

## **“Schools can ignore what lies beyond their gates, but they cannot escape it!”**

Colleen Cummings, Alan Dyson, & Liz Todd: *Beyond the School Gates. Can Full Service and Extended Schools Overcome Disadvantage?* Oxford: Routledge 2011

*Reviewed by Stephan Kielblock*

In internationally comparative research activities it has been reported that social problems like political distrust, ethnocentrism, xenophobia or social inequality bring a new understanding of schooling to the scene. Schools, or rather entire school systems of different countries have to meet the globalized demands of education in the twenty-first century. Maybe one possible form to establish sustainable schooling can be seen in the so called full service and extended schools – also called ‘extracurricular and out-of-school education’, ‘all-day schools’ or ‘after school programs’ in other contexts. In this context the present book written by Colleen Cummings, Alan Dyson and Liz Todd asks what happens if schools give up their single focus on children as learners and broaden their horizons with a glance ‘beyond the school gates’. Such schools are concerned with the learning of children as well as their personal, social and physical development, and with how they can access the services they need to support that development.

In chapter one Cummings, Dyson and Todd discuss how full service and extended schools have emerged in particular policy contexts. Especially for England they show how ideas about what those schools are and are for have changed over time and how the New Labour education policy formed today’s status quo. Since 1997 New Labour governments set in place a range of structures and processes for bringing services and organizations together within a single strategic framework. Full service and extended schools should no longer be seen as a separate category. All schools ought to be seen as offering access to extended services. Subsequently the second chapter deals with the question what such schools are for and what they might realistically hope to achieve. The authors show that initiatives for transforming the school system often do not explicitly articulate what they intend to achieve. To explore the rationales on which full service and extended school initiatives are based the team of authors suggest making extensive use of theory of change methodology to surface the implicit theories of change. It seems that different initiatives conceptualize the aims and characteristics of full service approaches in different ways, but one dominant rationale can be perceived over and over again: the sense that social disintegration can be repaired by new kinds of service configurations in and around schools.

Whereas in the first two chapters different initiatives were discussed, the following chapters focus on one recent initiative – the ‘Full Service Extended Schools’

(FSES) initiative in England. It is described in chapter three how schools responded to being involved in the FSES initiative and it became clear that their responses were full of both ambiguities and possibilities. To show the wide range of potential outcomes Cummings, Dyson and Todd explore some individual schools in three detailed case studies. As previously mentioned, it became even more clear through the case studies that a dominant rationale has emerged which views schools as a means of supporting children, families and adults in disadvantaged circumstances.

The fourth chapter fleshes out specific challenges and possibilities driven by additional funding. Altogether the FSES initiative encouraged local experimentation rather than implementing a tried and tested model. Taking into account that the extent to which schools are successful depends on the support they receive from national and local policy frameworks, it is utterly problematic how partial and inappropriate mechanisms for holding English schools to account have undermined their development of extended provision.

Cummings, Dyson and Todd were engaged to evaluate how the FSES initiative affects schooling. So in chapter five they explore the challenges they were faced with in conducting this evaluation. In general it is difficult to differentiate which aspect of the school's approach has produced what outcomes. So for the authors it did not seem possible to rely on a simple input-output evaluation design. The response of the authors, therefore, was to opt for a multi-strand, mixed methods design, and to place the theory of change methodology at the core of that design.

Chapter six gives an outline of the evaluation findings. To begin with the authors report evidence from international research projects, that on the one hand it is difficult to find evidence that improvements are so great, so sustained and so generalized that the effects of any social and economic disadvantages experienced by children and families are entirely negated. And on the other hand international evidence suggests that the impacts of full service and extended schools are variable according to different circumstances. From their FSES evaluation Cummings, Dyson and Todd report selected findings. First, that there is no real evidence for impacts on school-level attainment outcomes. Second, that impacts on children, young people and their families were ambiguous – nevertheless it becomes apparent that for example students who might achieve very little tend to do better as a result of the wider services and activities offered by the school. And third, that there is strong evidence for impacts on adults, communities and the school. The authors report some more findings in the book that in detail can be looked up in the final research report of the 'Evaluation of the Full Service Extended Schools Initiative', published in 2007 by Cummings and colleagues.

As a last point chapter seven reconsiders the collected evidence and suggests that schools need to be based on a theory of change that is coherent and explicit. This means there has to be an idea, or at least a debate, about what full service and extended schools are for and how they should work. And one should not indulge in the illusion that this idea or debate does not depend significantly on where the school is located, what the social realities of those locales are, and how other services are configured there. The authors are right if they say that decisions "cannot be made in the light of some decontextualized blueprint" (p. 107). It needs to be clear what the current policy context is, what problems it contains, and what it is that schools might contribute to the solution of those problems to build firm foundations for full service and extended schools. In due consideration of possible ways to think about

these crucial fundamentals one possibility is to see the focus of full service and extended school approaches as to break the link between social background, educational outcomes and chances in life – as already mentioned the authors speak of this as the dominant rationale. Another way of thinking receives far less attention. Full service and extended schools can also be seen to help build a society that is not only economically viable, but is also healthy in terms of its politics and values. In a way schools contribute to building a vibrant, democratic society.

The prevailing assumption that schools should solve a range of social and educational problems brings the term 'disadvantage' into question. As the authors delineate, the complexity of the links between structural inequalities and outcomes for individuals are commonly underestimated as well as the intricacy of multiple factors of disadvantage and their impacts and interactions. A closer look at the relationship between social disadvantage and education reveals that schools can, on the one hand, reduce risks to which individuals are subjected and increase their resilience. But on the other hand the underlying social structures and the inequalities and adversities inherent in those structures continue to generate risks relatively unperturbed by what school does or does not do. This makes sense if one considers that the strongest evidence for the effectiveness of schools is on the individual level whereas sources of risk are tackled in the communities and areas where children live. For this reason Cummings, Dyson and Todd recommend giving up the idea that school is the center of all services and activities and to turn towards aligning the work of the community agencies with that of the school. This should be secured by a shared local strategy. In the words of the authors they suggest "a shift from the *hub* model of full services and extended schools, to a *network* and *nested* model" (p. 120). This means in particular that not only schools embellish their core business with additional activities but, as the authors put it, that system level policy needs its own theory of change where schools are to be seen as part of a network of services operating strategically in pursuit of shared aims.

All in all the book 'beyond the school gates' addresses practitioners and policy makers as well as researchers. The combination of two relatively voluminous but generally intelligible chapters about the historical, political and organizational context in England and the following well-structured chapters about the evaluation of the English initiative to foster full service and extended schools, makes it possible to understand the undertaken research against the backdrop of the particular present situation in England. For internationally oriented research in the field of full service and extended schools this approach is of vital importance. In conventional (shorter) papers the specific context and history of schooling is not uncommonly rather neglected, so the results are interpreted in view of the author's country's standards – in so doing they are not uncommonly misinterpreted. In books like the one by Cummings, Dyson and Todd a deep and holistic understanding of research and the ongoing processes of school development is opened up and hopefully that future researchers follow this example.