear to reinforce 'identification with a community' (Woods, 2006, p. 587) with the primary school occupying a powerful symbolic, cultural, and temporal position within the village. The long-term friendships formed in the school by pupils from the village—coupled with the relatively low migration out of the village—helping to shape and solidify school–community relationships and social networks. These social networks co-established by the school with the local community, generated a particular form of social capital built around the strong bonded ties of family and friends living and schooling together within a long established and close knit community (Granvetter, 1973). In Minbury these strong ties facilitated a shared sense of identity and place amongst local residents and a strong sense of pride in being 'from the village'; exclusively to be 'from the village' one needed not only to live in Minbury but have family connections going back several generations.

Gewirtz et al. (2005, p. 668) note in close-knit working-class communities, social networks arising from the strong ties of bonded capital 'can provide practical, emotional and psychological support and a safety net in times of crisis' (Gewirtz et al., 2005, p. 668). With this in mind, and as government policies respond in a period of economic downturn, it is arguably this safety net of self-help potentially generated in socially disadvantaged rural communities at times of public expenditure cuts, which the current UK government seeks to exploit, discursively capture, and (re) present as a societal good in its Big Society ideal.

The degree to which these strong ties of bonded relationships can be built on to generate other forms of capital is a moot point (see Bagley, 2009). In terms of both schools and their current relationship with the community, the empirical evidence on the generation of bridging capital (Granvetter, 1973) is much less clear. For instance, the Minbury head in opening up the school to parental visits and facilitating a sense of shared ownership for the school between teachers and parents possibly helped to forge new friendships and associations between individuals who had not previously known each other. But it was not evident from the findings the extent to which this gave community members increased access 'to valuable resources and information outside their immediate network of friends and relations' (Gewirtz et al., 2005, p. 668). Indeed in both Minbury and Cowshill venues other than the school, for example the community centre in the case of Minbury, functioned as locales for more broad-based community-facing activity. The same observation applies to the generation of linking capital. Consequently, whereas Flint (2011) found those schools generating social capital to be building the capacity of community organisations and developing the competencies of local voluntary leaders to gain access to external institutions and agencies, no such activity was identified in either Minbury or Cowshill.

In gauging the ability of schools to generate social capital (as envisaged by the current UK government) and thus function as key institutions in the actualisation of the Big Society (Flint, 2011), our ethnographic data suggest local context to be critical. The crucial point here is that school–community relationships are forged within a particular cultural, socio-economic, historical and temporal context. Consequently, the scope and opportunity for developing school–community relationships do not simply fall to the professional desire and values of school leaders and teachers, although as shown in Minbury they are important. Rather, the mutual engendering of a school doing things with rather than for its community is in part determined by the nature of the community within which the school is situated. In the case of Minbury, a tight-knit working class former coal-mining community of long standing, the school was located in a context where bonded social capital was arguably already established and flourishing. A context in marked contrast with Cowshill, which experienced a transient community with very limited opportunities to establish strong, bonded ties, and social networks. Our data would suggest the potential for rural schools and their communities to build social capital, as envisaged by the coalition government, cannot be essentialised in a highly differentiated countryside.

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