Back to the future?

Remembering extended schools in a post-pandemic world

Doug Martin and Peter Moss

Abstract

The Covid-19 crisis calls for a transformation of education and schools, with the crisis having shown the many roles and purposes they do and can serve. But, the article argues, in the process of transformation there is another valuable experience to draw on: the 'Every Child Matters' policy agenda of the Labour government, including the concept of the extended school. Drawing on research into this ambitious programme, the article considers the potential of this image of the school, a rich image that has been wilfully neglected by governments since 2010.

Keywords: Extended schools policy; Every Child Matters policy; children's centres; learning community; pandemic

Time for transformative change

The education secretary, Gavin Williamson, has recently called for a 'transformative' reform to the schools system following the Covid-19 pandemic.

> I would see this as one of those moments, a bit like the 1944 education reform act, that came out of the second world war, about how we can be transformative in terms of changing and improving the opportunities for young people. But it's got to be evidence-based. We've got to look at what's going to have the biggest positive impact on children's lives (Cited in Walker, 2021).

However, much of the government's thinking seems narrowly focused on how children can 'catch up' after the disruption caused by the pandemic, through more schooling and more support for teachers. While the 'evidence-based' mantra continues the depoliticisation of education, in which education policy is tightly focused on means, while ends remain unexamined, and political questions, political debate and political choices are marginalised. In this triumph of technical over political practice, education has been reduced to the endless grind of meeting standards and schools consigned to the role of exam factories, judged against their performance in high-stakes tests.

But if it does nothing else, the pandemic should stir all of us – politicians, education professionals, parents, citizens, children and young people – to re-politicise education, by asking and debating political questions, including what are schools for, what is our image of them? And how should they relate to the world around them, to families, communities and the wider society? For while the emphasis of education policy over

 DOI: 10.3898/FORUM.2021.63.2.09

the last ten years has been on standards and performance in tests, the pandemic has reminded us that schools also perform other important roles and could perform even more; and that schools are not just autonomous businesses competing for the custom of parents, but integral parts of the ecology of local communities and their support networks.

They are an important part of the care arrangements for working parents; but they are also places where, at their best, all children are cared for. They are social centres for children and young people to develop emotionally, to gain a feeling of independence and to form relationships outside of their family. They provide a means of identifying and supporting children and families facing a range of difficulties. They are one of the few public resources and community services still universally and freely available. And they could and can be much else besides.

In recent research with primary school teachers – 'A duty of care and a duty to teach: educational priorities in response to the COVID-19 crisis' – Gemma Moss and her colleagues at UCL Institute of Education have provided some valuable insight into questions about what schools are or could be for and their relationship to the wider world. Speaking in a webinar, the research team referred to schools as 'community hubs' and an 'increasing awareness [in the pandemic] of the role that schools play in supporting families broadly'. Support for some families was particularly urgent:

> Sixty-eight per cent of all head teachers and 78 per cent of teachers working in the most deprived areas said their highest priority was 'checking how families are coping in terms of mental health, welfare, food' (Moss et al., 2020a) when communicating with families during lockdown. Our respondents knew many children in our most disadvantaged communities would go hungry during the crisis if schools did not help families access food (Moss et al., 2020b).

In short, as the research team succinctly summarise, 'schooling' is about much more than learning'.

On the other side of the coin, the research team argued there was a need to reduce the government's fixation with a particular view of learning, manifested in testing and a narrow concept of performance: 'The assessment and accountability system is in urgent need of review', with teachers telling 'us repeatedly that one positive outcome [of the pandemic] would be the end of statutory testing, and particularly Key Stage 2 SATs' (Moss et al., 2020c). The pandemic, they further conclude, has shown the weakness of our current over-centralised system of governance:

> COVID has revealed just how far current governance structures in education are geared to high level direction from central government based on limited consultation or dialogue with the sector. Such a centralised approach to decision-making has not worked well during the crisis. Stronger, locally responsive networks would allow

> policy decisions and national guidance to develop from a much fuller awareness of what the every-day realities of school life are … Such networks would also help schools collaborate on finding local solutions to novel dilemmas posed by the crisis. (Moss et al., 2020b.)

Given what we have learnt and relearnt from the pandemic about the wider role of schools, as well as their local knowledge and community importance, Williamson's equating of transformation with catching-up, asserting that 'efforts to help pupils catch up could be a catalyst for revolutionising schools', seems unambitious in the extreme, lacking in imagination and wanting in reflection about the lessons emerging from the pandemic.

Recalling 'Every Child Matters', children's centres and extended schools

Research by Gemma Moss and her colleagues provides some food for thought for an education secretary genuinely wanting to reflect on 'transformative reform to the school system'. A further dietary supplement for such reflection can come from recalling developments that took place under the last Labour administration: bold policy initiatives, led by a Department of Children, Schools and Families, to build a comprehensive children's policy, the 'Every Child Matters' agenda, and within it to create two new institutions: children's centres for children under five years and their families and extended schools for older children and their families.

'Every Child Matters', the Labour government's ambitious policy agenda, launched in 2003 (HM Treasury, 2003), emphasised a new holistic, integrated approach towards all services for children and young people, including: a common set of outcomes and assessment procedures; new local structures (children's trusts) to match the broad remit of the national Department for Children, Schools and Families (formerly the Department for Education); and the creation of a children's commissioner. Central to this holistic and integrated approach was the initiation of children's centres and extended schools, both envisaged as community resources offering a range of integrated services for all children and families (Department for Education and Skills, 2004, 2005).

Children's centres subsumed earlier government initiatives, Sure Start and neighbourhood nurseries (Lewis, 2011). All centres provided a so-called 'core offer': parent information and advice; drop-in sessions and activities for parents, carers and children; outreach and family support; child and family health; links with training and employment services; and support for local childminders. Centres serving the 30 per cent most deprived communities also offered integrated 'early education' and 'childcare'. Extended schools were to open from 8am to 6pm and also provided a 'core offer' for local families and communities, with a menu of activities, including:

- study support and homework clubs, sport, music, arts and special interest clubs, combined with formal, 'wraparound' childcare in primary schools;

- parenting and family support, including family learning;
- swift and easy access to targeted and specialist services (for example, speech and language therapy, behaviour support);
- community access to school facilities such as sports grounds, ICT and adult and family learning (Department for Education and Skills, 2005).

The government's target for 2010 was 3500 children's centres, one in every neighbourhood, and for all schools to become extended schools. Both targets were achieved, an extraordinary feat in just seven years (and probably only possible under England's highly centralised system of government). Achieved – but not sustained. These developments were, in the best traditions of English government, heedlessly tossed aside in 2010 by the successor, Conservative-led coalition government.

The Department of Children, Schools and Families became, once again, a Department for Education, 'driven by ideological disdain for a holistic understanding of childhood … [while] no cabinet minister has responsibility for children [and] there is no cabinet committee devoted to children and families' (Sodha, 2021). The new government removed the 'Every Child Matters' website and banned the use of the name 'Every Child Matters' in departmental statements; what had been a flagship policy was airbrushed out of history. Children's centres continued – but have been substantially cut back under the austerity policies of post-2010 governments, with the biggest cuts in the more disadvantaged areas (Taylor-Robinson, Lai and Rutherford, 2017; UK Government, 2021). The prospect of re-thinking and re-forming the identity and purposes of schools, held out by 'Every Child Matters', proved fleeting; although many schools have striven to retain elements of the original extended schools programme (Diss and Jarvie, 2016; Martin, 2016), the focus for schools reduced again to raising narrow academic standards along with a radical reform of governance, to be achieved via promoting academies and free schools and thus greater competition in a market of individual providers, accountable to no one except the secretary of state in distant Whitehall.

It is not our intention to claim that the Labour government was without fault in approach or implementation, far from it. Nor that children's centres or all elements of extended schools have completely disappeared overnight. What we do claim – a claim we will support with research – is that these innovations within the context of 'Every Child Matters' had real potential for re-thinking, inter alia, the image and place in society of the school; and that if Conservative administrations after 2010 had built on what Labour started, instead of turning their backs on it, we would have been better equipped as a society to respond to the pandemic in terms of support for the needs of children, families and communities. As Sonia Sodha (2021) comments, 'the architecture that was painstakingly built [under 'Every Child Matters'] to collectively nurture the children that need it has been dismantled and schools are being left to pick up the pieces as best they

can'. Perhaps it is not too late to try and make repairs and start building again, as part of the restoration work so urgently needed for England's social infrastructure. The first stage is to remember.

The potential of extended schools: local, flexible and learning institutions

The introduction and expansion of extended schools was driven through at breakneck speed by the Labour government, doubtless mindful of the limited time they might have in power in Britain's 'winner-takes-all' political system. Like children's centres, these new and innovative institutions lacked the time to achieve their full potential and become fully embedded into the school system before their dismissal by a new regime. But research does indicate their potential and points to important changes that occurred even in the short period when 'Every Child Matters' did matter. In this section, we draw on a research study conducted by one of us (DM) across the last two decades that captures the rise and partial fall of extended schools, as they first expanded under the last Labour government before falling back since 2010. Here is evidence of possibility.

The research involved clusters of schools, working in partnership, in four very different communities in the North of England, and charted how these extended schools evolved between 2006 and 2015. Cluster A was a rural collection of villages with a secondary school and nine primary schools; cluster B, a former coal-mining community with a high school and eight feeder primary schools; cluster C, a disadvantaged, inner-city community with an infant, junior and secondary school; and cluster D, a market town, with a secondary school and eight feeder primary schools. The learning that emerged from this longitudinal qualitative research – 'getting alongside' school leaders, teachers and other professionals located in these schools, services based in communities and residents – focused upon the changing relationships between these actors as extended schools policy impacted upon them.

The implementation of extended schools initially revealed the fixation of schools on narrow measures of academic success, and how this caused school workforces to concentrate on pupils within the classroom setting and on the quality of teaching. The gaze that resulted consisted of a partial understanding of pupils, divorced from their wider lived experiences of childhood within families and communities. But with the development of extended schools, as school leaders began to look beyond their school gates, they discovered that community-based services were also working with their pupils and their families, and that brothers and sisters were pupils in other schools in the same community. They also found that leaders of community-based services unanimously considered schools as remote from the community and 'inwardly looking', as did many parents: 'my child's school is like an island and has nothing to do with our community, I take them to school and give them over to the teacher', was a typical comment.

In this context, as school leaders stepped outside the school gates to begin engaging with these new-found services and their communities, some felt they did not have the understanding or skills to venture into partnerships, and introduced into their leadership teams new staff with extensive community experience. These new school leaders were given a range of titles, such as 'extended schools manager' or 'community manager'. In some communities there was resistance to schools seeking the lead in developing these new partnerships, and all parties had to work hard to gain mutual understanding of each other's roles. One source of tension and misunderstanding was different measures of performance: standard testing and inspection reports for schools, but very different criteria and measures of success for other services set by service commissioners, senior officials in town halls, NHS head offices or police headquarters.

But through joint working, a new mix of practitioners and leaders formed with, between them, a much better and more realistic appreciation of children and their wider lived context. Over time, knowledge built of other services and of others' work, along with a better understanding of the complexities and interacting factors that influenced families' lives. This was particularly noted within more disadvantaged communities. Localised partnerships were able to construct innovative ways of engaging with families that shifted the focus from silo measures of success to shared measures of success and through this a holistic conceptualisation of the child (Martin, 2019). This enabled partnerships to construct radical but workable practices as envisaged by the 'Every Child Matters' policy, such as the common assessment framework (CAF), team around the child (TAC) and whole-family-based approaches. This shift in practice facilitated a move from deficit modelling associated with crisis interventions, such as child protection, towards early intervention and prevention.

What emerged as the greatest asset of extended schools policy was the local flexibility that was allowed. This enabled local interpretation of centrally defined goals, including full permission to construct the core offer around the particular needs of each community. This is in sharp contrast to the centralised approach to decision-making during the current pandemic, which (as noted above) has not worked well during the crisis.

In addition to the core offer, partnerships studied in the research developed a wide range of responses, reflecting the needs of their diverse communities, illustrated below by a selection of 'snapshots'.

- Cluster A: a rural community with 'outstanding schools' and pockets of poverty had limited public infrastructure in the collection of villages that made up the schools' catchment area. In response to this patchy coverage, the high school took on the role of a 'community hub' as the extended schools partnership developed in response to its new role as potential community leader. It became apparent that schools sited in the villages could offer more by opening to the community through school holidays

and weekends – opening, for example, to local voluntary sector organisations such as those supporting adults with learning disabilities, but also to general interest groups where residents had come together to form art, history or music societies. The growing reach of these schools was recognised by the local authority, which saw them as more than a means to implement their children's plan but also as a way through which to engage with the villages. In 2012, as austerity led to reductions in local authority spending, the local sports centre was threatened with closure. The partnership rescued this facility through forming a community cooperative, closely followed by the acquisition of a community farm, which provided pupils with opportunities to engage in animal husbandry as well as a volunteering project open to all residents. Over time, therefore, this extended schools venture became the local 'community partnership' by bringing together many community interests and providing a local voice.

- Cluster B: a former coal-mining community had been badly affected by the closure of the mining industry and all that went with it. It became a commuter town, from which people travelled to neighbouring cities, and in the process lost identity and heritage. The high school, which was referred to as a 'community school', formed a partnership initially with the primary schools in the surrounding area. The principals stated that they wanted to be known as community schools not just by name but in their practice too, and the extended schools programme provided this opportunity. They initially embraced services by going into the community and listening to those that supported children, young people and families, such as the local children's and social care centres, and commenced exchanging understandings of each other's roles. Further developments saw links made with wider interest groups, such as sports and arts clubs, the miners' welfare, and with residents themselves, resulting in the opening of community shops. The partnership was not merely replacing the former centre for the community, the miners' welfare, but was rebuilding a sense of community and with that hope for the future. School leaders talked of their buildings being for more than learning, but as social centres for their communities open throughout the year. The schools' engagement with youth workers, social workers, housing managers, jobcentre and early years staff meant that children and families were readily able to access comprehensive support and, crucially, to do so earlier before crises led to referral to children's social care.
- Cluster C: an inner-city community, seemingly isolated and remote from the wealthier areas that surrounded it, had high levels of unemployment and felt rejected by wider society. Its three schools were all labelled as 'failing' and threatened with closure; they were considered to be of little significance to families, and parents themselves had often had a poor experience of education as children. The schools

were viewed by the community as isolated islands, their only contact with parents being when there were problems with children. Attendance was poor, as were levels of attainment. There were few local public services and residents talked of having to go to the town centre for housing or other help. The local authority had 'parachuted' in community development workers with the aim to improve employment prospects, but they had little impact.

As part of an extended schools partnership, the three schools contributed to a shared budget which funded a community manager who joined the leadership team for one of the schools. This person had substantial experience of working both in schools and in communities, and set about to 'make the community my own' by walking the streets daily and talking to residents, then guided the other school leaders on how to engage with the community, including how to overcome the deep-seated negative views of schooling. Statutory and non-statutory agencies were invited to join the partnership, as the community manager made clear that 'this partnership is not just about opening the school to the community but it is about the schooling going out into the community and being part of it. It is a two-way development'. Through honest dialogue, partners and the community grew to appreciate each other, while agencies started to pool budgets and put pressure on the local authority to build a children's centre. A Premier League football club sited near the community joined the partnership and opened their facilities to the community, making a significant contribution in terms of health and wellbeing.

All this was followed by local councillors, realising that the extended school partnership was becoming a real influence locally and that it offered a new way of engaging with residents. This led the partnership to become the community regeneration body, far more than the extended schools policy envisaged, empowering a disadvantaged community and providing it with a strong voice to shape its future. A youth work manager from the town hall spoke of the partnership's impact on his work: 'I used to come on to the estate and provide what I thought the residents wanted. Now I am told by the residents through the partnership exactly what they want from the youth service. I now offer what they want and realise their aspirations, not what I thought they wanted'.

- Cluster D: a market town over ten miles away from the city hall, this community felt remote from decision-making about schooling and family services. The community manager brought together the nine schools in the extended schools partnership, and started a journey that placed schools at the heart of a new local identity. Previously, the town council had minimal responsibilities, and its members were excluded from the management of their schools and family services. A new sense of localism and a reinvigorated local democracy developed, as town councillors saw the growing

> partnership as a new platform to support not merely the education and welfare of families, but also the creation of initiatives such as arts festivals. The partnership provided a strong voice for the community that was heard in city hall and influenced decision-making about service delivery, as their local children's plan developed.

These snapshots show how partnerships were developing at a pace between 2006 and 2010, by which date the government announced that all schools in England had provided the 'core offer' and research was demonstrating the shift towards prevention through localised collaborative working, particularly noted in disadvantaged and rural communities (Cummings et al., 2011). But the Conservative-led coalition government then led a return to a narrow view of schooling focused upon the classroom, coupled with an era of extreme austerity as public services budgets were reduced.

In this new policy climate, the partnerships that took part in the research attempted to sustain their work, despite a lack of interest and support from Whitehall. One school leader proclaimed proudly 'now we have worked like this there is no going back', while another added that 'despite Ofsted's lack of interest in our work with partners we will continue; we were trusted with this huge agenda and we have delivered it'. But the reality was policy agendas that contributed to fragmentation and competition between services via renewed marketisation, further centralised control in Whitehall, and eroded the welfare state via austerity. A local authority officer might comment in 2014 that 'working together in this way is the smart thing to do in the face of massive budget challenges; it serves to protect services and continues to support families holistically', but policy neglect and reduced funding debilitated the partnerships and sapped their initial enthusiasm and initiative. What remains today are remnants of their original bold ventures, such as before- and after-school clubs and a dwindling number of children's centres.

'Transformative' change – or more of the same

Back in 2011, Keri Facer in her book *Learning Futures* envisaged yet more roles – cultural, social and political – for the school, arguing for continuing investment in the school:

> As a physical space and a local organization … [because] it may be one of the most important institutions we have to help us build a democratic conversation about the future. A physical, local school where community members are encouraged to encounter each other and learn from each other is one of the last public spaces in which we can begin to build the intergenerational solidarity, respect for diversity and democratic capability needed to ensure fairness in the context of socio-technical change. Moreover, the public educational institution may be the only resource we have to counter the inequalities and injustice of the informal learning landscape outside school … It is therefore the time both to defend the idea of a school as a public resource and to radically re-imagine how it might evolve if it is to equip communities

> to respond to and shape the socio-technical changes of the next few years. (Facer, 2011, pp28-29.)

Extended schools, if lacking some of Facer's sweeping ambition, still provided an invaluable starting point for radically re-imagining the role and place of the school not only as a learning community but as a vital part of the social infrastructure, serving as a public space and a public resource that can help to repair the ravages caused, especially on poorer communities, in the short-term by the pandemic and in the long-term by decades of a disruptive and uncaring neoliberal hegemony.

So we would like to propose to the education secretary that, as part of the process of transformative reform that he acknowledges is needed for the school system, he should not settle for more of the same. He should instead give serious thought to reviving extended schools, and their sister institutions of children's centres, within the context of a renewed policy agenda that takes a holistic and integrated approach towards children and young people. Extended schools that are embedded in locally responsive networks, that are accountable to their local communities, and that work in close collaboration with each other and with other services for children and young people provided in and by those communities. Extended schools that not only equip communities to respond to and shape socio-technical changes, but provide a measure of protection and security to these communities against future shocks. Extended schools that are genuinely public schools providing a genuinely public education, and much more besides, for their local citizens.

References

Cummings, C., Dyson, A., and Todd, L. (2011) *Beyond the school gates: can full service and extended schools overcome disadvantage?,* Abingdon: Routledge. Department for Education and Skills (2004) *Choice for parents, the best start for children: a ten year strategy for childcare,* London: Department for Education and Science.

Department for Education and Skills (2005) *Extended schools: Access to opportunities and services for all: a prospectus,* London: Department for Education and Skills.

Diss, O. and Jarvie, M. (2016) *Unfinished Business: where next for extended schools?,* London: Child Poverty Action Group.

Facer, K. (2011) *Learning Futures: Education, technology and social change,* London: Routledge.

HM Treasury (2003) *Every Child Matters,* London: HMSO.

Lewis, J. (2011) 'From Sure Start to Children's Centres: An analysis of policy change in English early years programmes', *Journal of Social Policy*, 40 (1), 71-88.

Martin, D. (2016) *Whatever happened to Extended Schools? The Story of an Ambitious Education Project,* London: IOE Press.

Martin, D. (2019) 'The Challenge of Developing the "New Public School": learning

from Extended Schools, *FORUM*, 61 (2), 251-259.

Moss, G., Allen, R., Bradbury, A., Duncan, S., Harmey, S. and Levy, R. (2020a) *Primary teachers' experience of the COVID-19 lockdown – Eight key messages for policymakers going forward*, London: UCL Institute of Education, available at: https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10103669/1/Moss_DCDT%20Report%201%20Final.pdf

Moss, G., Allen, R., Bradbury, A., Duncan, S., Harmey, S. and Levy, R. (2020b) *Resetting educational priorities in challenging times*, London: UCL Institute of Education, available at: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/research-projects/2020/dec/resetting-educational-priorities-challenging-times

Moss, G., Allen, R., Bradbury, A., Duncan, S., Harmey, S. and Levy, R. (2020c) *Primary assessment in turbulent times*, London: UCL Institute of Education: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/research-projects/2020/oct/primary-assessment-turbulent-times

Sodha, S. (2021) 'The kids aren't all right – and the government has stopped caring', *The Observer*, 27 March 2021, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/mar/27/the-kids-arent-all-right-and-government-has-stopped-caring.

Taylor-Robinson, D., Lai, E. and Rutherford, C. (2017) 'Bigger cuts to Sure Start children's centres in more disadvantaged areas', *BMJ,* 2017, 359. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.j5332

UK Government (2021) *LA and school expenditure: Financial year 2019-2020, available at:* https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/la-and-school-expenditure/2019-20#releaseHeadlines-tables

Walker, P. (2021) 'Gavin Williamson considers changes to school year as pupils go back', *The Guardian*, 7 March 2021, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/mar/07/gavin-williamson-urges-transformation-as-english-schools-return

Doug Martin is a Course Director at Carnegie School of Education, Leeds Beckett University. His research crosses professional and organisational boundaries seeking to understand the relationship between services and children, young people and families.

d.j.martin@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

Peter Moss is Emeritus Professor of Early Childhood Provision at UCL Institute of Education. His latest books are *Transforming Early Childhood in England: towards a democratic education* (edited with Claire Cameron; UCL Press) and *Neoliberalism and Early Childhood Education: Markets, Imaginaries and Governance* (with Guy Roberts-Holmes; Routledge).

peter.moss@ucl.ac.uk