Supporting “Slow Renewal”: Developments in Extended Education in High-Poverty Neighbourhoods in England

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Abstract: This paper explores how a small but growing number of schools in England are gradually extending their roles to act as, what I term, agents of “slow renewal”: supporting long-term change in children’s complex family and community environments, through a series of strategically-aligned, small-scale, locally-bespoke actions, intentionally planned to bring about incremental change. An empirical illustration of one such school is presented and its core features explored via four core concepts: socio-ecological perspectives on children’s outcomes, soft-systems change, assets-based development, and liminal space. Through this, the paper contributes a set of integrated conceptual principles on which schools working to support slow renewal can act and which challenge the values of market-driven education systems more generally.

Keywords: community schools, extended education, assets-based approaches, systems change

Background and Aims

This paper arises from a keynote presentation I gave at the World Education Research Association (WERA) International Research Network on Extended Education in 2019, where I was asked to consider future directions for the field. In doing so, I reflected on lessons drawn from an ongoing programme of extended education research in England, which I have led individually and with colleagues since 2006. In general, this has focused on how schools can extend their roles beyond their statutory duties to address wider social needs, and more specifically, on how schools serving high-poverty neighbourhoods might help to address barriers to good education and related outcomes, arising beyond their gates, in children’s family and community contexts. A detailed justification for this focus has been provided elsewhere (Kerr, Dyson, & Raffo, 2014), premised on: (1) the stark concentrations of multiple interrelated inequalities and shrinking public services found in these areas, and (2) the opportunities for intervention which arise from understanding an area’s dynamics.

This paper is concerned with these possibilities, and specifically, the small but growing number of schools, with strong connections to high poverty neighbourhoods, which are starting to develop what I call strategies for “slow renewal”. I have coined this term to refer to schools which are: (1) making a long-term commitment to supporting change in children’s complex, multi-layered, family and community environments, (2) aiming to improve children’s outcomes over time, across all the domains in which it is important for them to do well—education, health, safety, housing, economic security, and community participation (Kerr & Dyson, 2016), and (3) are beginning to work through a sustained process of developing
strategically-aligned, small-scale, bespoke actions, which are responsive to and understood as part of a neighbourhood’s local dynamics, and are planned to lead to incremental change.

At the outset, it is also important to note that this focus is somewhat of an outlier in contemporary developments in extended education. It is distinct from important and growing bodies of research exploring the growth and impacts of extra-curricular academic tutoring (e.g. Bray, 2020, Pensiero and Green, 2017), and children’s academic and social development outcomes from participating in varied out-of-hours activities, particularly for disadvantaged groups (e.g. Schüpbach, von Allmen, Frei, & Nieuwenboom, 2017; Fischer, Steiner, & Theis 2020; Rollett, Lossen, Holtappels, & Tillmann, 2020). It does, however, draw on two established traditions which, particularly in the last decade, have lost prominence in the international scholarly literature, though remain strong in terms of advocacy. The first is the conception of extended schools as an anti-poverty strategy; to paraphrase Dryfoos (1994), if children from poor backgrounds come to school too hungry, too distressed and too unwell to learn, it is incumbent on schools to help ensure access to food, health and welfare services. Second is the idea that schools can help to revitalise poor neighbourhoods by acting to strengthen local infrastructures and support community development (Cummings, Dyson, & Todd, 2011; Morris, 1925; Warren and Hong, 2009). Schools which are working to support slow renewal provide an important link to these increasingly overlooked perspectives, while also helping to advance thinking around them (see also Lawson & Van Veen, 2016, as an important earlier contribution to this).

My purposes in this paper are therefore two-fold: (1) to provide a brief empirical illustration of what a school, working to encourage slow renewal, is doing in practice to extend its role, and (2) to begin to conceptualise core features of these emergent practices. The latter is particularly important as without this, the field will struggle to move beyond the presentation of one-off case studies and to enable the transfer of learning. This paper marks an important first step towards this, and I begin by briefly outlining the evidence base I draw upon, before addressing my main purposes in turn.

The Evidence Base

I draw here on iterative and cumulative learning from a 15 year research programme, which includes multiple exploratory and evaluative studies of national, local-government, and school-led extended education initiatives in England. Distinctively, it has enabled sustained relationships with a small number of schools (the longest spanning 10+ years), generating rich accounts of how their roles have been gradually extended. It is through close engagement with specific cases and comparative analysis across them, that the emerging features of schools supporting slow renewal have been identified.

These relationships have been underpinned by the principles of design-based implementation research (DBIR) (Anderson & Shutack, 2012; Fishman, Penuel, Allen, Haugan, & Sabelli, 2013; see also Kerr & Dyson, 2020, for a practice-based account). Importantly, DBIR assumes that: (1) interventions are not static, evolving iteratively through multiple cycles of design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, (2) intervention leaders and researchers work in partnership, both bringing their expertise to bear and with researchers