

The Impact of School Context: What headteachers say

Martin Thrupp and Ruth Lupton

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Abstract

This paper reports the accounts of fifteen headteachers of primary schools in one local authority in the South East of England, including headteachers of schools that are amongst the most advantaged five per cent of schools in England and those amongst the most disadvantaged twenty per cent. The headteachers reflect on the nature of the intakes and other local contextual factors, and their impact on day to day school processes and on decisions made about organization, curriculum and pedagogy. The findings give an insight into the extent of variation between schools and their capacity to respond to differing needs given budgetary constraints, performative pressures and the limits of professional knowledge.

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Introduction

Numerous studies have illustrated that the processes and organisation of schools tend to reflect the socio-economic advantages or disadvantages of the communities and families they serve. The activities and social relations of schools are not entirely the product of the agency of teachers and school leaders. They are influenced by economic, social and cultural capitals that students and parents bring with them, and thus in turn by local, regional, national and global processes of economic and social change and migration that produce particular local configurations of behaviour, relationships and expectations around education, as well as by the historical and contemporary operation of local education markets and policies (Carrasco-Rozas 2010, Kozol 1991, 2005, Lupton 2004, 2005, Metz 1990, Mills and Gale 2009, Thomson 2002, Thrupp 1999).

For the most part, teachers and school leaders experience socio-economic and other local contexts as ‘givens’ that constrain and enable their work and the ways in which they can exercise their agency. Better understanding of local contextual complexity could therefore give rise to fairer national evaluation of school performance, fairer distribution of resources, and the provision of more appropriate advice and support to schools. All of these would enable better responses to the needs of school populations. We call this the ‘contextualization agenda’ for education research and policy (Thrupp and Lupton 2006, Lupton and Thrupp 2007).

This paper aims to explore differences in local context as they affect primary schools in England. The data come from a large mixed methods study¹ which involved 44 primary and junior schools located within about twenty miles of each other in a single county in the South East of England and thus sharing some social and economic contexts at the regional level, although located in very different neighbourhoods. An important part of the study was to think about the dimensions of context that should be measured, and to produce some simple tools that would describe school contexts in ways that would enable headteachers, local authority and central government officials and school inspectors to gain a clear and comparative view of the challenges facing a school. We summarise this work in Appendix 1.² This analysis provides the basis for the references in this paper to schools having more or less of some particular feature that can be represented as an indicator (such as pupil mobility or special educational needs) and also enabled us to position the 44 schools on a spectrum of cumulative advantage and disadvantage (Appendix 1, Table 1).

We then conducted extended interviews with headteachers in all 44 schools in order to understand how context was perceived and acted upon. Topics covered were:

- Key challenges facing the school
- The nature of the area, and the school intake

¹ ‘Primary School Composition and Student Progress’, ESRC reference number RES-000-23-0784-A

² Further work on this issue continues in CASE – contact r.lupton@lse.ac.uk for details.

- The head's overall view on the way in which the intake affects the work that the school does
- Number of children on Free School Meals and the extent to which this reflects deprivation in the school
- The reputation of the school, the nature of the local market for schooling and the school's position in the market
- Trends in the school roll and reasons for any changes
- Numbers of pupils with special educational needs, and the kinds of needs
- Issues in working with parents, and the school's approach to this
- The level of pupil mobility, and the kind of mobility
- The school's approach to grouping and setting
- The school's approach to curriculum organisation, monitoring of pupil performance and preparation for standard tests
- Use of classroom assistants
- Issues in staff recruitment and retention and turnover
- The age/gender/experience profile of the staff
- Levels of staff morale
- The impact of workforce remodelling and the school's approach
- The fundraising activities of the school, the amount raised and what it is used for
- The extent and type of extra-curricular activities
- The existence and nature of any extended services, such as breakfast clubs

Many of these topics were canvassed because they had proved insightful in previous studies of school context (e.g., Thrupp 1999, Lupton 2004). It will be apparent that some encourage the description of school context, especially intake composition and the local educational market. Other areas allow for exploring how school processes may be affected by context, including looking at some specific processes that can be compared across schools, such as SATs preparation and the school's approach to grouping.

Importantly, the headteachers' accounts were not seen merely as extra (objective) qualitative detail to add to the statistical data. How headteachers read context and in particular how they interpret its implications for their own decisions is a subjective exercise, dependent on their previous professional and personal experiences, beliefs and attitudes, and their professional socialization, orientation and training, as well as on the possibilities open to them in their current environments and the particular institutional pressures they face (to recruit students, raise attainment, improve their Ofsted rating and so on). Under the Coalition government's new policy regime, characterized by a withdrawal of central initiatives and targeted funding and increasing emphasis on the agency of headteachers with devolved funding, these subjective readings will become increasingly influential. Understanding what headteachers see, say and think about context and its implications is therefore just as

important than what objective indicators tell us about the challenges facing schools, if not more so. It is this qualitative material that we cover here. In order to allow the subjectivity of the accounts to become visible, as well as to reveal in some detail the similarities and differences between contexts, we report the headteachers' accounts at some length, and with extended use of verbatim quotations, before offering our own analysis. We are aiming to 'let the data speak' in a direct way (Lupton 1985, Taylor et al. 2009).

The paper covers material from the seven most advantaged schools in the sample on the statistical measures and on eight schools that ranged from the average (by national standards) to disadvantaged. The South East is a wealthy part of the country and all of the more advantaged seven schools were in the most advantaged five per cent of schools in England.³ The more disadvantaged schools, on the other hand, were not extreme by national standards. They ranged from two schools close to the national median for deprivation, through progressively more disadvantaged schools, to a school at around the 25th percentile for deprivation nationally. Readers should bear in mind that, while it would be difficult to find schools in England that are much more advantaged than those in our sample, there are significantly more disadvantaged schools, particularly in large urban areas. The schools were both primary schools (ages 4/5 to 10/11) and junior schools (ages 7/8 to 10/11). They varied in size from just over 100 pupils to almost 300. Table 1 lists the schools with some key descriptive statistics. Diagrams showing the differences between the more and less advantaged schools on socioeconomic indicators are shown in Appendix 1, Figures 1 and 2.

The material on the seven advantaged schools, which comes first, has been published in the *Journal of Education Policy* (Thrupp and Lupton 2011). The later material, which considers the eight average to disadvantaged schools will not be published in a journal article in the same form due to length, although some of the material was presented at the British Educational Research Association conference in September 2011 and has been submitted for publication in that shorter form. The particular contribution of this CASEpaper is to bring the material together, in full, from all the schools across the socio-economic spectrum, illuminating the contrasts between them. We draw conclusions for education research, policy and practice.

³

Using a school level deprivation indicator based on tax credits developed by the Department for Children Schools and Families. See Thrupp and Lupton (2011).

Table 1: The Schools

School pseudonym	Type of area (Urban/Rural Classification)	Type of School	Number of pupils	Position (20ths) in national distribution of deprivation indicator
The Advantaged Schools				
Juniper	Village	Primary	149	20
Mulberry	Village	Primary	125	20
Spicebush	Village	Primary	118	20
Spruce	Village	Primary	144	20
Cherry	Hamlet and Isolated Dwelling	Primary	123	20
Ash	Town and Fringe	Junior	240	20
Elder	Hamlet and Isolated Dwelling	Primary	102	20
The Disadvantaged Schools				
Fir	Urban > 10k	Junior	208	10
Redwood	Urban > 10k	Junior	201	10
Willow	Urban > 10k	Junior	201	8
Palmtree	Urban > 10k	Junior	218	7
Aspen	Urban > 10k	Junior	221	7
Cedar	Urban > 10k	Junior	280	7
Cypress	Urban > 10k	Primary	258	7
Beech	Urban > 10k	Primary	102	5

The Advantaged Schools

Juniper: an extremely socially advantaged school

Juniper school was located in ‘a very advantaged area as you might have guessed coming through the village, it’s very attractive and a nice community to live in’.⁴ The head’s assessment of deprivation backed up the data: ‘it’s a very, very small minority who are not in a high income bracket’. Families were ‘generally very stable, a lot of fathers are working in the IT industries or in London’, mothers were at home or working ‘but it tends to be quite high-powered a lot of it, it’s going back to the office as opposed to going back to the supermarket’. The head described how the wealthy

⁴ All quotes are from the head of the school being discussed.

professional parents at Juniper constituted a different demographic than many primary schools deal with:

I think it's to do with house prices and to do with people's jobs, many of our parents are more mature than I remember parents being. When I first started teaching a long time ago, parents would be in their 20s with their children starting school, our parents are coming to their first child's parents' meeting into their 40s maybe even 50 for dads, so it's quite interesting, it's a very different family profile than the one that used to be there 10 years ago.

Having such parents supporting the school was very helpful financially: the 'friends of the school' had raised £22,000 over two years for a new music and drama room. At the same time the parents were articulate and confident and could be very demanding of the school:

...we're just about to update our Ofsted questionnaire which needs to be done and so in my wisdom I did a parents questionnaire, which is great in theory but in practice, the ones who are happy and contented don't send them in, and the ones who have the axe to grind do and that can be a little hurtful sometimes ... I think a lot of teachers have been a little stung by it, again it's a minority, tiny minority..

Parents at Juniper were ambitious for their children and sometimes overzealous about their academic progress:

parents are concerned because they see their children as playing and they can't see the merit in it and actually these children are doing such amazing things, and this is where I was going back to, they're thinking, they're being independent they are using enquiry skills, they're using so many skills but I think these parents like them sitting in rows with pencils and filling in sums.

A culture of over-investment in children by working parents was also described:

I'm out working I want to support my child by making sure they do the swimming, and the judo, and the horse riding and the dancing and I think sometimes the children just need time out just to be imaginative and at home, ...some of them just seem to whizz around a huge number of [things].

Despite this school's many advantages, the head identified some 'difficult' children:

...we've got one or two cohorts at the top of the school who have been very challenging indeed, all boys and for very different reasons, I mean some of them have got very particular needs, Aspergers or something like that which obviously has an impact... I should say the first three years they are entirely calm but at the top end we've got a group who

have been difficult all the way through and I think they will continue to be, one tries 101 strategies.

Juniper was in a very dominant market position, being full to bursting with students and unable to take any students from outside catchment. The head described how national media coverage had strengthened its reputation:

A few years ago we had the dubious accolade as being classed as one of the top 20 schools in the country, which was a nonsense, I have to say it's a nonsense, it just happens that that one year we had 100% success in our SATS and...Barclays premiership banking looked at house prices and good school results and they put us together as being in the top 20...And it doesn't hold water actually, but the other side of it, it has a knock on effect because it's gone in all the national papers, it then became a thing that you're a good school, or the reputation goes ahead of you, so we've very well sought after... When I first came to the school it seemed to be that not quite 50% but quite a large percentage of our children left at 7 for independent schools, that has completely gone away.

The head recognised that many parents would prefer smaller classes but could do little about it as the LEA was unwilling to allow extra classes when there was excess capacity in other nearby schools.

Juniper had more turbulence than some of the other schools, but at this school turbulence was often a matter of parents moving internationally for work or lifestyle:

We've got children who've left us at different stages...and I think all of them have left because parents have gone abroad or they've moved elsewhere ...there's nobody here who's gone to an independent school, one went to Australia, one went to New Zealand...

Only a few individual students were identified as having special needs:

We do have problems with family backgrounds. I mean we have two children who have support from [outside the school] and they have specific difficulties which are all related to self-esteem and they're very angry children, in fact very disturbed children.

Turning now to the way Juniper responded to its intake, the head was able to identify quite specific learning concerns, 'moving children forward with writing', 'children's personal assessment of their work' and 'assessment for leaning' as key issues for the school. Discussion in these areas tended to assume children were capable, independent learners:

It's not just a case of 'we are following the curriculum, this is what we do, we have now done it so now we know it', it's actually really looking

at the assessments with the children, and the children being aware of where they are and what they don't understand and what they need to do and how they can address this and that's the area again which has to be really fine tuned.

As a school that was too small to have a class at each level, Juniper operated with mixed yeargroup classes and differentiated work offered for different groups of pupils within each class. This mixing across classes also enabled a culture where the school could push ahead students of high ability:

I've got four year 3 boys in the class of year 4 / 5. They have done better than anybody else within that class, which just actually indicates how very able they are, because they have done better than their year 4 group.

It was also apparent that, dealing with a generally able, middle class intake, the school had considerable capacity to respond to any perceived learning issues. One indication of this capacity was that the head was able to spend some six weeks of the year out of the school acting as a consultant head to four other schools . This work also bought in extra funding to the school: about £10,000 per year. On the other hand, whereas it is often assumed that high SES schools have fewer problems recruiting staff than those in deprived areas, Juniper often struggled to recruit because of the high cost of housing in the local area.

Other extremely socially advantaged schools

Mulberry was another village school of similar size to Juniper and followed many similar patterns. Parents were again heavily involved: 'they're cosseted by the parents too much', 'independence is a big thing because the parents will trudge in, carrying all their bags, that kind of thing' and were again willing and able to provide considerable financial support to the school: 'we had an auction of promises to raise money to develop the school grounds and on that one evening we raised £9.5k'. As at Juniper, parents were also not slow to intervene in their child's schooling if they perceived any problem ('the letters start coming in, that kind of thing'), students were grouped within mixed year groups and it was often hard to recruit staff.

However there were also differences. Mulberry's most noteworthy differences from Juniper were considerable fluidity around enrolments and loss of students to private schools. This school only had a small 'natural' catchment area in the village so it took in 40% of children from out of catchment with students coming from 15 different pre-schools overall. Like Juniper some moved on with transfers 'we've got parents that are directors, and executives of companies and they move out of the area to go elsewhere with their jobs' but a more serious issue was that from Years 3-5 many tended to go off to the private system:

as I say, the catchment area here is difficult, it's a small catchment area, so they all move. They go everywhere; you've got [names three private schools], lots of different places. There isn't one or two.

Such students were usually easily enough replaced by out of catchment students ‘the Year Five at the moment, 80% of that class never started in reception year’. But this opened up the school to enrolling less advantaged and able students into its senior classes and it also created budget problems:

There has been a trend in that, we tend to have the high achievers moving onto the private system and will get in. Because there’s a place, people from [the nearby town] perhaps, less fortunate areas, and the children aren’t as high achieving, so there has been a general pattern.

it all depends on January 17th every year, your school budget is based on that one day, unfortunately for us last year we started off with 132 and we were down to 121 by January 17th. So we were funding the education of those children from our budget but not having anything in there. So our next year’s budget is based on that very day, how many children were in school on that day... There’s some small reimbursement once the budget comes through for changing numbers but it’s nowhere near [enough].

One effect of this is that whereas the other socially advantaged schools in our sample were generally identifying some particular learning goal as their challenging issue of the moment, the Mulberry head said a key concern for that school was ‘developing a PR strategy for the school [even though] we’re over-subscribed in terms of pupil numbers’.

A second noteworthy difference between Juniper and Mulberry is that the latter had even fewer single parent families. Unlike Juniper, Mulberry was a Church of England school and the head painted a picture of conservative family values pervading the school and the village:

They have strong family values, I have to say, a strong sense of respect and behaviour. They’re the type of children that don’t like people misbehaving and don’t like behaviour problems.

Spicebush was another Church of England school but like Mulberry its contextual indicators did not indicate any noteworthy differences from Juniper and in many ways this was borne out by the head’s comments. Spicebush was described as ‘reasonably privileged... things like free school meals and indicators like that are not an issue. Also ‘I think we only have one child who is not white Caucasian, not British’ and ‘our special needs issue is likely to become, very shortly, our more able people rather than the pupils that need additional support’. Nevertheless there were a few noteworthy differences. First, while parent support was ‘fantastic’ and the PTA typically raised £13000-15000 per year, the head described a more broadminded relationship between parents and the school than at Juniper:

the premise is always that the school has got things right, initially....I'm not going to have somebody smashing my door down because their child says, "I had a bad day at school," or something like that. They would want to investigate why, probably, but they're certainly not going to take the child's side over a staff member for instance...I've recently come from another school, outside of this authority, where parents were highly aspirational and I would have lots of challenging from parents about certain things. No, I am very impressed at the trust that's reflected in me and my professionals...I guess I would explain it by saying that they know their capability, the capability of their children, and...and so are far more interested in the kind of broader curriculum rather than focussing in on why the SATs results are...I had a telephone conversation with a lady from just outside London who was talking about choosing another local school over mine, which...which is somewhat of a surprise. And it was down to the SATs results, and my parents, the parents of my existing children, would find that fairly abhorrent I think.

Second, Spicebush was located in an expensive village, but one a fair distance away from the town. This meant that it was more reliant on local students and was in fact a little undersubscribed in a way that might be unexpected for such a privileged school 'certainly the local estate agents are surprised if you tell them that there are spaces here'. Yet, third and despite this location, the head found it 'worryingly' easy to recruit teaching staff. On the other hand it was almost impossible to recruit low paid lunchtime supervisors⁵: 'they [people in the area] pay their gardener more.'

Spruce was another C of E village school with reasonably high mobility and a higher proportion of single parent families than any of the schools so far. Children here were described as 'articulate, well-motivated children, who come from supportive families'. Some advantages of this kind of intake were noted:

because of the fact we've got in general well behaved children makes it an attractive place for other parents to come and say 'Yes I'd like my children to be here'.

it's also 'Cool to be Clever' here. So some of the boys in year 6 who are quite bright sparks, they are looked up to. Whereas in some schools, they are teased mercilessly for being the boffs and whatever.

At Spruce there was mention of poorer families being a significant group:

Yes there is an affluent contingent at the school but there is also the other extreme where I've got farm labourers and farm workers who are in tied cottages.

⁵ The Head's term was 'dinner ladies'.

[E]very term, the children go on a trip to do with a topic. Now not all parents can afford that, so [the PTA] do subsidise the trip as well.

This less affluent group was also likely to be the most mobile: ‘a lot depends on the estate workers if they move to a different estate’. Like Juniper and all the schools so far Spruce was too small to have a class at each level, so it operated with mixed year group classes and differentiated work offered for different groups of pupils within each class. Staffing at Spruce was settled – no teacher at this school had been there less than seven years and it was oversubscribed, about 3/4s of children coming from within its catchment and numerous enquiries from out of catchment:

it’s because we’re in a rural area, and there are so many more people moving from towns into the rural areas that I think that’s what’s happened. We’ve got a huge housing estate just the other side of [the town] and they’re just on the edge of our catchment.

The head at Spruce described this school’s enrolment situation as a big problem for the school:

I think the most challenging at the moment is the fact that we’re oversubscribed and we’re a small school and it’s trying to serve the community and to keep everyone happy. We have endless phone calls and we have to say – we are full.

Cherry School had a more clearly rural location than any of the others so far: ‘[it’s] not a noticeable village. You go through it, you think, Is there a village there? There’s a garage and bakery. Oh, it’s gone’. It had a correspondingly small local catchment and like Mulberry was heavily dependent on out of catchment enrolments. While Cherry’s contextual indicators were unexceptional, it also struggled with problems related to the affluence of intake already mentioned, including professional middle class turbulence, loss of students to private schools and ‘demanding’ parents:

You know, one year I was dreading seeing parents because it got to the stage “I’m sorry, we’re going to move to the Isle of Wight” you know, established families. “We’ve moved to Kingsbury and we can’t get here from Kingsbury anymore.”...Some to America, some to Cornwall, they’ve suddenly all gone. Normally it balances out, at the moment we’re getting more out than in, but that’s not always the case, and apparently that’s typical of the school...we’ve cut a class before because we were right down to ninety, and then you go up to a hundred and forty. And it really is an issue for us, it’s a big issue.

Some go on till about year five because some of the independents take - some of the prep schools go from about nine, don’t they, and they take them then. One or two for [private school] went in year five last year. And the intention had always been to send them to [private school], and

that's when- they went slightly early, they went in the summer of year eight because they got sports scholarships and [private school] wanted them for their cricket in the summer.

And sometimes it's about saying to parents, you know, "Are you thinking you're putting too much pressure on this child?" ...And, yeah, it does affect you the nature of the children, because some parents are actually looking at your every move through a magnifying glass, and others send your children into school and let the school get on with it. That's it, that's school, school will do it. And what you want is a sort of fine balance really

Despite (or perhaps because of?) these struggles, the head of this school played down its contextual advantages:

There's a new estate, or a newish estate, over there, it's been there about three years, and we've never had a pupil from there....They're very expensive, they were very expensive houses; they went from about four hundred thousand I think was the cheapest, to about seven hundred and fifty thousand. So that suggests independent education to me. Next year, I think, next September I think we're taking our first pupil from there

We haven't got any free school meals but we've got a heck of a lot of children on the special needs register.

Ash was a junior school of 240 students, about twice as large as any of the village schools discussed so far. Being a larger school allowed it to have classes at each year group with some ability grouping within these classes. The head of Ash argued that separate infant and junior schools held back achievement gains in junior schools because of the effects of divided institutional loyalties:

And junior heads have been saying this for years and there is now respectable data which show that children appear to do better at the end of Key Stage 1 in an infant school rather than an all through primary because in an all through primary there may be a dialogue between the year 3 teacher and the year 2 teacher, saying 'are you absolutely sure [about the level of achievement]' and there can be a professional exchange of views without anybody feeling that one institution is trying to undermine or impose on the other...Some of the level 3s we get in from [infant school] may have been a level 3 on that day in May with the following wind and bright sunshine and all we can do is achieve a level 5 for them and if we achieve that then that is 2 levels, zero value added.

Apart from being a larger school and a junior school, Ash again did not stand out much in terms of the contextual indicators but of course was far more complex once the quantitative account was considered. First, 30-40% of its children were drawn from a military base where it enjoyed a better reputation than amongst the civilian population. The head explained this as follows:

It is possible though that the emphasis we give to settling the military children and the fact that these children come in and out and disturb all the routine of the stable, civilian reputation, that may be part of the issue. Because if you're part of the military you know that moves go with the territory...For the people who stay they may see during four years, three of their very best friends go and there isn't the compensation...it's just 'oh they've gone and here are we'.

Second, the Head did not identify Ash as being a very advantaged school. Rather, in response to criticism from Ofsted that the school was not multicultural enough, he was keen to stress that the school did well with the various socio-economic elements of the community it served:

In civilian Ashtown there's pockets of really quite severe deprivation, 3 children and mum and dad living in a 2 bedroom flat. Er...there's a number of those, there's old farming Ashtown, there's social housing Ashtown, there's owner occupier detached 5 bedroom Georgian style Ashtown and there's town houses and semis.... we're pleased when we get children from the detached 5 bedroom, people living on Ashtown high street invariably access independent education, so there are those communities as well and all of them mix particularly well [in this school] but what this guy was saying was he didn't see enough evidence that in this very Anglo-centric white school that we had as educators opened our children's eyes enough to the realities of the world that they live in.

Similarly the military families were not as advantaged as the school's percentage of free school meals suggested:

mum is living in a military cottage miles away from any of her family back up, dad is away for up to 6 months of the year so effectively she is operating as a single parent.... So with military families what you might find characterises children in the civilian population, free school meals, there are lots of correlations, the one area where there isn't a correlation is in resources, and no minister in any government is going to put a military salary low enough to trigger free school meals, are they, obviously not. So we are forever being categorised with 'similar' schools that are [in a leafy town], which are as similar as chalk and cheese.

Third, Ash's school buildings did little to help the school:

This big unfriendly looking remote Victorian building... militates against what we actually want to do. That entrance hall is rather forbidding, the front door was driven in to the side of a chimney....

Fourth, a staffing problem had quite suddenly developed in the school, largely as a result of personal factors and promotions to other schools:

In the last two years a number of people's career paths all came to the same point simultaneously... So out of 8 permanent staff there could be er...well there are 3 gaps and a question mark.

Elder, the last of the advantaged schools, stood out on the context indicators as having a higher number of students with English as an additional language (EAL). However this was still only 7% of intake and EAL students were hardly mentioned in the head's interview. The school was also the smallest of the seven schools (102 students) and had fairly high student mobility.

At Elder the lack of independence of children was again noted: 'I think they have a lot done for them at home, I think Mum's run around after them'. On the other hand such privileged children could also suffer from a lack of parent attention:

[An] amazing number of them cannot use a knife and fork, so I don't know if they don't have meals together, I think a lot of I suppose the so-called better off childrens' fathers work in London, and aren't home until very late. So maybe they're having their dinner on their own, in front of the TV, I don't know...

...you've got some children who come from good backgrounds who you'd think was economically good who don't really spend much time with their parents, they're with childminders or they're farmed around to every club going and don't have quality family time.

The head at Elder also wanted to stress the presence in the school of a significant minority of children from poorer families: 'so you have got two ends of the scale, you have got people living in million pound houses but you have also got people living on the council estates'. The latter were estimated by the head at 30%, although this is not supported by the context indicators, nor by some other comments:

It's just a very few children, it's almost one family with their add ons, they seem to have cousins and other people who are affecting the rest of the school, even parents would like to see these families go...[They are] from the council estate down the road... Because of how they speak, how they look and really what they do outside the school. Because they're on bikes and they mess around in people's garages and hotwiring cars and doing some quite bad things, and they're known by the police, the police come here, they know who they are.

The children mixed well but parents didn't mix at all. For instance the parents association raised about £8000 per year for the school, however:

The type of things they organise, a lot of the parents don't want to come to. They organise fashion shows and this type of thing and the people who live on the council estates don't want to come....I was trying to get them to do like a race night with fish and chips, something a bit more down to earth but they weren't very keen on that.

The school was in a village 'a bit chocolate boxey, so it appeals in that sense'. However because of the demographics of this wealthy little village, there were only two children from the village at the school. The others all came from surrounding areas and there had been problems keeping up enrolments in the past but a new private housing development within catchment meant there was now much more demand for the school. However the head described how student numbers were always touch and go for the school because of funding cut-off points used by the county:

[Keeping the roll up] is something that concerns the governors, they're always very concerned about it, and there's this magic number – 101, once you go below 101, when form 7 comes out in January, if you go below 101 it cuts quite a lot of your budget.

The size of school was described as a mixed blessing. On the one hand it was an advantage to have small class sizes: 'sometimes it's like people who can't afford prep school, they see it as that a bit, because the classes are small' On the other it meant that the presence or absence of a particular child could heavily impact on SATs results:

Last year 100% got science, 100% got English and something like 87% got maths, very high...It's perhaps maybe why this year lots of people came in, but this year it's not going to be so good.

It could also lead to turbulence when a critical mass of students, in this case the proportion of girls, broke down:

at the moment I've got year 4, the year 4 has no girls in so it's 9 boys, it did only have a few girls in like 4 or 5 but gradually they've gone, but when it got down to three those last three didn't want to be the last three in the year group so they left.

This was part of a loss of nearly 20% of students who had left the school and been replaced by others (hence the high mobility). The turbulence was otherwise attributed to 'moving house and other people just didn't like a new head, a new regime and moved to other local schools'.

Being such a small school also made it more difficult to maintain distance from parents:

I've even had parents come, I had a lady come to see me just before the Easter holidays say 'I haven't got much money, where do you suggest I take my children out for a day.', Um and I'm thinking 'Not quite the Tourist Information' but it is like that. You are on their, it is their beck and call almost.

Elder had little problem recruiting staff. The key issues for this school identified by the head were learning matters - writing and religious education (it was a Church of England school).

The Average to Disadvantaged Schools

Fir and **Redwood** schools were the schools in our sample closest to the national average on the deprivation indicator, were similar on many of the indicators we collected and appeared to have similar contexts. Both were situated on urban housing estates, with what the heads described as mixed intakes. According to the head at Fir, the school had 'some aspiring parents with very capable children' but was also dealing with 'a good 60% - 65% of children who have more like the tail of underachievement' (notably this was considerably more than the proportion on low incomes). Redwood's head said the school had 'some very low socioeconomic parents and we have some very middle class parents'. Both schools had a relatively high degree of turbulence. In Fir's case, the headteacher ascribed this to families moving in or out of housing association dwellings 'so by the time the children get to Year 6 we have probably got about 50% of the original starting in Year 3'. Residential moves were also implicated at Redwood. Both schools also received children who were 'struggling behaviourally' from more socio-economically advantaged schools (Fir) and both, according to the heads had good reputations in their communities and particularly reputations for, 'being able to deal with the difficult children' (Redwood).

The headteachers of both schools thought that many of the problems experienced by the children stemmed from parent attitudes and expectations. "[A] lot of our parents are single parent families with bad experiences of their own education. So they don't feel fully equipped to be able to support their kids as they go through' (Fir). At neither school did the headteacher think that parents were sufficiently proactive about involvement with the school over their children's learning. For example, parents would come into the school over problems or issues with their children (such as the children being in trouble) but not to discuss learning or to offer help with reading or other learning activities. Fir's headteacher described this as "if it is learning, it's us taking the lead", while Redwood's said that while parents would turn up for sports days or performances, in matters relating to the children's learning "they leave us to get on with what we're doing."

The responses of the two schools to these ostensibly very similar contexts had some commonalities. In both cases, the headteachers emphasised the importance of building up children's self-esteem and confidence, and stressed that education was not just

about academic success but about personal and social development. At Fir this extended to monitoring of social skills through a ‘behaviour diary’.

We track them right the way through [on behaviour] as well as the academic side. [We] plot those kids in terms of being able to integrate, being able to access, being able to survive, communication skills, to be able to work collaboratively. So we have very detailed notes on some children, in terms of these sorts of things that they get up to.

All children at Fir were also put in ‘nurture groups’ of 8 or 10 children where they undertook PSHE (Personal Social and Health Education) activities including the opportunity to ‘talk about all sorts of things, what they like about each other, which difficulties they are going through’. Teachers often took a counselling role and made a priority of small teaching groups and full time LSA (Learning Support Assistant) support, partly in order to maximize opportunities for adult/child interactions. At Redwood, school assemblies were ‘PSHE based’ (Personal Social and Health Education). Both heads used extended anecdotes in the interviews to illustrate their version of success in these contexts:

One of my proudest moments as a head was at a Christmas assembly a few years ago; three children were playing the flute. One little boy and two little girls and the little boy, well he was not a nice child...but he played the flute like an angel and these other two little girls, he teased these two little girls mercilessly that he was doing this solo, that he could play better than them, and in the middle of the solo his reed stuck and [one of the girls], who only got one level four for her SATs⁶...she poked him on the back, gave him her flute, took his back and sat down again.... It makes me cry, every time I say it, it’s just one of those really special – one of those really special moments that I’m so proud of. And that’s the kind of child we want to develop because a child like that will go on and be a success... As I said, if you judge her by academic standards, she is a failure, but she wasn’t a failure in our books, she is the kind of child that we want to celebrate in Redwood...because not everyone is going to go to university and further education. Most won’t. (Redwood)

I mean, I will show you this, it’s a photograph...of twins, and they came here about 5 or 6 years ago, they are Royal Marines now, they were a pain in the arse, they really were, they were so naughty and they were not academic, and look at them now. They are really good lads. Did they get level 4s? Did they hell! Are they Marines? They are! I mean I will

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The national school qualification system in England is organised in Key Stages and ‘Levels’. At Key Stage 2 (the end of primary school), pupils are expected to have reached Level 4 across their subjects. The point being made here then is that this girl was not a high achieving student. It is also worth pointing out that flutes don’t have reeds: presumably the story has been told so many times that the detail is no longer important.

trust these guys to defend me any day of the week, but they were little buggers when they were here. But that's really summing up what we are about (Fir)

However, in other respects, the strategies deployed by the schools were rather different. One area was parental involvement. At Fir the headteacher emphasised ways in which parents were failing to help their children:

...they haven't got the culture of exams, like early nights, good idea! Last year we had a lad who basically had arranged a sleepover so he couldn't get his levels⁷, he could have got level 5 but actually got level 3, and the parents were quite distraught, 'so why did you do that?'... We had our evening back in February and we reminded them of 'early nights' and we sent letters to say 'Dos and Don'ts', we also have homework clubs, we do revision booklets, we have the computers set up ... and yet you get the stupidity.

This headteacher thought that it was difficult to get parents of able children at Fir to have higher aspirations for them. The school therefore invested a lot in parental involvement and what the head described as "missionary work to help the parents to see that that particular child is capable of going on, and that isn't a threat, that's an opportunity, and to celebrate that". Although it did not have a Parent Teacher Association (PTA), the school tried very hard to involve parents in their children's learning, employing a home-school link worker and running a "whole range of initiatives to get parents into the school, sitting alongside their kids in non-threatening ways", such as inviting them in to do maths puzzles together with an outside tutor. At Redwood there were fewer efforts to get parents more involved because the lack of involvement of parents was regarded as less of a problem:

I've always adopted the attitude that if [parents] are unhappy, we'll hear, if we don't hear from them, it's because they're happy with what we're doing.

If parents came to me and said that they had a burning desire for [a PTA], then I'd support it, but the parents haven't asked for one, so I haven't pushed for it either. And that works for us.

On the other hand, Redwood's head placed greater emphasis on the effects of material deprivation:

It's something I'm conscious of, that our children don't have breakfast properly, but I have to try very hard to think 'is this my own white middle class upbringing?', my children were never allowed out of the house without breakfast even if it was a banana. A lot of our children

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See footnote 6.

don't have that kind of upbringing and you have to think, is that me putting my values... if we have a child that's particularly hungry we'll find them some biscuits or get them a banana from the kitchen.

She also placed even more focus on the individual characteristics and needs of children than at Fir:

Our children need treating very individually, they need treating with care but they need treating individually.... There are some children for whom shouting is the only way, we had one particular child for whom calm negotiations had no effect, because it was so alien to the way he was brought up and the only way I could deal with him was to scream in his face and then when I'd got his attention, then I could calm down and say 'come on, I don't want to shout at you', but you had to do it first before he would even respond to you. The fact that I was a woman and beneath it was the way he was brought up. So we try very hard to say that we treat all children according to their needs.

Approaches to setting and grouping were also different. Although these were similar sized schools, Redwood had mixed year-group classes rather than Fir's single year-group classes. This was explained as being because 'our roll is very turbulent, so one year you might get 48 in, and then the next year its 60'. Fir had adopted setting across the whole year cohort in English and Maths, and mixed ability classes in the other subjects used schemes of work broken down into three ability levels. Staff at Redwood had been more reluctant to use setting, although it was used for Maths. The headteacher's comments reveal the extent to which professional experience and beliefs shape decisions such as these, and in this case how the physical layout of the school had led to a particular approach:

I've always maintained that I would never work in a school where setting took place. But ...we had all the discussions and the staff were saying that they'd worked in schools where setting was really good and could we try it. So we tried it for a year, and I had to eat my words, because it really worked well for maths. So the children are set for maths. We did have them set over the four classes but it was a nightmare because of the way that the school is set out. We have two classes down this end and two classes down that end of the building, and the school was unsettled by it all.... Now they're set for maths but across the pairs. Across the two classes, so they get to know the two teachers very closely. You have a lower set group and a higher set but within that they're still taught within abilities, so you may have the upper set for maths but within that upper set you will have your high flying, your middle group and your lower group.

Thus in ostensibly similar contexts we see nuances in subjective readings of context and thus of priorities for action, as well as different pedagogic strategies based on experience and educational philosophy. There were also differences of internal

context in these schools. Both had some problems recruiting because of the cost of housing in the region, but while at Fir staff relations were reportedly good and morale was high, at Redwood the cynical behaviours and attitudes from just one member of the small teaching staff were reported to have soured staff relations, creating a “constant struggle and.. negativity in the staff room... a constant chipping away and nothing you can actually deal with, it’s very subtle, very undermining”. At the time of our interview morale was reported to be picking up again because the teacher concerned was leaving. Nevertheless the anecdote illustrates the potentially destabilizing effect of such contextual factors within the very small organisation of an English primary school.

We now move to look at the contexts of the more disadvantaged schools in the sample.

Willow was a junior school with a more disadvantaged intake than either Fir or Redwood and with lower baseline attainment. As with Fir and Redwood, however, the intake of Willow was somewhat mixed, drawing from the local estate and also from out of catchment, as the local estate had an ageing population and fewer children than when it was first built:

The housing in this area is probably at the lower end of the housing, some of the cheapest houses in [the area] to buy... people living in the area are basically on the bottom step of the ladder. Over 20% of our children are on Free School Meals [even though] it’s an area of high employment. A lot of the jobs they do have are part time and low paid...[But] some of them aren’t, we’ve got some children who come from very aspiring families, [a local public service] has been employing people from overseas, and so we’ve got people from Zimbabwe and places like that...

According to the headteacher, Willow’s mainly disadvantaged intake was reflected in low parental aspirations: ‘our families tend to be very low aspiring on the whole, so the children aren’t necessarily pushed from home, they don’t get that support which we would sometimes hope for.’ Parents often required help from the school with their children and sometimes with their own problems as well:

a lot of these parents they’re single parents...or they’re ..they’ve had several relationships and they haven’t got a family background...dad, grandparents etc to support them and so they feel a little at a loss sometimes to actually solve their own problems. Parenting skills are not good with all the parents, some of the parents are perfectly fine but others really do struggle, they have issues with getting their children to bed, making them eat sensibly,making sure they’re well controlled when they’re playing etc, and they get issues outside of school.

...some of the parents are actually very obviously needing us as a school to support them, partly in the education of the children but also in their own personal situations and we often act as counsellors to the parents as

well as supporting their child. So they'll come in with their issues and we have some parents who come in daily. ...we're not quite sure why, well we think we know, that they need that reassurance and they actually feel that they belong here and they actually feel that there is somebody here that will listen to them.

As at Fir and Redwood, there was no PTA at Willow but this head also suggested wider limits to parental involvement:

...we can't actually run a PTA because I can't find anyone to run it. We've done lots of activities and we do get parents involved but never been able to find people who will do the organisation of it, it actually basically comes down back to the school to do, they'll help out on the day, they'll be directed, but they won't do the actual organisation, sorting it out etc, the responsibility they don't want to take ...or some of them, if they could do it, they don't want to give the time...there's issues there.

Willow had little turbulence but stood out for its high proportion of SEN students. This was the only school in the sample where SEN was identified by the head as the most challenging issue of the moment:

It's the level of special needs, and the variety, the range of special needs that we deal with from Aspergers, autistic tendencies to moderate learning difficulties to quite severe emotional behavioural difficulties as well. A lot of children are in counselling...

... we are a very inclusive school,...it is a fact that that's part of our ethos and the way we want the school to work, so we've got a lot of children here who would actually be excluded from other schools. ...and we are willing to go that extra mile, extra yard whatever it is, to try and keep them here.

Willow's fairly stable roll of around 200 children was due variously to its reputation for dealing with SEN students, its ability to enrol children from beyond catchment largely on the basis of that reputation and the desire to keep classes small anyway "because a lot of these children need quite a lot of attention and individual support". The school's intake and other contextual features led to a number of responses on the part of the school. First, dealing with children 'who are on the edge a lot emotionally' meant '...lots of reward systems, lots of trying to raise the children's self-esteem, lots of trying to make them feel valued and making them work together with staff and other children'. The reward systems were particularly extensive:

if they read at home they actually can win prizes and they get praised and they get house points and they get ...they go in to a draw and the winner of their class each term gets book tokens and things like

that...And we keep changing what we do, because things lose their impetus...The interest value just drops off so you have to keep changing these systems trying to think of ways to encourage and to reward. For the homework, if they regularly bring their homework in again they win prizes, at the moment we're giving away pens and pencils with smiley faces on and things like that so if they do bring their homework in on time, three times whatever it is. Three or five, I can't remember what it is now...if they want to they can save it and get a bigger prize if they get 10 things like that. So we build little activities like that just to encourage them because they don't always get the support from home so it's got to come from them.

The school also had its own guidance counsellor (although only for three hours a week) and it worked closely with other agencies to try to address the various social issues impacting on childrens' lives. There was an emphasis on warm and welcoming interactions with parents to try to overcome the problem that 'some of them are still antagonistic towards authority and they don't like coming in to school because it reminds them of their days maybe when they were at school or whatever'. There were also realistic discussions with the children about improving their life-chances: 'You know...you may not know what you want to do now but if you work reasonably hard and try and succeed...you'll have more chances and you may actually be able to do what you want to do'.

Another feature of this school was extensive target-setting:

....we look at personal targets, and we have group targets, we have class targets, we have literacy targets, and maths targets, so they actually know and they're told, you know, 'this is an area we're going to work on, now I want to see you being able to do this'...They've got a written folder with targets in, they also have targets on the wall in the classroom which are referred to during lessons, 'do you remember our targets children'? There it is, hanging on the washing line across the middle of the room, we are learning this today or this week'...

Setting was only used at Willow for mathematics. In literacy there was grouping within classes but this school avoided setting across classes because of a concern that teachers lost track of the progress being made by their students in sets other than the level they taught. Finally, while staff morale was described as generally good at Willow, staff recruitment was often difficult, sometimes with only one applicant per job. This made supporting staff development especially important: 'Basically you've got to make sure that they're competent but that after that you actually train them and support them and make sure that they become good teachers'.

Compared to Willow, **Palmtree** had slightly more low income families, slightly lower baseline attainment and more turbulence. This junior school was located on a 1960s

council estate. Families tended to arrive in the area and then move out to more affluent areas whenever possible. This created turbulence for the school:

It's just the area, a lot of families; as soon as they come they move out... I would say that they are the people who've got that little bit of ambition....I was talking to this lady, she was buying a house literally a mile down the road, but you know not a council home."

Palmtree was described as a school with 'so many social difficulties, that one can just find oneself constantly tied up in social issues, rather than educational ones'. These problems had been compounded by a leadership void in recent years:

Palmtree had a very, very good reputation up until this difficult period, it had an excellent head teacher, who had real vision and strength, and she had a great team, and Palmtree was considered the school to go to [locally] and then kind of everything went wrong, and the reputation went with it. People could see good teachers who they valued leaving, and so things became very difficult. And instead of 64 – 65 children coming in a year group, the numbers dropped down, so in my present Year 5 there are only 44 children.

So the social circumstances of the school teamed up with the difficult situation we are in, has made it really hard and that has been compounded here by things like financial difficulties, staffing difficulties, that are being resolved but are taking a lot of time.

Social conditions on the estate were seen to affect variously parents' expectations, children's aspirations and their physical wellbeing:

...the children are coming thinking that the kind of soap opera life that they are leading is far more important than reading every night, or doing their homework every night, or being actively engaged in learning spellings. So it's really difficult to move these children forward.

Once you start delving deep you have no idea how some of these children come to school, you only have to look at them, they are small, they are thin, they are pasty, they don't get good food in their bodies, some of them sleep on floors ... if you look at the data, you've got the ones that are on line and doing well, and then you've got the SEN ones here, then you've got this mass in the middle who are under-achieving who are as bright as can be, but they are tired, they're under-fed.

Palmtree faced other resource issues related to its intake. The head contrasted the school with those that had 'that big body of dedicated parents who don't work because they don't need to work. Because although [this school has] a lot of parents who don't

work, they are unreliable'. There were financial constraints around computers and other expensive equipment:

I wrote to the [local authority] and said 'look you've given all this money out for interactive whiteboards and you are giving £1,000 to every school, why don't you find out which schools have all the interactive whiteboards and don't bother giving them any money cause you can only have one per room, and find out which school haven't got any and give them... and then they said 'oh, yes that would be wonderful but this wasn't the way it was agreed'. And I felt that this even distribution of funds it really doesn't help a school like ours.

One response of Palmtree to its context was to work on home-school relations, especially parent involvement in learning:

...it's not so much the behaviour I'm trying to get into, it's learning but it's kind of slightly disguised. It's saying 'OK, if Daniel is prepared to do 15 minutes reading, what would you do?', so mum then agrees to say 'read' to the child for 15 minutes, so if Daniel goes to bed without making a fuss, what would you do?, so mum agrees that she would allow Daniel to read in bed for 15 minutes before his light goes out. So it's kind of like 'he'll do something, but what would you do?'

Another response was to try work on students' expectations and aspirations:

I literally say to my Year 3 'when you are older do you want to be going around punching mates or are you going to say 'I'm going to learn because I want a good job because I want to go on a safari, and I wanna travel round the world, I don't wanna be stuck in [this area]', and they love that, but it's all going in. It's not a lecture and we laugh. I don't know whether it's working or not but you can only try, that's the important thing.

Palmtree was also beginning to offer various types of therapy:

we've also have set up something that's called 'Turnaround', we've got quite a few children who come from a very violent backgrounds, so once a week on a Friday they are able to come together with the teacher, so we are training a teacher who can be there as a resource if they come in and things have happened and they are angry. Another lady, the art lady is going to art therapy so she's going to learn how to use that as a means of helping these children. We've got the same lady who does the violent group 'Turnaround', she's been trained in play therapy...

There was no across-class setting at Palmtree, only some grouping within classes for English and Maths. There were classroom assistants in all classes in the lower school and one between two classes in the upper school.

This school had real difficulties recruiting staff and had developed a weak staffing profile where there was ‘no confidence, people were just doing their best with discipline, they were actually not thinking too much about learning’:

A lot of teachers who teach in [this town], know [this area], and a lot of them think ‘I’m not going there, so it’s actually quite difficult to get these people. And I tried to get... I’ve advertised twice now, this time last year and this year, slightly earlier, and both times I ended up with only NQTs (Newly Qualified Teachers) applying.

I had a teacher in every class, though there were quite a few job shares going on, so I had two teachers who were going into their 2nd year, I had two returners to work, one after 10 years, one after 20 years, I had one Australian, one supply and I actually took on a deputy so I had my deputy from my old school, so I knew I could rely on her, and other than the two NQTs who were going into their 2nd year no member of staff had been here for more than two terms...

Palmtree’s head described making the most of the NQTs the school could recruit, teaming them up with an experienced mentor. He suggested he was ‘having to put as much effort into developing my teachers as I have my students’.

Aspen’s proportion of low income families was slightly higher than Palmtree’s and its baseline attainment was the same. However this junior school stood out as having the highest proportion of SEN students the second highest turbulence of all the schools and the second highest proportion of single parent families. These suggest a school under considerably more pressure than Palmtree and this was supported by the interview data as well.

Another school on a council housing estate (‘I don’t think we’ve got much private housing at all’) Aspen served, according to the head, both as the local school and a ‘dumping ground’ for those whose local schools were oversubscribed.

Aspen’s head identified many more SEN children than were of the SEN register ‘In most year groups we’ve got about 60-70% children with special needs problems’. Having such a large number on the register also made huge demands on the school:

Every child who is on the SEN register has to have an individual plan and they do. It’s phenomenal amount of work for the staff but they all have a plan. Some of them have two because they have a behavioural one and a learning plan. That’s aside from all the reports they have to write for social services and any other external agencies.

Many of the children came from families where Social Services had some involvement. They often needed careful handling:

...we've got a lot of children who are emotionally damaged because of the situations at home, and that is getting higher, the percentage of children who have social service involvement because of issues at home is increasing quite rapidly. I went down to a Child Protection Conference yesterday and the police sergeant said to me 'have you got all of the children on the at-risk register because you're here more often than I am?'

During the year, if the conditions are right and they've got the support of the teacher they will sit and do the work. But the thought of having to sit through a test – they're throwing it across the room and 'I'm not doing this' and they don't perform. They're quite capable of doing it but you've got to have the situation right for them.

Although not all parents caused difficulties: 'we've got some fantastic parents as well, who are very supportive and turn out to all of the events', Aspen was a school where parents featured in the headteacher's account as a source of problems and were the target of many school responses as well. To begin with Aspen could not expect much support from parents in dealing with learning issues:

....obviously a lot of parents find it very difficult to support their children in their education because of their skills. They have poor numeracy and literacy skills themselves so to ask them to support their children at home with work - they can't do it.

Nor could parent support around the behaviour of children be assumed: 'you do feel like you're banging your head against a brick wall sometimes with the parents'. Rather parents were seen to be often undermining the school:

So we're trying to instill in children a sense of authority and respect and discipline and it's pushed aside at home and it's not reinforced and the parents feel that they can come and shout you down and get their own way which has its effect on the children.

Turbulence at Aspen was also often related to parents being hostile towards the school: 'they take their kids away and they tend to send them to another school and then they come back'.

....they always think the grass is greener and that different teachers are going to be different. In some cases, that [the experience of trying another school] has got the parents to accept that there is a problem.

Not surprisingly, many of Aspen's responses were targeted at parents too. There were classes on parenting and drop in sessions for parents with a worker from the behaviour support team. One basic response was to improve school security:

On one occasion a parent literally just walked into the school, down the corridor, passed this door ‘effing and blinding’ and grabbed hold of another person’s child – and obviously you speak to the staff here and find that was not unusual. So I thought ‘we’ll put a stop to that one’ and had the security doors installed over the summer holidays. So I think very quickly parents knew that I wouldn’t stand for that. But there were still a couple and even now there are two parents in particular who will come in here and shout and swear at me and they’ll often break down in tears because it’s their own frustration and aggression, they’ll not accept that they’ve got a problem but you can tell they know they have but that’s the only way they can cope. I had a panic alarm started here because they get quite aggressive [but] nobody’s ever hurt me...

Another was to specify very clear expectations around children’s behaviour:

We’re quite forthright now with the parents that these are the expectations and ‘this is what will happen if they don’t’. I have excluded a number of children and I think that word’s got around that we won’t stand for the totally unacceptable behaviours. Because I think they thought it was just a bluff. We’ve had staff have been spat at and assaulted and I’m not going to let the staff put up with that, they shouldn’t have to.

Other responses to Aspen’s intake were more directly focused on the needs of the children. Classes were mixed ability, except in year Six where setting was seen as a useful response to some particular learning issues. The school used a range of approaches to try to improve student achievement, some focused on motivation (‘...everybody who does the right thing gets good things and treats’), some very practical:

In the SAT’s week, when all of year six were having their tests, I spent nearly a hundred pounds buying breakfast bars – so they all had a breakfast bar before their test. So it’s just the little things like that that to give these kids a fighting chance you’ve got to think ahead really and accommodate for that.

Aspen was well-staffed for a school of its size with a full-time LSA in every class, a .6 special needs teacher and a fulltime extra LSA who did speech therapy only. Like Willow, Aspen employed a guidance counsellor three hours a week. It offered a programme that went well beyond the academic curriculum:

...in particular, subjects that would appeal to these students, because they’re not all going to be little academics but there might be somebody out there who’s going to be an actor or a musician. I think they need to be given that opportunity to see if their talents lie elsewhere. So this year, one of my NQT’s was a drama specialist so he’s just started a drama club, which is really well attended. [A local secondary school]

has arts specialist status, so I've linked up with them. And they provide us with trumpet lessons, cello lessons, drama club (which has stopped now that we've started one here), dance club every week, and choir.... Then there's the sports clubs – we've now got tennis, cricket, football, tag rugby and netball starting next year so that's starting to broaden out as well.

Effort had also been put into improving the built environment of the school:

I want them to realise that they can have nice things. Since I arrived here I've spent £900,000 improving the environment, that's painting rooms, new carpets, new toilet facilities you name it we've had it done. Somebody said to me when I first started 'I wouldn't bother they'll just wreck it'. But I said if you don't give them the chance - how do you know? 'Because they've done it before' – but you've got to instill in them that they've been given this and they've got to look after it. We've got a beautiful display down the corridor of a big fairground, it's got lights on it and little horses - it's been there a year and not been touched.

Aspen's head described the staff as 'dedicated' and morale as 'superb' although that hadn't always been the case in the past. Recruitment had also improved:

Somebody once said to me 'nobody wants to come here'. At the end of the first year I had to advertise and we had about six, I think it was, applicants - so I was thinking 'oh my God, people want to come and teach here!' I've not had a problem since really.

Cedar had virtually the same proportion of low-income families as Aspen but did not stand out across any of the indicators. Another junior school, it drew on an estate described as

... fairly rabbit warren-y and either housing association with all the attendant problems that that has brought but also split families where there isn't enough money to buy two nice houses so they're reduced to having something round here. But when they can get out, these families do.

Turbulence at Cedar often reflected this 'getting out:'

... its very sad because when we hear a child is leaving the first question any teacher shouts across at me is 'Is he a potential Level Four?' You know, meaning that next stage up and it does happen that way....

The children at Cedar often exhibited challenging behaviours, especially in the senior school

you can give them the expectations in Years Three, Four and Five, by the time they get to Year Six, it's peer group pressure that's strong and it's back to the attitude and the shrugged shoulders, 'I'll only do it because if I don't I'll get into trouble' which is not the attitude that you want.

I have a lot of child protection cases, things like that, we have a lot of input from social services.

The head described a culture of low aspirations amongst both children and parents

I think the expectations are generally low...that's not right across the board...but in many ways a lot of aspirational parents move out of this area.

We have low unemployment and therefore the idea of getting a decent job at the end of your education doesn't really apply, because they do very nicely thank you.

Cedar struggled to get support from the majority of parents: 'on the whole when I get a parent coming in it's because they're going to shout at me'. Perhaps surprisingly this school had a PTA, but it was poorly supported:

The PTA, poor things, trying to run the quiz nights, all kinds of things like this, nobody comes.

One of the calls has always been 'Don't understand maths, can't help them with their homework' so we produced a little leaflet on 'How to' – if you like, and we had four parents, two of whom we had press ganged...so we had twelve teachers and four parents turn up.

The Head stressed both the importance of consistency with the kind of children Cedar was dealing with and the need to not just get caught up in negativity:

...don't take it personally, never be surprised, be prepared and be consistent so they see it's fair and that you don't ever change your mind when something [unexpected] happens.

And there is something called 'golden play' on Friday for children who have not been in trouble, because we are very concerned that the people who get most of the attention is that minority of children who are behaving badly while all the ones that aren't don't get the attention.

Cedar had set up a breakfast club ('I have got some hardcore families that need it') and had also set up a 'nurture class' for 10-12 children with more serious behavioural problems. The head noted how this had improved the tone of the rest of the classes, which except for maths were 'mixed ability'.

Finally, staffing at Cedar was quite stable with most staff having been at the school for several years and some for a full decade. Morale was good although had recently been lowered because the school had been selected to be involved in a local authority school improvement intervention: 'the implication is that they're doing it wrong and they've got to get it right if they're going to succeed with the children.'

Cypress had the lowest baseline attainment in the sample but little turbulence. It was a primary school rather than a junior school and served the children of the local council housing estate. Turbulence at Cypress related to the fact that many families were in social housing so had little choice about where and when they moved if they wanted to transfer to a large property to accommodate a growing family. Families had to go where homes were available. Nevertheless the geography of the estate meant there were other some local schools. Cypress had been through a period of low enrolments as children were enrolled in other local schools but the head thought Cypress's reputation was improving:

I know people who I've met recently are saying that 'You've got a really good reputation for special needs' and that's the reason they've decided to come here.

Although Cypress served many of the most disadvantaged families in the area, the children were described as keen to be at school: 'It's normality, things are stable [here]' and often 'very polite' and 'very caring'. The children were generally also seen to come from caring and close-knit families:

I do believe a lot of these parents, ok, they might not have the money or things, but they generally do really care about their children. For instance when I came out of the classroom I had a mother of a child and she doesn't have any money at all, with some money she'd saved during the week, she bought some flowers because they wanted to. They do care, just because their children aren't the cleanest or they haven't got nice things...[whereas] you go to some schools where the children have everything, and they can be horrible children and the parents are quite rude.

There's the community church over there and a lot of them, I was quite shocked when I came here, about 200 go on a Sunday. There's a big link over there, they need that, they have that as a community together, a lot of them go.

...you see them all at the end or beginning of the day, they come here for their chat in the morning and might be here for a good 15 minutes after the children have gone into school, that's their time. And are very protective towards each other.

On the other hand parents were seen to be defensive and in need of lots of social support:

...an awful lot of our parents, school wasn't their most favourite place to be, and they are quite wary I think, of what's seen to be authority... I think they feel that everyone's very anti them. They've had a hard time, and think people are trying to catch them out.

In a school like this, you are not just teachers you are almost social workers.

Similar contradictions around support for academic success were also noted:

We've had parents' evening, or rather a Numeracy evening this term and we had a huge response of parents. The majority would turn up to things like parents' evening but on the other hand, we don't have a huge impact in terms of PTA. Or support on the financial side.

...there's very few that are aware academically...they wouldn't come marching in if their child hasn't achieved a level three, at the end of key stage one, but they would come marching in if their child was told off because they didn't have a PE kit, and they have really got a PE kit in school. Things like that are more important to them.

One of the ways Cypress responded to its intake was by recognising broad curriculum goals:

And it's looking at the whole child, not just the academic, preparing them as life long citizens of learning, not just 'You will go to University', but it's actually 'You will be able to have a conversation, you will be able to talk, you will know and tolerate people, you will respect people' and thing like that.

There was also a conscious effort to avoid stereotyping students on the basis of their family background. This was not so much a denial of the effects of poverty but recognition that they did not affect all children in the same way:

There are children here who've come from a very hard background, a very difficult background but actually academically are doing quite well...It depends very much on the child, there are some children who

almost put their home life to one side, that's home and it's forgotten about, and you don't see the issues they have to deal with at home reflected in their behaviour in school.

Staff tried hard to connect with children's interests in their teaching of literacy and numeracy:

A lot of these children aren't necessarily the most academic children in the world but they've got an awful lot of strength in terms of music and sport and anything arty so we're focusing on those which gives them a boost.

Classes at Cypress were taught in mixed year groups (e.g. years 3 and 4 together). This provided flexibility and allowed staff to 'think of the child as the whole child not the age of the child, which is important'. PSHE was 'huge' at Cypress: 'we do school council, we have buddies, we've got monitors' and a school counsellor came in twice a week. The 'incredibly challenging behaviour' exhibited by some children was managed by employing four Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) to deal with behavioural matters (i.e. four over and above those attached to each class): 'we feel it's very important to do that because the teachers need the support so they can get on and do some teaching'.

Other ways Cypress responded to its intake involved self-consciously working with parents:

You've got to work in partnership with them, get their trust. You've also got to smile, smiling is a huge help, if you smile, you're positive, I think it's important not to come across like you're better than them. 'I'm no better than you – I've got an expertise but you've got expertise as the parent, and we've got to work together to help that child'. It's very important sometimes, and this is going to sound really obvious, not to just pick up on a negative issue, but to also praise. To say 'so and so had a really good day' and that really helps to push up their self-esteem.

Cypress parents were invited in to read with their children each morning ('if they do it at school, they then won't do it at home but at least you'll get them to do it in some way'). There was also a conscious strategy to 'stay one step ahead' of potential problems:

If you hear that there's a slight upset with a child or a parent, phone them straight away, talk to them, say 'Come in and speak to me', being there so that the problem doesn't get bigger. Because overnight they'll have dwelt on it, and got even more angry and it's going to kick off.

Cypress did not seem to have many problems recruiting staff: there had been 30 applicants for two recent positions.

The last of the eight schools, **Beech** had the highest percentage of families on low incomes in our sample and also the most single parent families. Beech was a primary school of only about 100 students. It had suffered from ‘a bad reputation for many years, not so much now, it’s improving.’ Although Beech was located in the heart of a large council housing estate, ‘there a pecking order even within [this estate]’. As a result, many of the in-catchment families sent their children to other schools leaving Beech to mostly enrol children from only the poorest part of its catchment: ‘[it] tends to be social housing, temporary housing’. There was also constant hemorrhaging of the school roll:

Most of the ones who actually aspire to something else will do their damndest to move out of the area, or move to another part of [the area] and then they’ll move their children to another school.

When it came to the families served by Beech, the head warned against ‘tarring all of them’ but painted a picture of unstable relationships, domestic violence, poor parenting skills and lack of learning opportunities at home for children:

Most of them are single parent families, or they’ve had a number of partnerships and marriages, a lot of the women...they are obsessed with having a man and any man will do, and they search on the internet and they meet people off the internet and somebody will come down from Manchester and Birmingham and move in with a family and of course that immediately has effects on the children.

They might get dragged around at the back of the trolley or something like that but they’re not, parents aren’t actively engaging with their children when they go shopping so their monetary skills, all those kind of basic skills aren’t there.

The school had taken many approaches to respond to its intake. One response was to adapt curriculum and pedagogy ‘to really meet the needs of these children’.

we’re trying to address the balance of the curriculum, because at the moment its very much, it’s almost like, it feels 70% English and maths, 30% the rest and that’s really not, apart from the fact that it’s not healthy, it’s just very restricted.

There were flexible grouping arrangements to attempt to meet the learning needs of children. On the other hand there was a concerted effort to avoid disrupting learning through unnecessary change:

...we’re hoping that actually may be something we throw up as a school to say well actually it would be more beneficial for a teacher to have a group of children for two years rather than one year, than the children have to learn something completely new and a new person. Because we’ve tried to create continuity with the resources in the classrooms, and

the way that the classrooms are organised and labelled, so that you know when you go from one class to another you know that the literacy area is green and that the literacy resources will all be in this specific area, just to try and make that aspect of moving, because change is something [our children] can't cope with.

Beech had a nurture class for children with particular behaviour issues. There was an emphasis on emotional literacy and on 'redirection' as a strategy to manage behaviour in a way that wasn't humiliating. The school also provided literacy and numeracy classes for parents intended to help them support their children more.

Beech, more than any of the other schools, was also the target of intervention by the local authority. This was a frustration to the head who argued that the intervention often just got in the way of improving the school:

now even by admission with from certain local authority people they're saying it was a waste of time. And actually it was a waste of time, what I asked for and what they should have given me was support, not come in and say well obviously you're to blame here and we're going to find a way of getting rid of you.

In a way the fight is to prove to the powers that be that yes you can get there but you can't get there unless you address this, this, this and this.

Staff morale at Beech was reasonably good but it had experienced huge problems recruiting staff:

The only people we had applying for any positions that we had in the school were NQTs, no experienced staff came forward for any of the posts that we had available. So in the end we had to appoint NQTs, which then put us in a very difficult position because there was only myself [and] the deputy as experienced staff.

Discussion and Conclusion

The data presented here raise a number of issues for the way that differences in school context are recognised and responded to in policy and practice.

First, it confirms both that there are patterns related to levels of deprivation which are predictable on the basis of the kinds of school and neighbourhood level indicators we have used for this study, and that some external and internal variation at the school site does need to be recognised if an accurate picture of contextual advantages and disadvantages is to emerge. The advantaged schools discussed here had much in common in the way they manifested what might be expected on the basis of previous

research findings about the middle class and education, the social geography of middle class school choice and the nature of schools with predominantly middle class intakes (e.g., Ball 2003, Butler with Robson 2003, Kozol 1991, Lareau 1989, Power et al. 2003, Thrupp 1999, Vincent and Ball 2006). All of the schools had a high level of parent involvement, a strong focus on student learning and progress, considerable ability to raise funds, very good reputations and only a handful of students with serious learning or behavioural problems. The more disadvantaged schools manifested much of what might be expected on the basis of previous research findings about the working class and education, the social geography of school choice and the nature of schools with predominantly working class intakes (e.g., Lareau 1989, Mills and Gale 2010, Thrupp 1999, Lupton 2004).

However, within each of the two groups of schools, there were particularities of context. For example, among the advantaged schools, Ash served a military base. Mulberry and Cherry demonstrated how some socially advantaged schools can suffer from uncertain market contexts because of their location and the attraction of private schooling to many middle class parents. Some of the comments made about parental aspirations and attitudes at Spicebush, compared with those at Juniper, where some parents ‘liked them sitting in rows with pencils and filling in sums’ and Cherry where some parents were ‘looking at your every move through a magnifying glass’, perhaps reflect different middle class cultures or perhaps different fractions within the middle class. Among the more disadvantaged schools some of the schools were under more pressure from SEN demands (Willow, Aspen), turbulence (Fir, Redwood, Aspen), market competition and reputational issues (Aspen, Cypress, Beech) and local authority intervention (Cedar, Beech). Some of the schools (Cedar, Cypress) had also apparently found it easier to recruit staff than others (Willow, Palmtree, Beech). These kinds of differences point to the importance of contextualised management and nuanced funding and support that can equip schools to deal effectively with their particular challenges. At the same time we would emphasise that detailed elaboration of local differences should not cause us (or policy-makers) to “lose sight of the wood for the trees”. Even within this one school district there were vast differences between the contexts of the relatively advantaged and disadvantaged schools. The qualitative data back up the findings from the analysis of the contextual indicators that socially disadvantaged schools are cumulatively disadvantaged, notwithstanding that the components of disadvantage might be different in different cases.

Second, the importance of context for what happens in schools is determined in part by the meaning given to it by headteachers. Individuals working in similar schools will not necessarily read their situation the same way. Note for instance the difference between the very positive comments of the headteacher at Cypress school about the capabilities and resources of children and families there compared with the rather more pejorative and frustrated comments of headteachers at the other similarly disadvantaged schools. These ‘readings of context’ are the focus of our separate paper on the disadvantaged schools.

Third, the findings point to issues of capacity. The headteachers of the advantaged schools were, under interview conditions, concerned to emphasise particular contextual factors and challenges, and sometimes to overstate these, for instance:

Juniper: 'We do have problems with family backgrounds. I mean we have two children who have support from [outside the school]...'

Spruce: 'Yes there is an affluent contingent at the school but there is also the other extreme where I've got farm labourers and farm workers who are in tied cottages'.

Cherry: 'I mean, you look here, we haven't got any free school meals but we've got a heck of a lot of children on the special needs register'.

Elder: 'so you have got two ends of the scale, you have got people living in million pound houses but you have also got people living on the council estates'.

However, in general it was evident that it was well within the agency of these heads and their staff to run good schools despite these challenges. We could really only point to two issues (that of military families at Ash and the small school funding 'step' at Elder) that might require changes to policy or funding arrangements. The other problems identified lie within the remit that we could expect of any senior manager, given their highly socially advantaged school environments. For instance competition from private schools was a problem for some of the schools, but most could recruit anyway because they were 'popular' schools with high positional value. Indeed, some of the comments of the heads point to the willingness and capacity of staff at socially advantaged schools to acknowledge and pick up problems that would be overlooked by more socially disadvantaged schools, for instance more focus on the problems of individual students (this might also reflect socially advantaged schools often being small village schools) or those who are 'average' but underachieving.

The picture was very different in the disadvantaged schools, however. It is noteworthy how much all of the schools were struggling to grapple with the effects of social disadvantage given that it is only the average to somewhat more disadvantaged bracket that we have considered here. Even in Fir and Redwood, the most average schools, there was considerable turbulence, parents keeping their distance from the school, no PTA, a perceived need to constantly monitor behaviour and build self-esteem and a holistic vision of education somewhat at odds with official discourses centred on academic achievement. Many of the problematic issues in the 'average' schools were more pronounced in the more socially disadvantaged schools. Reputational issues, parent involvement, and the sheer proportion of students with serious learning or behavioural problems generally became more formidable as social disadvantage increased.

Unlike the advantaged schools, where very few remarks were made about needing to do anything particularly different to the standard curriculum and pedagogy offered in English schools, the disadvantaged schools were characterised by a range of

adaptations and initiatives. Some of these were common to all. For example all the schools were trying to boost the self-esteem of children and most of the heads stressed that their schools had (and needed to have) much broader educational concerns than the academic curriculum alone. But there were differences in many areas. The adaptations made to academic curriculum, pedagogy and related grouping varied in ways which seemed to reflect a range of perspectives about what was needed by children from disadvantaged backgrounds (for instance Redwood's highly individualized view of children's needs, Willow's emphasis on target-setting and its view that setting meant teachers lost track of children's progress and the Beech effort to keep children with the same teacher for two years). The schools also varied widely in their approaches to pastoral care with behaviour diaries (Fir), counselling (Willow, Aspen) group therapy activities (Palmtree), behaviour-dedicated LSA's (Cypress), nurture groups (Fir) and nurture classes (Beech). Some schools also put more emphasis than others on compensating for material disadvantage.

The overall impression is that, in the absence of any more far-reaching policy for responding to the effects of a socially disadvantaged intake, the schools in our sample were energetically trying a lot of different things, informed by experience of what had worked in the past or by particular educational philosophies and as and when they could afford them. Faced with challenging and unpredictable circumstances, without substantial extra funding or staff or fundamentally different organisational designs, and without the resources contributed by wealthy parents, these headteachers were having to adjust, innovate, and grab available opportunities and funding. There was an instability and ad-hocness about the responses of these schools that was absent from the more advantaged schools. This suggested that the challenge of genuinely addressing the issues they face went beyond what was readily achievable within existing policies and resources.

In our view, this situation is one that relies far too much on the efforts of outstanding individuals, and does not represent a coherent and well-resourced effort to transform the life chances of children from disadvantaged homes and close the gap between them and their advantaged peers. The data here support arguments for more fundamental contextualised funding mechanisms and policies to improve schools in disadvantaged areas, meet the educational, social and material needs of pupils and enable effective engagement with parents. These would include more differentiated provision and organisational design, and policies to improve teacher retention and education, enabled of course by a greater redistribution of funding (Lupton 2004). Such policy shifts would enable staff to engage with the challenges of disadvantaged schools in more comprehensive ways than we observed here.

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Appendix 1: Conceptualising and Measuring Context

Our intention in this study was to go beyond the very limited measurements of school context that are typically available in England – usually measures of the proportion of pupils in a school eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), with English as an Additional Language (EAL), or with an identified Special Educational Need (SEN). We wanted to capture a wider range of indicators of family circumstances related to education (such as educational and social capital of parents) as well as social-interactive, environmental, geographical and institutional characteristics (Galster 2010) of the immediate neighbourhood. These (e.g., local labour market, access to services, social conditions, crime) form the environment in which educational habituses are formed, as well as potentially impacting directly on schools through, for example crime or environments for staff recruitment.

Drawing on a wide range of literature on relationships between background factors and educational success, we have measured school composition on three domains, as follows:

- educational need (including Special Educational Needs (SEN), English as an additional language (EAL), prior attainment and literate practices in the home);⁸
- low income;
- family social capital (lone parent families and frequent residential moves).

Data on SEN, EAL and prior attainment was drawn principally from publicly available sources such as the national school performance tables and national pupil database. Low income is typically measured in England by the proportion of pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM). This measure fails to accurately capture the population of families in poverty, partly because families do not necessarily declare themselves eligible and partly because there is considerable movement in and out of eligibility. FSM is only available to people on out-of-work benefits. In areas of high employment such as the one in this study, these would primarily be lone parents. For this reason, our measure of income is compiled from two measures used in a school-level deprivation index compiled by the Department for Children, School and Families using 2006 data, as part of a review of school funding. We add the proportion of families in out-of-work benefits and the proportion claiming working tax credit (and in-work benefit for people on low incomes).⁹

Data on household composition, family social capital and residential mobility were drawn from a questionnaire to Year 3 parents in all 44 schools. The purpose of the questionnaire was to gather more information on these and other socio-economic

⁸ SEN was based on a three-year average for 2003/4, 2004/5 and 2005/6, EAL and prior attainment on the characteristics of pupils in Y3 in 2004/5. Prior attainment was measured at age 5 (entry to primary school).

⁹ The disadvantages of this dataset are that it was based on 2006 data (one year after the study) and that it does not measure benefits claims at the individual level but ascribes to each pupil in a school the benefit-claiming attributes of the small neighbourhood in which they live.

variables than is available in national datasets.¹⁰ It attracted a very high response rate (84%, see Brown et al. 2005). However, within the smaller schools, overall numbers were still low, and thus the data was strongly influenced by the characteristics of individual families. For this reason, we have used the questionnaire data only for variables where no other suitable measure was available. We combined two residential mobility variables: the percentage of Y3 who had moved five or more times since birth and the mean number of moves in the year group. ‘Literate practices’ comprised three measures; the number of books in the home, whether parents read a newspaper regularly, and whether there was internet access in the home. The most robust data was collected in relation to literate practices, so we use that variable here. Gaining rounded measures of school context without primary data collection from parents remains a barrier to understanding the nuances of context.

The neighbourhood domains and indicators we chose were as follows, based on the electoral ward in which the school was located¹¹:

- Educational role models: percentage of 16 and 17 year olds (i.e. immediate role models) and percentage of 18-49 year olds (i.e. young adults up to parental age) with qualifications below level 2 (equivalent to five higher grade passes at GCSE, the English school leaving age);
- Employment prospects and role models: The percentage of people aged 16-74 in routine or semi-routine jobs, and those who are unemployed or economically inactive (apart from people who are retired or students), and the rate of under-18 conceptions, and
- Neighbourhood stability/social capital: The percentage of the population who moved into the area in the last year, the proportion of single parents and a measure of child density.

All these data were taken from the last available Census (2001) except teen conceptions data that are based on years 2001-2003 and taken from the Neighbourhood Statistics dataset. We are well aware that the data available is inadequate to capture completely the concepts we are trying to measure. For example, we were able to find no physical or environmental measures, and our measures of social capital are at best proxies, since we have no data on individual social networks. Nevertheless, this is at the same time a more comprehensive attempt to measure local context than is typically employed in school performance monitoring, and one which is replicable and straightforward. Part of the purpose of this article is to examine what we can read off from such methods.

¹⁰ This was designed to support quantitative analysis of relationships between school composition and pupil performance in the wider study, focusing on the cohort of children in Y3 in 2004/5. This is also the reason that some of the other variables in our dataset were only gathered for Y3 while others were collected on a school wide basis.

¹¹ In this area electoral ward is the geography whose population most closely matches than needed to generate a two form entry for a primary school. While basing neighbourhood variables on the location of the school is in some respects problematic (because pupils travel to school), it is relatively robust in this context, where most children travel short distances to primary school and the local authority’s admissions criteria are based on catchment areas. Our qualitative data enables us to identify cases of out-of-catchment admissions and their implications.

Appendix Table 1 provides the rankings of the 44 schools in relation to these measures. Appendix Table 2 characterizes the geographic location of the schools and provides actual figures. It will be apparent from these tables that most contextual variables follow from the level of deprivation found locally. At the more socially advantaged end of the table are schools which tend to be located in villages or have village-like suburban characteristics and which have high prior achievement, low numbers of SEN and EAL students, low turbulence and a low proportion of lone parent families. At the most deprived end of the table are typically urban estate schools with low prior achievement, relatively high levels of SEN pupils and in some cases EAL, high turbulence, a high proportion of lone parent families. Middling ranked schools in terms of deprivation often tend to be middling in terms of other contexts as well.

We have been experimenting with simple visual tools that allow comparison of the contextual features of schools occupying similar places on the spectrum of social deprivation/advantage. Figure 1 shows the seven extremely socially advantaged schools discussed in this article and as a group they can be contrasted with the eight most deprived schools in our study as shown in Figure 2. School composition variables are on the right hand side of these diagrams, neighbourhood variables on the left. Variables are standardized to their own mean across the 44 schools so that what is shown is on the scale is the number of standard deviations they are above or below the mean¹². These diagrams illustrate how patterns of SES advantage or disadvantage are overwhelmingly followed by other kinds of advantages/disadvantages too. They do however indicate some contextual variation amongst schools of similar levels of deprivation.

Finally, in this discussion of context, we note that all of these factors and processes may be considered as ‘external context’. We also want to consider what might be described as ‘internal context’. Historical factors such as past leadership, past staffing stability, past resourcing and past reputation often weigh heavily on schools but they form contexts for which current staff can hardly be held responsible. There may also be some current internal factors that are more context than agency in the event that there is little the school could do about them. Examples would include significant staffing changes due to personal circumstances or schools being damaged by fire or flood. These cannot be readily captured by statistical measures but are revealed in the interview material.

Brown, C., Thrupp, M., Kounali, D., Lauder, H., Robinson, T., Goldstein, H., Guy. P. and Hill, N. (2005). ‘Pulling out all the stops: Achieving a “miraculous” response rate’. Paper presented to the 2005 BERA conference, 14-16 September, University of Glamorgan, Wales.

Galster G. (2010) ‘The Mechanism(s) of Neighborhood Effects: Theory, Evidence, and Policy Implications’. Presented at ESRC Seminar: “Neighbourhood

¹² The neighbourhood variables tend to have less variation than the school ones, partly because some of the schools fall in the same wards.

Effects: Theory & Evidence” St. Andrews University, Scotland, UK 4-5
February, 2010

Table 1: National positioning on the 44 sample schools in relation to social deprivation and their sample rankings on social deprivation and other context indicators

School name	% on low incomes	National 20th on % low incomes	Sample rank on low incomes	Sample rank baseline attainment	Sample rank SEN	Sample Rank EAL	Sample rank Frequent mobility	Sample Rank Single parent	Sample Rank neighbourhood mobility	Sample Rank neighbourhood low social class	Sample Rank neighbourhood unemployment and inactivity	Sample rank neighbourhood youth qualifications
Beech	52.74%	5	1	14	5	23	37	1	13	1	1	2
Cypress	48.73%	7	2	1	7	11	37	4	10	3	3	1
Cedar	47.34%	7	3	5	9	16	8	5	23	4	6	6
Aspen	47.32%	7	4	2	1	9	2	2	8	8	4	4
Palmtree	46.97%	7	5	3	11	6	19	6	13	1	1	2
Willow	42.91%	8	6	4	2	23	37	9	30	6	18	8
Redwood	37.73%	10	7	9	4	1	18	12	8	8	4	4
Fir	37.43%	10	8	6	8	18	21	7	40	10	21	12
Lilac	36.95%	11	9	8	17	2	6	19	7	12	27	10
Maple	31.94%	13	10	37	6	23	10	30	36	16	8	16
Poplar	30.07%	14	11	33	37	23	26	13	1	22	25	28
Hazel	29.51%	14	12	32	22	8	37	17	23	4	6	6
Birch	29.38%	14	13	18	10	12	16	15	40	10	21	12
Sycamore	29.29%	14	14	24	16	4	31	10	22	14	33	19
Yellowwood	28.61%	14	15	23	30	15	33	33	30	6	18	8
Alder	24.57%	16	16	15	33	6	36	21	17	13	36	18
Hollybush	23.51%	17	17	22	3	23	27	14	38	15	29	11
Elm	21.28%	18	18	26	15	14	12	23	5	40	42	31

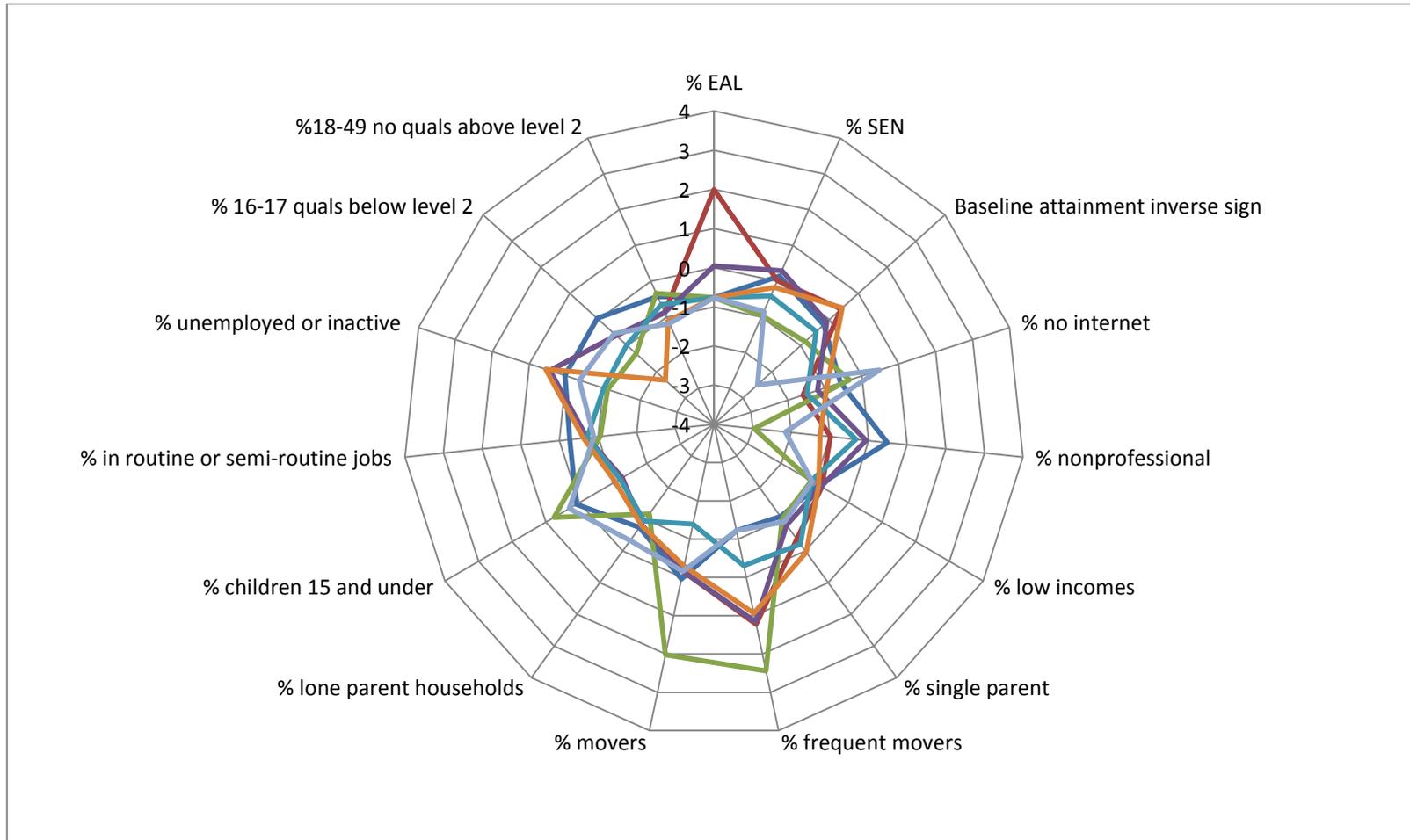
Hawthorn	20.17%	18	19	34	41	23	37	44	36	16	8	16
Ivy	20.16%	18	20	20	13	23	13	27	11	23	38	20
Pinetree	19.60%	19	21	7	32	5	30	18	2	42	40	22
Walnut	19.40%	19	22	40	43	23	5	41	35	44	30	27
Laburnam	19.07%	19	23	25	31	23	21	32	21	19	26	26
Rowan	18.00%	19	24	12	34	23	4	3	25	27	11	42
Oak	17.65%	19	25	35	24	23	15	11	34	32	20	29
Rubbertree	17.63%	19	26	41	35	23	20	28	32	18	31	15
Larch	17.50%	19	27	16	42	22	28	24	44	26	44	37
Olivetree	16.78%	20	28	17	25	23	35	19	11	23	38	20
Magnolia	15.85%	20	29	38	20	23	29	39	15	20	23	22
Myrtle	15.78%	20	30	30	27	12	17	31	2	42	40	22
Dogwood	15.63%	20	31	13	29	10	25	25	5	40	42	31
Crabapple	15.38%	20	32	10	19	23	14	36	39	25	10	14
Chestnut	15.32%	20	33	42	38	17	24	40	28	35	32	38
Eucalyptus	14.91%	20	34	31	40	21	34	34	33	38	34	39
Plumtree	14.77%	20	35	11	21	20	32	29	42	33	16	33
Gumtree	14.64%	20	36	44	26	23	37	8	28	35	11	42
Ferntree	14.60%	20	37	39	44	23	3	36	25	27	14	33
Elder	14.57%	20	38	21	18	3	6	26	19	30	14	33
Ash	14.34%	20	39	27	12	19	9	35	19	30	23	22
Cherry	13.51%	20	40	28	14	23	37	43	15	20	11	42
Spruce	13.45%	20	41	19	23	23	10	16	25	27	28	30
Spicebush	11.22%	20	42	43	36	23	37	38	18	37	37	41
Mulberry	10.90%	20	43	36	39	23	1	42	4	39	34	39
Juniper	10.81%	20	44	29	28	23	23	22	42	33	16	33

Table 2: Type of locality and context indicators for the 44 schools

School name	Urban/Rural	Mean baseline attainment	%		% Frequently mobile	% single parent	% movers in last year	% with routine or semi routine jobs	% unemployed or inactive	% 16-17 yr olds with qualifications below level 2	National quintile of U18 conceptions Jan 01 to Dec 03
			SEN	EAL							
Cherry	Hamlet and Isolated Dwelling	2.73	20.7	0%	0%	6%	0.14	0.17	0.13	0.49	5
Ivy	Urban > 10k	2.47	20.8	0%	9%	13%	0.15	0.16	0.10	0.49	2
Hawthorn	Village	2.95	9.2	0%	0%	0%	0.12	0.19	0.15	0.50	3
Hollybush	Urban > 10k	2.53	33.7	0%	4%	20%	0.12	0.20	0.12	0.54	3
Birch	Urban > 10k	2.45	23.2	3%	8%	19%	0.11	0.29	0.14	0.53	1
Alder	Urban > 10k	2.42	14.5	4%	2%	15%	0.14	0.24	0.10	0.49	2
Cypress	Urban > 10k	1.89	27.8	3%	0%	37%	0.15	0.36	0.18	0.65	2
Beech	Urban > 10k	2.41	32.2	0%	0%	46%	0.15	0.36	0.19	0.62	2
Rowan	Hamlet and Isolated Dwelling	2.39	14.3	0%	15%	38%	0.13	0.14	0.15	0.28	5
Elder	hamlet and Isolated Dwelling	2.47	19.5	7%	13%	13%	0.14	0.14	0.14	0.43	4
Maple	Village	3.05	32.0	0%	12%	12%	0.12	0.19	0.15	0.50	3
Poplar	Urban > 10k	2.90	10.4	0%	4%	20%	0.22	0.17	0.13	0.48	1
Dogwood	Urban > 10k	2.40	15.0	3%	4%	13%	0.19	0.11	0.10	0.43	4
Elm	Urban > 10k	2.66	20.7	3%	11%	15%	0.19	0.11	0.10	0.43	4
Oak	Town and Fringe	2.98	17.6	0%	8%	22%	0.13	0.14	0.14	0.46	5
Pinetree	Urban > 10k	2.25	14.5	5%	4%	16%	0.20	0.11	0.10	0.49	3
Larch	Urban > 10k	2.42	8.9	1%	4%	14%	0.09	0.15	0.08	0.42	4
Lilac	Urban > 10k	2.29	19.9	7%	13%	16%	0.17	0.24	0.13	0.54	1

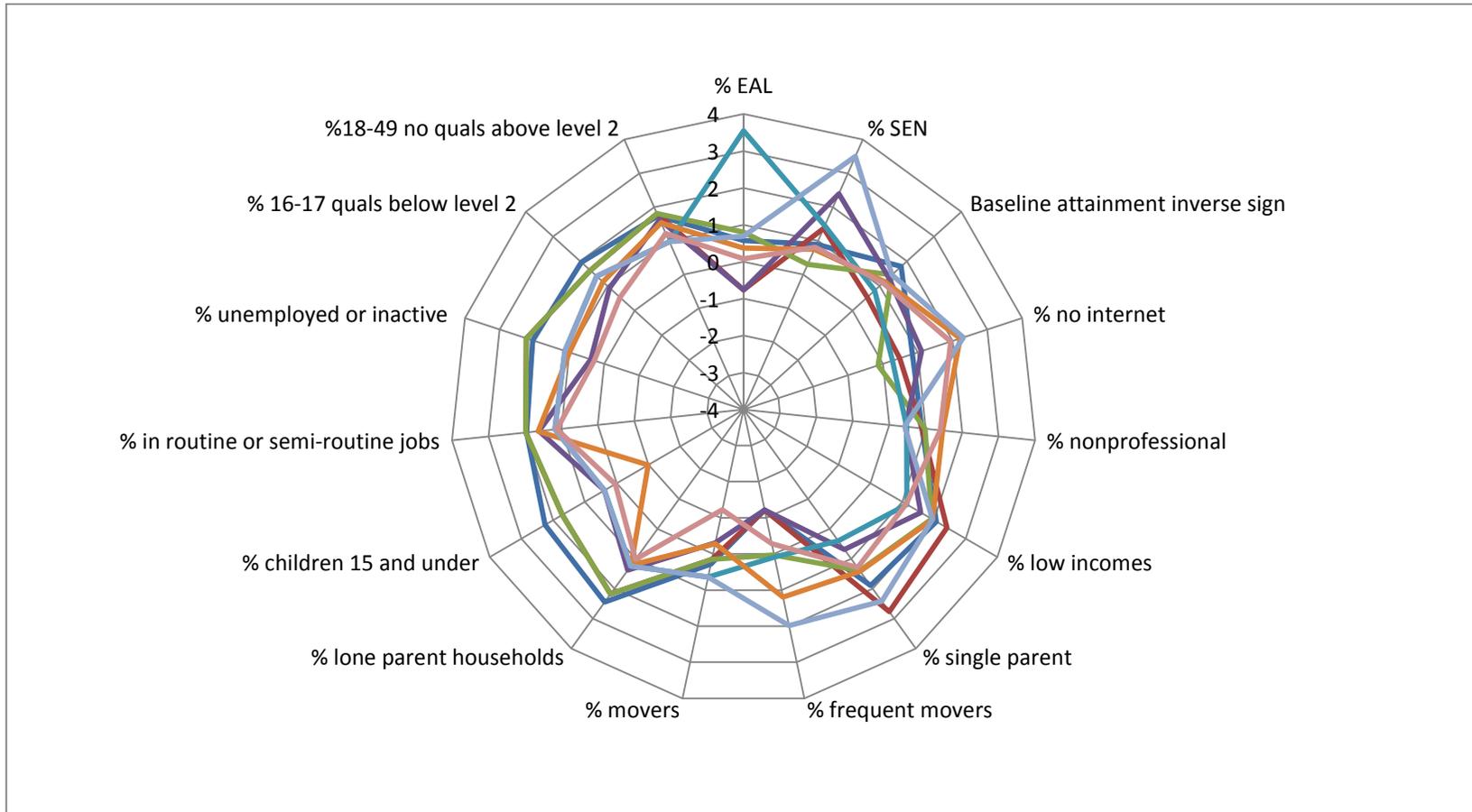
Magnolia	Town and Fringe	3.13	18.9	0%	4%	7%	0.14	0.17	0.13	0.49	5
Mulberry	Village	3.00	10.3	0%	20%	7%	0.20	0.11	0.10	0.37	5
Palmtree	Urban > 10k	2.03	22.2	4%	7%	32%	0.15	0.36	0.19	0.62	2
Ash	Town and Fringe	2.68	22.1	2%	13%	9%	0.14	0.14	0.14	0.43	4
Willow	Urban > 10k	2.08	41.9	0%	0%	24%	0.13	0.33	0.14	0.56	3
Juniper	Village	2.84	15.5	0%	5%	15%	0.10	0.14	0.11	0.40	4
Plumtree	Town and Fringe	2.37	18.4	1%	3%	12%	0.10	0.14	0.11	0.40	4
Redwood	Urban > 10k	2.30	33.0	10%	7%	21%	0.16	0.30	0.16	0.60	2
Rubbertree	Hamlet and Isolated Dwelling	3.20	13.2	0%	6%	13%	0.13	0.19	0.12	0.51	3
Cedar	Urban > 10k	2.15	26.4	3%	13%	32%	0.14	0.33	0.16	0.58	1
Spruce	Village	2.46	17.7	0%	12%	18%	0.13	0.14	0.15	0.28	5
Sycamore	Urban > 10k	2.61	20.4	6%	3%	24%	0.14	0.21	0.11	0.49	4
Walnut	Village	3.17	7.1	0%	14%	7%	0.13	0.11	0.12	0.48	5
Aspen	Urban > 10k	2.03	52.3	4%	18%	43%	0.16	0.30	0.16	0.60	2
Hazel	Urban > 10k	2.87	18.3	4%	0%	17%	0.14	0.33	0.16	0.58	1
Yellowwood	Urban > 10k	2.60	14.8	3%	3%	10%	0.13	0.33	0.14	0.56	3
Myrtle	Urban > 10k	2.85	15.6	3%	7%	11%	0.20	0.11	0.10	0.49	3
Gumtree	Hamlet and Isolated Dwelling	3.75	16.4	0%	0%	25%	0.13	0.12	0.14	0.43	4
Crabapple	Village	2.36	19.3	0%	8%	8%	0.12	0.16	0.15	0.52	5
Eucalyptus	Urban > 10k	2.87	9.5	1%	3%	9%	0.13	0.11	0.11	0.40	4
Olivetree	Urban > 10k	2.43	17.5	0%	2%	16%	0.15	0.16	0.10	0.49	2
Ferntree	Town and Fringe	3.16	2.2	0%	17%	8%	0.13	0.14	0.15	0.28	5
Laburnam	Town and Fringe	2.63	14.6	0%	5%	10%	0.14	0.19	0.13	0.48	2
Spicebush	Village	3.70	11.4	0%	0%	8%	0.14	0.12	0.12	0.43	5
Fir	Urban > 10k	2.17	27.0	2%	5%	31%	0.11	0.29	0.14	0.53	1
Chestnut	Village	3.24	10.4	2%	5%	7%	0.13	0.12	0.14	0.43	4

Figure 1 The most socially advantaged schools in our sample¹³



¹³ A version of this diagram which is colour-coded to identify particular schools is available from the authors

Figure 2 The highest deprivation schools in our sample¹⁴



¹⁴ A version of this diagram which is colour-coded to identify particular schools is available from the authors