Introduction

This is a book about schools on the edge. It is, in part, a story of eight English schools living on the precarious edge between success and failure, but it is, in larger part, a narrative of schools and communities edging towards a common purpose and understanding of what is educationally important and achievable. The history of school education, wherever and whenever it has been written, provides accounts of schools in the centre of the social mainstream as against schools perpetually on the periphery. What brings them together is a common policy framework but their social and economic circumstances are worlds apart. Schools on the edge face a constant struggle to forge a closer alignment between home and school, parents and teachers, and between the formal world of school and the informal world of neighbourhood and peer group.

Children and young people live nested lives, writes Berliner (2005) referring to the contextual layers of experience through which they attempt to make sense of their world. Failure to grasp the complexity is a weakness of policy that looks for simple remedies, he suggests. So when classrooms do not function as we want them to, we set about improving them. Since those classrooms in turn are in schools, when we decide that those schools are not performing appropriately, we commence 'improving' them as well. But those young people are also situated in families, in neighbourhoods and in peer groups which shape their attitudes and aspirations, often more powerfully than their parents or teachers.

This is a story that could be told in Sydney, Hong Kong, Paris or New York. Politicians and policy-makers often pursue a school improvement path without a textured understanding of what it means for schools to meet the needs of young people on the edge of the social mainstream. These schools serve families and communities that have been cut adrift. The decline of traditional industries in the

hinterland of major conurbations has stranded some adults and young people on the periphery of economic life and the schools they attend often sit amid the rubble of run down neighbourhoods, distanced from their surroundings by their values, traditions and frequently inflexible structures. Sometimes they are also physically distanced, on the outskirts of town, drawing young people literally and symbolically to a different place.

Education may be the route out of challenging circumstances if the will and skill can be found to navigate a path through the rigid conventions of schooling. Some young people, however poor the financial status of their families, are able to draw on a social capital in the home which provides momentum and support. There are others who, with no such legacy, still manage to surmount the obstacles of both school and social conventions to achieve beyond expectation. Others follow the line of least resistance into the twilight economy. Their uncelebrated intelligence is put to use on the margins of the law, lured over the edge into scraping a living by whatever means and sometimes criminal activity, what Manuel Castells has tellingly described as 'perverse integration', the back door entry to becoming accepted and achieving success (Castells, 2000: 74).

Those who teach these young people also come from a different place. The neighbourhoods these teachers visit on a daily basis are rarely the ones they would choose to live in or whose lifestyle they would choose to emulate. It is that very ability to choose that separates most teachers from those they teach. And it is the freedom to choose that distinguishes them from parents to whom governments proffer a choice of schools, as if choosing well might make all the difference between life on the edge and life in the mainstream.

Yet choice *is* exercised. It is often a rejection of the local school and the immediacy of its problems and the children who litter gardens and pavements with disused wrappers and Coke cans and inscribe their personal slogans on shop fronts and bus shelters. As these families choose schools in better neighbourhoods with 'nicer' children, they leave behind schools with a critical mass of parents and pupils who have less resilience or capacity to choose. They leave behind them as well schools which struggle to survive, year on year on the edge of viable numbers whilst attempting to meet the demand for public evidence that they are able to perform just as well as any other school, despite the unevenness of the playing field and the seemingly unyielding yardsticks of accountability.

Yet, however bleak the picture, there are schools in all countries which succeed in defying the odds, sometimes by statistical sleight of hand, sometimes by a concentrated and strategic focus on those students most likely to reach the bar and, in some instances, by inspirational commitment to deep learning across boundaries of language and culture. These schools are, in every sense, exceptional.

A matter of attainment

The last decade has witnessed increasing use of so-called 'league tables' to locate school performance. Exam performance has become crucial and schools which are judged not to be up to the mark are deemed suitable cases for treatment. But what counts as 'low attainment' and how many secondary schools might be implicated? Such questions are more difficult to answer.

A report from the National Audit Office (NAO) on 'poorly performing' schools (2006, Figure 14: 23) suggests that in 2001 just over 600 secondary schools had 30 per cent or fewer of their pupils getting five GCSEs at grades A*–C. Judged against national averages, where half the pupils were getting over the same hurdle, all these schools could be described as 'low attaining'. In that year, however, the view of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) was that 20% represented the minimum acceptable target for all schools. Of the 600 schools just under 200 had less than 20% of their pupils getting over the same hurdle (2006, Figure 14: 23). Only 10% of the schools falling below the 20% hurdle were, according to the NAO's analysis, judged by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) to be 'good' although it does not report what proportion were performing 'satisfactorily' (NAO, 2006: 3).

Defining what might be meant by a 'poorly performing' school is not, however, that straightforward. The same analysis by the National Audit Office (2006, Table 10: 20) suggests that there were a number of different categories of 'poorly performing' schools, all of which might be said to present problems. Three categories were defined by Ofsted's procedures and accounted for some 140 secondary schools. They included: schools in Special Measures which were 'failing to provide an acceptable standard of education' (90 schools); schools with 'serious weaknesses' which were of 'inadequate overall effectiveness' (45); and so-called 'under-achieving' schools which 'performed significantly less well than others in similar contexts' (11). These are schools which might be said to be officially 'under-performing'. However, the DfES also defines schools as 'low attaining' if they are 'failing to achieve adequate levels of attainment for their pupils as measured by GCSE results' (53 schools).

In short, it is difficult to establish precisely how many schools were 'poorly performing' in England in 2001. The Ofsted and DfES categories suggest somewhere between 200 and 300 schools might be in the frame. Whatever the case, for a variety of reasons, the totals were to be reduced considerably over the next three years. The numbers of schools in Special Measures and Serious Weaknesses declined and more schools achieved the earlier 'floor' targets. In 2004 the number of secondary schools not reaching the 30% hurdle was reduced to somewhere over 300 and only around 70 fell below the 20% figure. But whilst such schools were making some

progress the bar was moving inexorably higher as the pressure to perform (and, crucially, be seen to be performing) took hold across the country.

In England, schools perpetually on the margins of national standards, are now described as 'in challenging circumstances'. Within that substantial group of schools the DfES defined an even more disadvantaged sub-set which they termed 'schools facing *exceptionally* challenging circumstances' and which they deemed to be fertile ground for demonstrating that even in the most adverse conditions schools could make dramatic improvement.

Eight schools, selected and recruited by the DfES as a test-bed for examining improvement, are the subject of the second half of this book. They are the prism through which we are enabled to see the larger picture. Through their experiences we come to a more fine grained understanding of how change works, both generally and in varying contexts. These eight schools are unique in their own cultural settings and their developmental history, yet recognisable virtually anywhere in terms of the issues they face. In common with schools in many other places they find themselves trapped in the force field of turbulent communities and uncompromising government policy.

It is the tension between these two sets of pressures that forms the central theme of this book. The first three chapters examine life in communities on the edge and the educational polices intended to provide educational opportunity. The fourth chapter describes the eight schools which signed up for the project designed to show how schools could rise above their circumstances and prevail against the odds, in exchange for the promise of realistic levels of resourcing and support. The stories of this 'Octet' of schools before the intervention of the project are told in this chapter.

The stories as related in Chapter 4 and the evaluation of the SFECC intervention as recounted in the chapters which follow are drawn from an in-depth evaluation study conducted by Cambridge University between 2001 and 2005. The team analysed student performance data over that period, comparing the improvement trajectory of the eight schools with a comparison group, visiting the schools on a regular basis, observing in classrooms, conducting interviews with staff, students and headteachers and, wherever possible, with social/community workers to get an external perspective on these schools (a fuller description of the evaluation project is provided in the Appendix).

Chapter 5 examines the impact on schools of the various initiatives of the SFECC project and evaluates their relative successes and failures. Their success, as measured by attainment at GCSE (the government benchmark for improvement), is the theme of Chapter 6. It analyses student attainment over time and in relation to a set of comparable schools. In light of the findings of the evaluation, the final chapter looks forward to a different kind of future for these schools and all schools which find themselves on the edge.