
The Challenge of Developing the ‘New Public School’: learning from extended schools

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ABSTRACT English school policy since 1988 has increasingly been defined in neoliberal terms, with an emphasis on markets, competition, and education in its narrowest sense (ENS). However, for a brief interlude from 2005 to 2010, school leaders were challenged by a new Extended Schools (ES) policy to look outside their classrooms and beyond their school gates and to consider education from a wider perspective. This article, based on research in four communities, examines how schools responded to this policy change, through developing ES partnerships, and engaging with community-based organisations and the community itself. The learning from this research undertaken across diverse schools and communities covering this unique period points to what a ‘new public school’ might be and the conditions it might need to successfully evolve.

Introduction

English education and schooling since 1988 have been increasingly driven by a neoliberal agenda that has focused on the creation of a competitive market. Changes to school governance such as the introduction of academies and, more recently, ‘free schools’, league tables based upon Standard Assessment Tests (SATs), inspections and a strong central management of school performance have led schooling towards education in its narrowest sense (ENS) (Fielding & Moss, 2011). As a result, the present landscape of English schooling resembles inward-looking ‘exam factories’ disconnected from their community, resulting in artificial understandings of children, the community and education itself and dismissive of considering education in its broadest sense (EBS) (Fielding & Moss, 2011).

But there was a brief period in the 2000s when an alternative to such schooling appeared to emerge, resulting from Labour policy initiatives such as Every Child Matters (ECM) (Department for Education and Skills, 2003) and Extended Schools (ES) (Department for Education and Skills, 2005). The contention of this article is that this experience, though fleeting and rapidly forgotten, can help us imagine a new public school based on features of the ES. These features include a new understanding of childhood, the forging of new connections between schools and other services and practitioners working with children, and the possibility of developing a new democratic relationship with the community itself. This article remembers this important if short-lived development, drawing on a research study conducted as school leaders were responding to ECM and ES policy in the 2000s (a full account of this research is given in Martin, 2016).

The Evolution of Extended Schools

In 1997 Labour aimed to understand why children from poorer communities were being left behind despite neoliberalism's promise of improved attainment for all (Apple, 2001). Labour continued to support competition between schools, but also started to experiment with compensatory measures such as Education Action Zones (Ball, 2013). The death of Victoria Climbié and the subsequent Laming enquiry (Laming, 2003) accelerated policy development which sought to improve not just education but the potential for all children to gain improved outcomes (Eisenstadt, 2011). A radical holistic response was set out in ECM through an approach focused upon early intervention and prevention (Department for Education and Skills, 2003). Initially, schools were not required to work with local authorities to implement the proposed integrated multi-professional partnership approach. However, upon the publication of 'Extended Schools: access to opportunities and services for all' (Department for Education and Skills, 2005), schools' positioning shifted as ECM was added to Ofsted's school inspection framework.

All schools in England were required to develop a 'Core Offer' of services constructed around the needs of their community. The offer included childcare, out-of-hours activities for pupils, parenting support, community access to school facilities, and swift referral to specialist services. The government demanded that all schools gain ES status within five years, by 2010. The National Children's Plan (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007) extended the role of schools further than the Core Offer with the ambition of each becoming a resource central to their community and a hub for broader service delivery, reflecting a shift to EBS. This ambitious policy drive proved to be a challenge for school leaders. It required consideration of what schools might look like outside the vision of the exam factory and challenged all practitioners who came into contact with this experimental policy.

The Extended School in Practice

By 2005, as part of my doctoral research, I had established relationships with schools in four diverse communities as they began the process of responding to the new ES policy. These communities were: an impoverished large inner-city estate where schools were judged as failing and threatened with closure; a rural community with 'outstanding' schools; a market town with 'good' schools; and a former coal-mining community. Newly forming ES partnerships consisted of an infant, a junior and a secondary school in the inner-city community and a secondary school with feeder primary schools in the three other areas. A qualitative approach was adopted, with school and local authority quantitative data supporting the analysis.

The study involved the researcher getting alongside the following parties: school leaders who were developing new local partnerships; teachers and other school staff; leaders of community-based services; local authority strategic leaders; frontline practitioners; and parents who lived within school catchment areas. Additionally, those senior civil servants and ministers who had developed the agenda for changing schools took part in the research to provide insights into ES and ECM policy motivations. It emerged from the research that in Tony Blair's final term in office the Cabinet had engaged in a protracted debate about how schools and children's services could work more closely together. Gordon Brown, upon becoming Prime Minister, renamed the Department for Education and Skills the Department for Children, Schools and Families, signalling a commitment to re-conceptualising English schools as central to their communities and closely linked to a wide range of children's services (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007) – a potential shift away from ENS towards EBS.

This policy turn empowered school leaders to take charge of new ambitious partnerships at the community level; secondary school head teachers led the agenda in the four research areas. New professionals, with much broader skills than required for ENS, were introduced in two partnerships to facilitate change; an inspired secondary head teacher who refused to accept that schools should remain focused upon ENS grasped the opportunity to drive forward change in the rural community; while in the market town, development was led by a Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) who had developed a good knowledge of children's lives outside the classroom through her work with children with additional needs.

Each ES partnership evolved in different ways, and at differing rates, but with some common strands. School leaders were challenged to look outside their school gates, to communicate with and form relationships between other schools sited in the same community and to learn about their community and other services that supported their pupils outside the classroom. Schools leaders considered themselves 'trusted' by government with this important new agenda. The two managers recruited to develop ES in schools with no EBS skills to support change had to engage with teachers, many of whom could not understand why schools should be moving in this new, community-oriented

direction. Community services considered schools insular and were challenged by school leaders asking them what they did and wanting them to suddenly work in partnership. In each ES partnership many hours were spent learning about what each constituent organisation did and what they considered success, having previously worked in isolation from each other.

The inner-city ES partnership converted the infant, junior and secondary schools into an early-years-to-16-years 'through school' and became, over six years of development, the central vehicle for community planning and regeneration for the local authority. The ES partnership in the former coal-mining community was described by residents as replacing the 'miners' welfare', the former community focus for leisure activity, welfare and adult education. The ES partnership in the market town became partners with their town council in supporting a new local sense of identity; councillors came to realise that, as with the inner-city schools, there was an opportunity to develop a new vehicle through which to engage families in local decision-making. The rural ES partnership was invited to take over the local authority's failing sports centre, followed by acquiring a local smallholding; the reality in this rural community was that schools were the only major public infrastructure. All four partnerships ran events involving not just children and parents but the entire community, including arts and music festivals.

All partnerships responded seriously to the call to develop Extended Schools, with a new confidence and the strong ambition to redefine the role of their schools. They surpassed what seemed to them a 'minimal' Core Offer, not only through their outreach in their communities but in school-based activities. The inner-city ES partnership formed a close relationship with their local professional football club, establishing a joint learning centre open to the community, including adult training and employment opportunities. The market town ES partnership initiated local multi-professional meetings where joint early intervention replaced crisis intervention for families. The rural ES partnership formed close relationships with businesses, faith communities and the voluntary sector to create innovative initiatives, effectively constructing new forms of democracy.

One leader spoke of it as being unthinkable 'to return to our boxes' and silo thinking, a view shared in other partnerships. There was a spirit of experimentation, of 'trying out' and 'testing new ideas', with no rule book or exemplars or experts to constrain them; the ES partnerships had rapidly shifted into new ways of thinking that outstripped local authority advisors, central government and national organisations such as the National College of School Leadership. The latter were on catch-up as these partnerships grew organically and gained in confidence and in relevance to their communities, through this newfound freedom from tight managerial control. In association with their communities, the partnerships were mutually constructing new practices and new forms of leadership and professionalism based upon common, mutual understandings. They seemed on course to move to a more holistic approach to children, families and communities through adopting EBS.

The Assessment of the Extended School

Implementing ES policy had brought about the first steps towards repositioning schools in each of the four communities. The ES partnerships were becoming the means through which education and welfare could become merged within the community. A former Children's Minister described how ECM was too large and complex a policy for local authorities to deliver successfully, representing as it did a fundamentally new approach to children, families and communities; instead, more localised partnerships at community level were needed, and these were trusted to invent new ways of working, taking forward Labour's social justice agenda.

Each partnership developed differently and at a different pace, but there were common achievements on the journey to reposition their schools:

- Schools had previously often been in competition with each other in the same community, a consequence of neoliberal market policies. Under the ES programme, primary schools had to develop better mutual understanding and discovered that they faced many similar issues and that through sharing they could help each other. Secondary schools had previously had little contact with their primary feeders, and there were different professional and leadership approaches apparent in each (primary and secondary) community. These sectors learnt about each other, appreciating that children from the same families were in their schools and how the primary/secondary divide might not benefit children. Through coming together they were able to share resources and expertise and foster a broader understanding of families.
- The workforce in both primary and secondary schools started to learn that children had lives and important relationships outside the classroom, a wider perspective previously blinkered by the narrow demands of the school performance agenda. When school leaders initially came together, they realised they had much to learn about their communities, and for some this was a real struggle; some took on this agenda directly, others appointed new staff who were skilled in working with communities. School leaders went into the community, building relationships between schools and other services and with the community itself.
- Taking advantage of the freedom offered by the ES policy, all four partnerships constructed customised local governance arrangements to fit with the composition and structure of their community; school leaders also started to develop new governance arrangements between schools and community-based services. There were, though, variations. ES governance arrangements in the market town were school dominated with no ability for community organisations to make decisions, whereas the inner-city partnership arrangements were inclusive of parents and children, councillors and agencies.

The greatest accomplishment was the development of a new shared local multi-professional understanding about children and community. This emerged out of mutual learning between schools, between schools and community services, and

between them and the community itself. This was a journey of discovery, towards a new understanding of children in relation to family and community, a strong basis for developing ECM and EBS. Parents in all four ES partnerships gained new understandings of schools, which no longer seemed, in the words of one parent, 'an alien bubble where we drop off our children in the morning and pick them up in the afternoon'. Schools were shifting from these 'alien bubbles' of education and being viewed through a different lens, creating the basis for forming a new relationship with parents.

Despite these achievements, there were also problems raised along these partnership journeys:

- Redefining schooling and education itself caused conflict between school leaders and their workforces. Leaders appeared to be making a sudden U-turn away from the narrow, inward-looking security the workforce had developed. For teachers, this challenging phase appeared to come from nowhere, as they were excluded from the evolution of ECM from its inception in 2003. Schools opened their doors to the community, and parents who had stood by the school gates to collect their children were now in the school, and in some cases in the classroom, working and learning with their children. Teachers viewed these changes with suspicion, and some were critical as this was not education as they knew it.
- Schools for many years had been working in isolation, and their new, outward-looking ambitions to form wider partnerships threatened some community-based organisations, who were suspicious when government seemed to entrust school leaders with this new ECM agenda. Such suspicion was expressed by a youth work manager who feared his team might be taken over and managed by the school.
- Similarly, these newly constructed local partnerships were challenging local authorities and NHS leaders and commissioners, their roles and their powerful positions. Some local authority and NHS staff embraced these partnerships and could see the potential, while others fought them or dismissed them as a short-term experiment.

Despite such problems, these partnerships grew and gained in strength. Beverly Hughes, the Children's Minister (itself an innovation under ECM), declared they were a new means for improving the lives of families. But a resurgence of neoliberalism was about to impact upon them.

Whatever Happened to Extended Schools?

Education policy under the Conservative-led coalition that came to power in 2010 was dominated by the Conservative's neoliberal values, leading to increased marketisation, driven by a campaign to increase academies and introduce free schools (Ball, 2013), and a renewed emphasis on the academic role of schools: ENS. At the same time, under austerity measures, local authorities suffered huge cuts in their budgets, around 40% between 2010 and

2018 (NAO, 2018), undermining their capacity to provide community-based services.

The coalition signalled to all school leaders in England a return to 'traditional educational values' (Martin, 2016) and that ECM and similar meddlesome Labour policies were a distraction from teaching and the classroom (Martin, 2012), while work began on reframing the Ofsted inspection framework, withdrawing themes such as ECM. This broad agenda, the new government argued, with its accompanying ES programme, diverted schools from their core work of improving standards; schooling, it was said, was about excellent teachers and the classroom. The Department for Children, Schools and Families was renamed the Department for Education.

The research project in the four partnerships continued until 2015, finding that the partnerships still managed some development, despite the new government's dismissal of the Labour government's flagship policies. The ethos of ES was maintained despite the constraints of the coalition's policy and funding regimes; some leaders discussed how the partnership approach was helping make the most of diminishing budgets. Some of the partnership schools converted to academy status, but remained leaders in their ES partnerships. A consistent theme heard across all four partnerships was that they had discovered improved ways of working and new understandings; as one school leader stated: 'I will continue to uphold ECM principles as it is the right thing to do.'

Yet the longer-term prospects were worrying. Due to a policy void and leaders 'moving on', the drive to continue working in partnership waned over a five-year period. The ES ideal, with its possibilities of EBS, was at risk of slowly withering in the face of government disinterest and funding pressures.

The Extended School as a Precursor to the New Public School

I would argue that the new public school calls for a new holistic understanding of childhood and education, a turn from ENS to EBS, and an opening out of the school to other services for children and families and to the local community; this implies new relationships and new professional roles. Based on my research experience, I would suggest that this new public school needs the following conditions in which to form and flourish:

- Trust – the Labour government trusted school leaders to develop ES through a policy framework which provided freedom to work outside the classroom and construct multi-professional local partnerships with minimal interference or targets or prescribed implementation models;
- Schools having the freedom to work with children, families and the community in the context of children's lived experience;
- Education that transcends traditional organisational and professional boundaries, including the primary/secondary divide;
- Children, parents and the community defined as key stakeholders in public education and public schools;
- Schools defined as playing a fundamental role in local democracy, and democracy explicitly defined as a fundamental value of education;

- Schools encouraged and supported to construct integrated education and welfare responses to the needs of local communities;
- Schools freed from the shadow of nationally prescribed and simplistic measures, inspections and league tables, to be replaced by new forms of democratic accountability involving children, parents and the local community and including the construction of locally meaningful measures of success.

Drawing on the experience of ES, in particular their experimentation, the following features should form part of the ethos of the new public school:

- The school and its education should be inscribed with a holistic understanding of childhood and the importance of the lived experience of each child;
- Leaders and practitioners, both in schools and in other services for children and families, should value each other, based on mutual respect and understanding;
- Education should be seen as being more than the classroom and the traditional role of the teacher;
- The school should be seen as being an integral part of its community and the community an integral part of the school.

The new public school, developing along these lines, may seem at first sight an unachievable ambition to present to school leaders and their workforces, incarcerated by the straitjacket of ENS. We must not underestimate the invasiveness of the ideology deeply embedded within our present generation of educators. However, my research on ES offers hope that if the policy environment changes and if school leaders are trusted, then through working with local communities and professionals, they can build the foundations for the new public school; the response to the challenge posed by ES, to build new collaborative approaches to education and child well-being, suggests that this is a possibility. While the present straitjacket confines educators to partial understandings of childhood and to the confines of ENS, we can construct an education and a school based on holistic understandings of the child set within the context of their lived experience and EBS – and through this offer our children, families and communities a better future.

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