

Extended Schools in England: Emerging Rationales

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Abstract: Schools in many countries are beginning to take on extended roles, working with families and communities as well as with students. However, the rationales underpinning such developments are often unclear. This paper reports on case studies of 20 schools developing new roles as part of the national extended services initiative in England. It reports in detail on two of these schools, exploring the rationales for their extended roles elicited in the course of a theory of change- based evaluation. It finds that schools saw no contradiction between their traditional and extended roles because they saw students' academic attainments as shaped by a wide range of personal, family and community factors. It argues that the schools' rationales were coherent, but by no means fully articulated and concludes that dialogue between practitioners, policy makers and researchers is necessary to develop these rationales further.

Keywords: Extended education; community schools; extended schools; disadvantage

1 Introduction

The establishment of *The International Journal for Research on Extended Education* is indicative of a growing international interest in exploring ways in which schools can extend their work beyond their traditional role. In some cases, this wider role may simply take the form of an extension of the school's core business of teaching and learning into different parts of the day and year. However, there are initiatives internationally which take schools well beyond their normal concerns, involving them in working with families and communities as well as with students, and in working on issues of wellbeing, family functioning and community development as well as on academic matters (Cummings/Dyson/Todd 2011). These initiatives take many forms and go by many names, though in England they are known as 'extended schools' (DfES 2005). Although there is considerable variation in how these schools operate, they all tend to offer additional services and activities to their own students and, to a greater or lesser 'extent to students' families and to the communities where they live. 'Additional' in this sense may mean services and activities focused on academic learning, but it might equally well mean family support services, health services, or employment-related services (Cummings/Dyson/Todd 2011).

What is extended in such initiatives is not simply the time available for the school to engage in teaching its students. It is also the remit of the school, which ceases to be simply an academically-focused institution, and instead becomes involved in issues which apparently have little immediate relevance to teaching and learning. This inevitably begs the question as to why schools should extend their roles in this way, and what they hope to achieve by becoming involved in children's health, or family welfare, or area regeneration? There are, of course, many ways to tackle these questions, and in other work we have tried to construct some possible rationales more or less from first principles (see, for instance, Cummings/Dyson/Todd 2011; Dyson 2011; Dyson 2010; Dyson/Kerr 2013; Dyson et al. 2012). However, it is also important to explore the rationales constructed by school professionals as they try to implement extended approaches in their own contexts. While such rationales may not be fully-formed or explicitly grounded in research, they reflect both what is practicable in 'real world' situations and the incentives to think creatively about the role of schools in the midst of the pressures and contradictions of practice. In this paper, therefore, we propose to report on the rationales of this kind that emerged in England in response to a recent national initiative to extend the roles of schools. In so doing, we will give an account of recent developments in this field in England, but, more importantly, we will test the underlying coherence of professionally-devised rationales and consider the implications for how the purpose of schooling and the place of schools in affluent liberal democracies might best be understood.

2 The English Context

Although there has never been a single, clearly-articulated rationale for extended education in England, schools there have long expected that they will need to offer cultural, leisure and sporting activities to their students, that they will need to support their personal and social development, and that they will need to engage with parents and communities to varying extents. From time to time, there have been more systematic attempts to extend the role of schools. Again, however, these have not been based on any single rationale and therefore have had different aims, often to relating to the social contexts in which schools were set. Some, such as the Village Colleges launched in Cambridgeshire in the 1920s have focused on making the resources of schools available to somewhat isolated rural communities (Morris 1925). Others, such as the community colleges in Leicestershire and elsewhere during the 1970s, have seen community engagement as part of a project to democratise education (Watts 1974). Others again, such as the community schools proposed by the Plowden Report on primary education (Central Advisory Council for Education (England) 1967), have been seen as ways of tackling social and educational disadvantage. All of this meant that, by the end of the Twentieth Century, the English school system was characterised by a rich array of schools with extended roles, but with little consensus as to either rationale or mode of operation (Ball 1998; Wilkin et al. 2003).

This situation changed in important ways during the period from 1997 to 2010, when there was a series of government-led initiatives to extend the role of schools.

These began with Schools Plus (DfEE 1999), through the Extended School Demonstration and Pathfinder projects (Cummings et al. 2004; Dyson/Millward/Todd 2002), and on to the Full Service Extended Schools initiative launched in 2003 (Cummings et al. 2007) and finally to the extended services initiative launched in 2005 (DfES 2005). Each of these encouraged schools to develop out of hours activities for pupils, extend their capacity for meeting pupils' social, emotional and health needs, provide support for families, make childcare provision available, offer adult learning activities, and open their facilities for community use. However, they differed from each other in terms of the detail of what was expected, the funding that was available, and whether they were targeted at particular types of schools (usually those serving disadvantaged populations) or were intended to apply to all schools. In particular, the last-mentioned 'extended services' initiative marked a departure from its predecessors in that it focused less on locating additional services on individual school sites, and more on creating integrated local networks of child and family services, to which schools would be key contributors but which they would not necessarily be expected to lead.

In each of these cases, governments followed a particular style of policy-making. They tended to set out in general terms the kinds of services and activities schools should offer, and outline a wide range of benefits which might accrue from working in this way, but to stop short of specifying in detail how schools should work or identifying particular outcomes that they were expected to achieve. At the launch of extended services, for instance, schools were promised no fewer than nine major outcomes, ranging from more 'fun' for children through to improved attainment, reduced health inequalities and reductions in the number of children living in poverty (DfES 2005, p.16). Quite how these outcomes were to be achieved, or what pattern of provision would be most effective was not made clear. It did not help matters that the governments of this period were simultaneously pursuing an intensive 'crusade for standards' (DfEE 1997) which required schools to focus on their core academic concerns, and penalized them severely if they failed to raise their students' attainments. Only towards the end of the period was an attempt made to show how the wider roles of schools might be reconciled with these narrower concerns (DCSF 2008), and even then it is arguable that this was more of a pious hope than a detailed rationale.

In this situation, it was left up to individual schools to fill in the lacunae and reconcile the contradictions in national policy, and so to formulate their own rationales for their extended roles. This led, in effect, to a series of natural experiments in which different schools, in different contexts, arrived at their own solutions and attempted to implement them as effectively as they could. Inevitably, some attempts were ill-thought-through, half-hearted, or conceptually flawed (Cummings et al. 2007; Cummings/Dyson/Todd 2007). Others, however, took the form of serious-minded attempts to find new roles for schools which might address some of the deep-seated problems of the school system, most notably in terms of a link between children's social background and their educational outcomes which has proved remarkably resistant to all attempts to break it (Perry/Francis 2010; Schools Analysis and Research Division Department for Children Schools and Families 2009).

In the remainder of this paper, we wish to report on these school-level rationales as they emerged from the national evaluation of extended services to which we contributed. In the next section, we outline the evaluation's methodology. We then report

on its overall findings in relation to school rationales and present two case studies of how these emerged in particular schools. Finally, we discuss the wider implications of these findings both for schools in England and for attempts elsewhere to develop forms of extended education.

3 Methodology

The national evaluation of extended services in and around schools ran from May 2009 to January 2011. More detailed accounts of its methodology and findings than are possible in this short paper are available in a series of reports on the evaluation as a whole and on specific themes within it (Carpenter et al. 2011; Carpenter et al. 2010; Cummings et al. 2010; Cummings et al. 2011). The evaluation methodology comprised an extensive range of activities including: telephone and postal surveys of 1,500 schools; face to face surveys of parents and pupils from 2261 households; longitudinal in-depth case study work in 20 schools; cost benefit analysis with approximately 500 schools; impact assessment using data from the surveys and the National Pupil Database; and two small-scale thematic reviews, one focusing on how far schools were targeting their work on children, families and other adults facing disadvantage, and the other focusing on the way in which local authorities had structured extended services.

This paper is based primarily on data from the 20 in-depth longitudinal case studies. The case study schools (11 secondary and nine primary), were located across England and were chosen to reflect a diversity of characteristics in terms of geographical locations (urban and rural), and ethnic and social composition (in terms of levels of disadvantage and the presence of minority ethnic groups in the school population). However, all of the case study schools were selected on the basis that they were already offering access to a range of services and had developed their provision over at least the last two or three years (and, in some cases, over a much longer period). To this extent, they were experienced and committed providers of extended services and were different from some other schools which might only have begun working in this way in response to recent government imperatives.

The aims of the case studies were to identify what kind of services schools were developing, what kinds of problems and facilitators they were encountering in this development, and what kinds of outcomes for children, families and communities were being generated by these services. In order to achieve this, we adopted a 'theory of change' approach (Anderson 2005; Connell/Kubisch 1998; Dyson/Todd 2010). Theories of change are the more or less explicit assumptions actors make about how their actions will produce the outcomes they desire in particular situations. From an evaluation point of view, articulating a theory of change makes it possible to identify and assess the outcomes that actors are actually aiming at rather than ones that might be imposed by the evaluators. It also lays bare the causal mechanisms that link action to outcome so that the latter can be attributed more securely to the former, and so that progress through those mechanisms can be monitored long before end-point outcomes become apparent. However, theories of change are also, in effect, structured rationales for action, and are thus particularly relevant to the purposes of this paper.

In practice, our use of a theory of change approach in schools involved recurrent interviews with head teachers and other school leaders to understand: how they saw the situation of the school and the children, families and communities it served; what outcomes they were trying to generate in the long term; what services and activities they were putting in place; and how they anticipated that those services and activities would impact on the school's situation in order to produce the intended outcomes. Typically, interviews began at a somewhat general level, becoming more detailed and precise as the series unfolded. After each interview, the research team returned to the school a version of the theory of change as the researchers understood it, usually in diagrammatic form with a textual commentary. The school participants would then suggest amendments and the amended theory of change would form the starting point for the next interview. It was not unusual to go through four or more iterations of this process. Over the duration of the evaluation, the research team visited each site up to four times, conducting interviews lasting between one and two hours with a range of key personnel – mostly head teachers and staff with direct responsibilities for organising and delivering extended services.

4 School Rationales: The Findings

Our discussions with schools revealed that it was no easy matter for them to articulate a clear rationale for their extended roles in the face of competing demands and opportunities, and in the absence of coherent national guidance. Inevitably, schools were more and less clear about what they hoped to achieve by extending their roles and why, and articulated their rationales in somewhat different ways. In particular, a wide range of intended outcomes was articulated across the case study schools. We were able to identify well over one hundred, ranging from the very general – ‘social and educational inclusion’ – to the very specific – ‘lower body mass index in the student population’, and from pupil-focused outcomes – ‘pupil attainment will increase’ – to outcomes for whole communities – ‘to build a proud, thriving, supportive, learning, self-sufficient, cohesive and sustainable community’.

However, it was also clear that there were some recurrent patterns beneath the idiosyncratic formulations of individual schools. By grouping similar formulations together, we were able to categorise schools' intended outcomes within a limited number of ‘domains’ (see table 1). These ranged from outcomes that were close to schools' traditional concerns, most notably with ‘learning’, to those that were somewhat distant from those concerns, in terms for instance of enhancing the capacity for ‘democracy’ amongst the population served by the school, or of contributing to the cohesion and sustainability of the local community.

Table 1: Outcome domains in case study schools

	Domain	Outcomes in the domain
1.	Learning	Attainment, achievement, transferable learning/thinking skills.
2.	Engagement	Engagement with learning and learning opportunities (including school)
3.	Social	Social skills, social functioning/contacts and cohesive contexts
4.	Well-being	Psychological and physical well-being, including self-esteem, confidence, health, reduction of risky behaviours
5.	Service access	Service availability and skills; knowledge and capacity on the part of users to access them
6.	Life chances	Employment, income, life chances, breaking intergenerational cycles of deprivation
7.	Opportunity	Enrichment, horizon-broadening, new possibilities
8.	Democracy	Voice and representation, active citizenship
9.	Supporting children	Family functioning, parenting, family support for learning
10.	Community	Community cohesion, sustainability, and regeneration; positive community cultures

Source: authors

The fact that the very different articulations of different schools could be categorised in this way may be an indication – though no more than that – that schools were moving hesitantly towards a common and coherent rationale. It may also be significant that although individual schools focused their work to different extents on students, families or communities, the same outcome domains were associated with each of these beneficiary groups. Even the ‘community’ domain typically included outcomes for students as well as for adult community members, largely on the grounds that students constituted the local community of the future.

Likewise, there were indications that the articulation of outcomes by schools was founded on underpinning theories of how these outcomes might be achieved. As we found in our studies of previous extended schools initiatives (Cummings/Dyson 2007; Cummings et al. 2011), schools might see themselves as engaged either in ‘transforming’ the lives of individuals, families and communities, or in ‘enhancing’ or ‘resourcing’ those lives. Enhancement in this sense, was about increasing access to opportunities for the intended beneficiaries, and extending choice, enrichment, enjoyment and skills. It was primarily about making people’s lives richer and more fulfilling rather than solving any problems they might have, and often, therefore, involved provision that was open to all. Transformation, on the other hand, was about making fundamental changes to the lives of beneficiaries on the grounds that those lives were seriously problematic or limited. It often involved provision that was targeted at highly disadvantaged individuals and groups, and focused on breaking down the barriers that kept people marginalised, intervening before problems became intractable, and reducing social and educational inequalities. Individual schools tended to favour one or other of these underpinning theories, with those in highly disadvantaged contexts more likely to focus on transformation, and those in advantaged contexts more likely to emphasise enhancement. However, all schools articulated elements of each approach and the differences were of emphasis rather than of fundamental conceptualisation.

Overall, then, there was a sense that, despite the lack of clear national guidance, schools were beginning to feel their way towards a wide-ranging but nonetheless finite set of outcomes, and that they were beginning to develop underpinning theories of how they expected to bring about change. However, generalisations of this kind conceal as much as they reveal, and if we are fully to understand the rationales that were being developed by schools, it is necessary to explore how those rationales emerged in particular places and how they related to particular school contexts. It is therefore to the case studies of two schools that we now turn.

5 Case Studies of School Rationales

The two (anonymised) case study schools presented here illustrate trends in the articulation of rationales across the wider sample of 20 schools. However, it is important to remember that these two schools, like the sample as a whole, was drawn from schools with well-developed extended services approaches. On the other hand, we know from the survey element of the evaluation that most schools were rapidly developing their provision (Carpenter et al. 2010), and the two schools described here can therefore be taken as broadly indicative of the direction of travel of schools nationally. More to the point, the two case studies offer illustrations of the themes we have outlined above, and raise important questions about the ways in which the roles of schools might be extended and their purposes rethought. The accounts which follow present the schools as they were at the time of our fieldwork in 2010.

Redsborough Primary

This school, catering for children in the primary (age 5–11) age range, was located in an area characterised by high levels of socio-economic disadvantage. At the time of our fieldwork, students came from a very broad range of ethnic backgrounds, and the proportion of students who were learning English as an additional language was high in comparison with national averages, as was eligibility for free school meals – an indicator of socio-economic disadvantage in England. Many children arrived directly from abroad and their previous experiences of education were extremely varied. A relatively high proportion of students left and joined the school each year due to the transient nature of the community in which the school was placed. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities was also well above the national average. However, despite the context, the school had excellent results in national assessments, and recent analyses placed it amongst the best-performing schools nationally in terms of the value added to students' attainments. The school had recently been designated as 'outstanding' by the national schools inspectorate.

The school had a well-defined set of aims which went beyond a narrow focus on attainment. These were: to provide a safe, secure, happy and stimulating environment; to ensure a high quality education for all the children; and to support the children's personal and cultural development and prepare them for life. In line with this, school leaders saw an extended services approach as integral to its way of working rather than as an 'add-on'. The head teacher told us that it was made clear to all staff

that if they were expecting ‘a 9 to 3.30 job’, then Redsborough was not the school for them. As the extended services coordinator, a long serving teacher at the school, explained:

I think it’s to do with the ethos of the school. Extended services is at the heart of our school. It’s in our school improvement plan, it’s one of our points, and the way we work as a school, we are a well-established team. We have some very challenging pupils and some really challenging parents, but everybody supports everybody.

The school had a history of offering extended services, particularly in relation to student welfare, dating back to 2001. Its breakfast club and after school club had run for over eight years, and a holiday play scheme targeted at the most disadvantaged students had been on offer since 2003. Extended services were delivered by members of the school staff and were available for 50 weeks of the year. Many of the staff involved were ‘teaching assistants’. These are support staff without teaching qualifications, who often come from the local community, and are employed to work in a support role with students. Often these staff are employed only during term time, but Redsborough Primary had recently changed the contracts for its assistants so that they were now employed all year round.

The school offered a wide range of out-of-hours activities, from Bollywood dancing, Asian cookery and go karting for children, to yoga, Slovakian fathers’ football and boxing. The aim was that all children and parents should be engaged in some activity as soon as the child entered the school. In this way, the school believed it was able to spot problems more easily and intervene early. It had a family support team who delivered parental support groups and family learning courses as well as monitoring and supporting vulnerable families through a family support worker. The school also had strong links with the local further education (post-16) college which delivered vocational courses to adults on the school site and signposted participants to other education and employment opportunities. Local residents had access to a community cookery room and to volunteering opportunities in the school. The school also employed language support staff in recognition of the large number of Slovakian Romany children in its population.

Clearly, Redsborough had developed an approach which went well beyond a narrow focus on students’ attainment and that was aimed at families and community members as well as at students. Underpinning this approach was a view that all of the outcome domains outlined in table 1 were important in their own right, but that they interacted with one another and could, ideally, be mutually reinforcing. For instance, the extended services coordinator explained how efforts to engage with students outside of formal teaching situations made positive changes in their relationships with school staff in *all* situations:

[We’ve seen] a difference in teacher-pupil and staff-pupil relations, because I think they [pupils] see them [staff] in a different light especially so for residential or play scheme when it is totally outside the classroom and school day. You see them in a totally different light and they see you as more approachable for a lot of them, because you are silly, because they see you on a mountain bike or see you on a motorbike. [They] see you in vulnerable situations as well which in a lot of them it increases their self-confidence and self-esteem.

School staff were likewise able to cite specific cases where their approach was impacting on children’s psychological well-being, which in turn was impacting on their learning. For instance, a play scheme worker told us:

We have got a little boy now who's so shy and timid – well he *was* – and I can remember one day he was struggling with something and I just said to him 'You need to find that big voice that you have got inside' and I said 'Put your hand up and we'll come and help you. That's what we are here for' and he has come on leaps and bounds. [The teacher] spoke to Mum at parents' evening and she cried, she is so happy that he is now finding his confidence. He is now starting to speak out and he's got a part in the Christmas concert.

Redsborough's approach to working across the outcome domains was particularly influenced by the high levels of poverty and disadvantage many of its students experienced in their home lives. There was, in the school leaders' view, no way that they could carry out their core task of teaching children if they did not also pay attention to the multiple other problems those children were facing. As the extended services coordinator explained:

Well, basically it's our ethos... obviously that they are being fed, but that they are safe, secure in a secure environment... they are clothed ... and they are warm. Because if they are not safe, fed, and clothed then... you could be doing back flips around and around the class and they won't learn anything at all.

In order to meet these demands, the school breakfast club provided meals at the start of the day, and the after school club also provided an evening meal. In addition, the school had a clothes bank to ensure there was a supply of appropriate clothing and footwear for children when needed. School leaders also told us that they regularly had to take children to medical appointments to ensure their physical health needs were being met. Likewise, the extended service coordinator explained that the out-of-hours provision made by the school was both a way of enabling parents to stay in employment and a means of keeping children safe:

we've got children who attend our play schemes and after school club because they've jumped out of windows, shoplifted, anything, when they're not actually in school. Out of school they don't just run wild but they're not looked after, so [the out-of-hours provision] lessens the amount of time that they're actually at home or roaming the streets... [I]t helps working parents but it's also half and half as there's children with real social needs that would end up in care by the end of the holidays if we didn't do something to address issues for them.

For similar reasons, the extended services coordinator told us, the school had developed a very proactive approach to ensuring children attended school:

because our view is that if they're in school, they're fed, they're safe and they're warm and we know where they are, they're not at home looking after younger siblings or they're not roaming the streets. So if you don't turn up to school by 9 o'clock, you get a phone call first of all, and then if there's no response or no one's told us why you're not in school, you'll have two members of staff knocking on your door.

Crucially, the extended roles taken on by Redsborough were not seen as in any sense contradictory to its core business of teaching children and improving their attainments. On the contrary, looking after children's physical, emotional and social needs, and supporting their parents to meet those needs more effectively, was seen as an essential foundation for being able to teach effectively. As an area extended service coordinator employed by the local authority commented:

they've seen all the other benefits, to the children and Ofsted and no other school in this area is an outstanding school, nobody else has results as good as this school – that's results without context value added but context value added is as good as all the other schools as well.

Amblesby Secondary School

Amblesby Secondary was located in one of the few areas of England which retains 'grammar' schools – that is, schools which select children on the basis of their prior attainments. As a result, Amblesby educated students in the 11 to 18 age range who had not been selected in this way and it therefore had a disproportionate number of low-attaining students. The school served a socially mixed area with many students coming from a nearby social and ex-social housing estate, alongside others coming from more affluent areas. At the time of our fieldwork, about a fifth of students had minority ethnic backgrounds. In its most recent inspection, the school had been categorised as 'good with outstanding features'.

Like Redsbrough, the school appeared to have a strong rationale underpinning its approach to developing extended services. In terms of students, the main aim was to reduce 'risky behaviours' in terms of drug and alcohol misuse, criminality and inappropriate sexual activity. In terms of the wider community, the aim was to increase engagement with enrichment and learning opportunities. The link between the two was that the community was regarded as somewhat isolated and inward-looking, with too few opportunities for positive activities for either young people or adults. Therefore both groups were trapped in something of a dead-end with counter-productive activities as their only escape. As the extended services coordinator explained:

we're two or three miles outside of [the] town centre and because the next town along is a good bus ride away, it's a very kind of parochial area... You've got the youth centre, for adults there's a social club that people go to and join on the estate, there's a chippy [a fast food outlet], a corner shop, a hairdressers, a church down there and towards the other end of the estate there's a post office and another chippy, and that's all there is.

Amblesby had a formal relationship (a 'hard federation') with its neighbouring primary school, and this meant that extended service provision could be run across both sites. A range of activities was offered for students, usually at no cost to them. Some 50 clubs were available, ranging from sports to curriculum enrichment and a homework club. The primary school was in the process of organising a breakfast club. There was also a youth centre on site that students could access during the evenings and at lunchtimes, and this offered structured, extra-curricular activities leading to awards in sports and in personal and social development. A range of parent support groups was run across both schools and parenting courses had been offered in the past. In response to the perceived parochialism of the local community, a local university had been invited to run free 18-week taster sessions for parents who had never participated in higher education. Family literacy and numeracy programmes were held for parents of targeted students struggling in these areas, along with other family learning sessions including cooking, pottery and drumming. Furthermore the school signposted parents and community members to other adult learning opportunities and had itself run award-bearing courses.

The school's relationship with the youth centre on site appeared to be particularly powerful. Together, they had developed a programme aimed at developing the social skills of 'disruptive' students. A teaching assistant who helped deliver the programme described it in the following terms:

[The programme] is for vulnerable children with low self-esteem, children who are maybe just not getting on in the classroom. We take them out of the classroom into this environment or up to the [sports centre] ... We have an instructor ... who then teaches them ball skills but it is all ... based around goals and what we're aiming for, and maybe not setting our targets so high so that we can achieve our goals and things like that... just, basically, getting them to build on their confidence, work with each other.

The school was offering a second programme in conjunction with the on-site youth centre for girls who might become involved in risky behaviour. As with the social skills programme, this was run by non-teachers, and the youth worker responsible described it in the following terms:

A lot of them are at risk of teenage pregnancy and drugs and alcohol and stuff, [but] none of them have got pregnant, so that's a positive – and the fact that they all go through and get their [awards] in all sorts of things that they do. They do sexual health, they do drugs awareness, we get people in or we do that ourselves as well and a lot of it is life skills, you know. We do budgeting now and students do that on our enrichment programme as well, things that you don't necessarily get taught but that you really need to learn...It's confidence which is their big thing really, behaviour and understanding really, that understanding of what is going on in the world and not sort of living this life that's very sort of parallel lines and it's like 'Oh well actually, if I do it this way, it's going to work differently'.

Such programmes were aimed at a range of the outcome domains we set out above. In this case, the primary focus was on the social, well-being and life chances domains, though it is notable that gaining qualifications and developing students' sense of themselves as learners were characteristic of much that was on offer. The school was also attempting to address other outcome domains, for instance in relation to 'opportunity' and 'supporting children'. It had recently run a trip to London for the families of the students from the federated primary. We talked to several parents who had been on this visit and they confirmed how this had extended the opportunities and experiences available to members of this 'parochial' community. As one put it:

that was fantastic! ... We had two coach loads, and it was a really lovely day, tiring. Things like that we wouldn't normally do otherwise.

In order to support children and their families, Amblesby employed a family support worker. She reported on the case of one family she had recently worked with in the following terms:

We did have a young person in Year 7 [the first year of secondary schooling] who was flatly refusing, very sort of babyish, you know, sulking, throwing dummy out of pram. So, what we did first of all was we put him into our vertical tutor group [a mixed-age group brought together for guidance purposes]... There are two members of staff there, where these children are selected because of attendance issues, and phone calls are made if the students don't turn up... So, this young person was put in there for the additional support to monitor. I did a home visit and found that things at home were very dysfunctional and I referred [the mother] to a lady who is a family behaviour support worker [employed by the local authority]. She worked intensively with the family. Mum and Dad are not together and [the mother] is totally, I mean is a totally different woman now – it is absolutely amazing – a really empowered mum. There are rules now and chores now put into it, with rewards in the family home... We referred her to [a local service] to help her get help with her housing. We advised her for debt advice because Mum was in debt. She has addressed all of those issues with the help of [the support worker] and myself, and the young person's attendance is so much better. It's now

off the child in need register [a formal record of children at risk], and things are really, really positive for this young person now.

Here we can see both the way in which work with the student and with the family interacted and the way in which the school supplemented its own services by acting as a broker between students, families and other agencies. By creating a network of school-provided and externally-provided services, Amblesby was able to work across a range of outcome domains simultaneously, tackling the often complex problems in its population and thereby dealing with the issues which compromised its ability to enable its students to learn effectively. As an assistant head teacher in the school explained:

In the past, we didn't have this huge network of support staff in schools, it was teachers who did it in their spare time and therefore it didn't always work as well.

6 Interrogating School Rationales

What we see in these two cases is that, as the set of outcome domains presented in table 1 suggests, schools had begun to move well beyond their core concern with enhancing the educational attainments of their students. They were equally at home addressing students' personal and social difficulties, working on health issues, tackling the problems faced by parents, and trying to break down the marginalisation of communities. In order to do this, they had appointed a range of staff other than teachers, and were working collaboratively with other schools and services to create local service networks.

Neither Redsbrough nor Amblesby saw the extension of their roles in this way as compromising their ability to carry out their core business of teaching students. On the contrary, in situations where students' learning was compromised by the multiple challenges they experienced outside the classroom, working on these wider issues was seen as essential if students were to learn effectively. Both of these schools had come to the conclusion that the different contexts in which children grew, learned and developed, and the different outcome domains with which the schools engaged were deeply interactive. Put simply, how well children functioned in classrooms depended not just on the quality of teaching in those classrooms, but on how they felt about themselves, the kinds of experiences they had in their families, and the kinds of cultures and opportunities they encountered in their communities. In this sense, the set of outcome domains in table 1 is anything but a mere list. It is an indication, of the location of children within complex, interacting ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) which shape their development and mould their outcomes.

Moreover, there are hints – to put it no more strongly – that the two schools were beginning to rethink their roles in other ways. Although it is clear that much of their work was about tackling the presenting problems experienced by their students, it would seem that they were also thinking more widely than this. Their development of provision to extend the opportunities and experiences, capacities and confidence levels of both children and adults in their areas implies that they saw the school as a bridge between the lives children and adults were currently leading and a richer set

of opportunities. To this extent, the schools were not confining their work to a narrow focus on raising attainment, nor even to a problem-solving approach to disadvantage. Rather they were thinking in terms of what we earlier called ‘enhancement’.

Of course, these rationales raise many questions. Although, for instance, the schools developed impressive systems for supporting disadvantaged children and families, it is not clear that they had yet thought about how the root causes of disadvantage might be tackled and whether the school could play any part in this. Similarly, although there were hints of a concern with ‘enhancement’, it is not clear that the schools had any fully worked-out notion of the kind of lives they were hoping to enable people to lead. They wished to act as bridges, perhaps, but where those bridges might lead was somewhat uncertain. Finally, it is even less clear that these schools had thought through what the relationship between professionals and the people who were intended to be the beneficiaries of professional activities might be, and how they might avoid professionals’ imposing their own views on those beneficiaries.

Despite these caveats, the developments undertaken by schools such as Redsborough and Amblesby in England, and by their equivalents in other countries, raises important issues about the roles that schools might play in the development of a thriving and equitable society. Driven by what many would see as an overwhelmingly dominant ‘neoliberal agenda’ (Gunter et al. 2010), many countries have engaged in their own version of a ‘crusade for standards’, requiring their schools to focus narrowly on driving up students’ levels of attainment. Yet the experience of schools such as Redsborough and Amblesby is that such a narrow approach is both inadequate and unnecessarily restrictive. It is inadequate because children’s attainments cannot, in many cases, be raised unless the negative conditions in their out-of-school lives which prevent them from learning are addressed. It is unnecessarily restrictive because schools can do much to contribute to the creation of thriving and equitable societies in addition to what they contribute by driving up educational attainments. They can help to tackle the problems faced by disadvantaged families and communities. They can also act to widen the opportunities and enhance the lives of all the children, families and communities they serve.

In these cases, therefore, we can see emerging, however imperfectly, a rationale for a new role for schools – one which sees them not just as academic institutions, but as hubs for the support of children, families and communities, and as ‘bridges’ to greater opportunities and better lives. If these emergent rationales are to be developed further, we suggest, two things are necessary. First, there needs to be some way of capturing what schools such as these are beginning to learn, and second, there needs to be some way of enabling them to think even more deeply about their work. Some form of dialogue is now needed between the policy makers who establish the frameworks for extended approaches, the school practitioners who have to make those approaches work, and the researchers who can turn experience into evidence and bring it to bear in turn on practice.

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