Schools as community assets: An exploration of the merits of an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach

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This paper describes and evaluates the ‘Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) in Schools’ project; which was designed as a public health intervention to explore the extent to which focusing on schools as community assets can promote well-being for pupils, their school and the local community. The paper reviews the literature in relation to the background and context of the ABCD model within the field of community development where the focus is identifying and mobilising the positive capabilities, skills, talents and strengths of individuals, associations and communities in order to bring about social change. As such, this project was established using the principles of ABCD. It was designed to ascertain the extent to which ABCD could be feasibly utilised in the school environment and to explore its possibilities in terms of being a force for change. The project piloted two practical pupil-led ABCD initiatives to develop the life-skills, resilience, well-being and future employability of the pupils involved. This ABCD project focused on Year 9 pupils in the foundation learning tier in two secondary academies and also involved, as mentors, undergraduate students from two local universities. The location for the project is a city in the North Midlands of England which experiences areas of high levels of socio-economic disadvantage. Following a rationale for the project and description of the two initiatives which evolved, we highlight the lessons learned and suggest the ABCD approach can be regarded as promising practice for any (school) community.

Keywords: asset-based community development (ABCD); community; curriculum enrichment; school activities; social environment

# Introduction

Every single person has capacities, abilities and gifts. Living a good life depends on whether those capacities can be used, abilities expressed and gifts given. If they are, the person will be valued, feel powerful and well-connected to the people around them. And the community around the person will be more powerful because of the contribution the person is making (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993, 13)

This extract is from a ‘guide’ produced by John Kretzmann and John McKnight (1993) at The Asset-Based Community Development Institute based in the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University (Illinois). This guide and other subsequent ‘workbooks’ (e.g. Kretzmann and McKnight 1997; Dewar 1997; Turner, McKnight, and Kretzmann 1999) are the outcome of extensive policy research to investigate the characteristics of a range of successful community initiatives. Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) is enunciated in these texts as both a conceptual framework and an innovative strategy to promote population health and which has been advanced by community development practitioners working in rural and urban communities in North America. The tenets of ABCD are based on the premise that every community, no matter how troubled or disadvantaged, possesses unique (gifted and skilled) individuals, associations, organisations and institutions that need be recognised and could be mobilised from within for development and community-building purposes. Assets will typically be defined as physical, tangible resources or spaces in communities (such as schools, parks and recreational areas, religious places of worship, sports facilities, community centres etc.) as well as the more intangible personal and social qualities. These attributes might be, for example, experiences, knowledge, skills, culture, passion, self-esteem, confidence and, as Friedli (2103, 132) suggests, ‘key features of social capital; *social networks, reciprocity, mutual aid and collective efficacy*’ [original emphasis]. An ABCD approach aims to counter deficit models for evidence-based public health which, according to some, inherently emphasise needs and define individuals and communities negatively (e.g. McKnight and Kretzmann 2012; Missingham 2017). This needs-driven approach arguably focuses on people’s problems and deficiencies invariably contributes to policies and practices which create greater dependency on welfare services and ultimately disempower the people they are designed to support (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993; Mathie and Cunningham 2003; Morgan and Ziglio 2007). Conversely, ABCD is regarded as a positive alternative to traditional needs-based approaches (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993). Much of the current literature about ABCD and asset-based approaches in the past two to three decades emanates from the United States of America (USA) where proponents of ABCD principles provide a wealth of case studies illustrating how their application have led to community empowerment and social change. For example, the evolution and development of the Healthy Neighbourhood Project in California (Ellis and Walton 2012). ABCD and asset-based approaches have gained some currency in UK public health policymaking (see for example, Hopkins and Rippon 2015) and the new narrative of ‘assets’ referred to in various reports and policy documents (e.g. Foot and Hopkins 2010; Foot 2012; City of Stoke-on-Trent 2013; Evans and Winson 2014; Public Health England 2015; Marmot 2010). Notably, asset-based working is being embraced by policymakers in Scotland (McLean 2011; Friedli 2013; Education Scotland 2014; Garven, MacLean, and Pattoni 2016). The rationale for taking an asset-based approach, as reported in this paper, was primarily due to one of the authors being influenced by the Health Empowerment Leverage Project (HELP) (2011) and earlier case studies (Stuteley and Cohen 2004) and who had been involved in commissioning community development work underpinned by an asset-based approach. Subsequently, an interest developed as to whether and to what extent utilsing an asset-based approach could have a positive effect on young people in a school context and their wider community (City of Stoke-on-Trent 2013).Having outlined the ABCD model as a conceptual framework and an innovative strategy this paper centres on two main questions: ‘How may the principles of ABCD be applied in the context of schools as community assets?’; and ‘To what extent does focusing on schools as community assets promote well-being for pupils, the school and the local community?’ In an attempt to provide answers, we first review and critique the principles of ABCD and asset-based approaches in light of existing literature. The paper then describes and evaluates the ‘Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) in Schools’ project, which was designed as a public health intervention.

Kretzmann and McKnight (1993, 9) have championed the concept of ABCD as intentionally ‘internally focused’ and ‘relationship driven’. As such, ABCD and other asset-based approaches lean towards recognising, emphasising and valuing people’s strengths and take a positive stance in terms of appreciating people’s capacity to identify the issues which affect them. Importantly, the principles of ABCD purport that individuals in communities possess the assets to mobilise, drive and affect change from within. The ABCD process first involves identifying the positive capabilities of a given community by mapping assets to create a capacity inventory of resources, skills and talents. This process may be led by a person (in the field, this might typically be a community development worker) who is not assumed to be an expert bringing knowledge and experience, but rather a facilitator (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993; Missingham 2017) who also aids the development of relationships through dialogue and partnership. McLean (2011) notes ABCD draws on many different methods and techniques that are not exclusive to ABCD for example appreciative inquiry, participatory appraisal, collaborative community development models and activities. Asset mapping is undertaken to enable a community to discover together its internal capacity ‘from the inside out’ (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993) and can assist in accentuating interconnections, interdependency and relationships; the strengths and contributions which can be built upon to develop a shared vision, initiative or goal for the future. Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) profess it is only when the potential of local citizens, their associations, organisations and institutions are recognised and mobilised to create social change that any outside or external resources can be effectively leveraged to support actions.

Critiques of ABCD and asset-based approaches, as noted by Missingham (2017), point to a lack of consideration of the fundamental causes of poverty and disadvantage and the structural inequalities and social injustice which exist in communities around social class, gender and ethnicity, for example. However, it could be argued the origin of the concept of ABCD is steeped in Kretzmann and McKnight’s (1993) awareness of deep structural disadvantages, barriers and tensions and, as Missingham (2017) observes, this understanding underpins their subsequent work and writing (e.g. McKnight and Kretzmann 2012). MacLeod and Emejulu (2014), however, offer a critique of ABCD via an analysis of the broader political thought and ideological context which fashioned it. They purport the model emanates from, in part, a response to the deindustrialisation and suburbanisation which shaped traditional USA urban communities from the late 1970s that was fuelled by the New Right policies of the Reagan Administration. Further, MacLeod and Emejulu (2014, 435) attribute, in part, the emergence of ABCD as being inextricably linked to ‘undercurrents of American political thought: a deep mistrust of the state and a championing of populist politics’ (MacLeod and Emejulu 2014, 435). MacLeod and Emejulu (2014) explain how, in a time of a national and global economic crisis, existing welfare programmes and services were perceived as inherently bureaucratic and a burden on public expenditure and thus targeted. Neoliberal market economics were promoted as the solution to expensive and inefficient service provision and for the distribution of social resources. This ideology promotes the privatisation of services and a competitive market offering greater choice, a reduction in the role of national and federal governments and so alleviates public expenditure, and recasts individual citizens as ‘consumers’. As such, MacLeod and Emejulu (2014, 436) caution the ABCD model renounces the role of the state and its ability to operate for the benefit society and presents communities as ‘nurturing environments which empower citizens’. Essentially, they fear the shift in state responsibilities to individual citizens and communities. Taking a similar viewpoint Friedli (2013, 140) questions the ‘balance of power between public services, communities and corporate interests’ contending asset-based approaches echo the withdrawal of state provided public services. Nevertheless, Garven, MacLean, and Pattoni (2016) consider such criticism and propose asset-based approaches could provide successful outcomes if utilised together with progressive policy, which seeks to address the fundamental reasons of social and structural health inequalities. As such, Garven, MacLean, and Pattoni (2016, 19) contend:

A state that is too directive risks failing to make best use of the existing individual and community strengths at a local level […]; on the other hand, one that simply leaves communities to ‘get on with it’ risks exacerbating inequalities. Therefore, in creating enabling conditions, a balance for government is required between setting strategic direction and facilitating the space for local self-determination.

It is on such a basis that this ABCD project was established alongside an acknowledgment of the Marmot Review. Amongst its many tenets the final Report states the need to ‘ensure that schools, families and communities work in partnership to reduce the gradient in health, wellbeing and resilience of children and young people’ (Marmot, 2010, 24, 104, 182). The Report also purports:

Education is not just about attainment: it should also enable children to develop their personalities, talents and abilities, to build resilience, self-esteem and to live a full and satisfying life (Marmot 2010, 104).

Having reviewed relevant literature, we now discuss the ABCD project: how the project evolved and was launched; opportunities and challenges presented by the ABCD project; project accomplishments; data collection methods and findings; lessons learned and next steps.

# The ABCD project and its evolution

The geographical area in which this ABCD project is located is regarded as economically deprived where there are areas of considerable socio-economic disadvantage (Public Health England 2017). In terms of social-economic demographics, statistics from the 2011 census (Nomis 2018) indicate that the city’s population of just under 250,000 is younger than the national (England) average (mean age of 38.5 years compared to 39.3 years). Residents rating their health as 'very good' is 42% (5% below the national average) with 1.9% rating their health as 'very bad' (0.6% higher than the national average). Regarding educational attainment those having no qualifications is 11.3% higher than the national average and all qualifications equal to one or more GCSEs at grade D or below are less than the national averages. Concerning the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SeC) compared to the national average there are 20% fewer residents aged 16-74 in Higher and Intermediate managerial, administrative or professional occupations.

Many of the city’s young people experience and/or are at risk of experiencing poverty and social exclusion, while still in compulsory education, and in the future beyond schooling. A report from the Joseph Rowntree Fund (Robinson, Zass-Ogilvie, and Hudson 2012) recognises the ‘great pressure’ facing disadvantaged communities and encourages universities to support them. Universities are hailed as ‘resource rich’ in the report and ‘one of the local community’s most important assets’ (Robinson, Zass-Ogilvie, and Hudson 2012, 7). Staffordshire University has been long committed to this kind of community involvement by virtue of its location, social context and widening participation agenda. Ultimately, the ABCD project aimed to help improve young people’s aspirations and employability particularly those with difficult early life experiences or circumstances. The project also sought to encourage young people to stay and invest in their communities and have success locally where possible. From a public health perspective, it is well known that these are precursors to the well-being and health of a local population (Marmot 2010; Garven, MacLean, and Pattoni 2016).

The project aimed to promote well-being for pupils, their school and the local community. We acknowledge there are many debates in the literature about the theoretical constructs of ‘well-being’ which have been expanded over recent decades to incorporate many different dimensions (Salvador-Carulla et al. 2014). We recognise well-being as an imprecise concept which is often interchanged, sometimes unproblematically, with happiness, functioning, quality of life, mental and physical health and satisfaction with life; well-being is conceived as both a state (of being) and a transitory process. Nevertheless, the measurement and assessment of individual and societal ‘well-being’ per se has become a key priority for successive UK governments (arguably, driven by international organisations, medical and health companies, and research institutions) and is not without significant implications for education (Kidger et al. 2010; Ecclestone 2012; Thorburn 2015). With this is mind and alongside the criticism of ABCD as outlined above as well as the conceptual ambiguities of well-being, the conception of this project was fuelled by a local recommendation that:

Public Health should develop a pilot with a small number of volunteer schools to develop practical measures which promote wellbeing by exploiting the relationship between the school, pupils, parents and the wider community, taking an assets-based approach (City of Stoke-on-Trent 2013, 92).

As such, this ABCD project was established using the principles of asset-based working. It was designed to ascertain the extent to which ABCD could be feasibly utilised in the school environment and to explore its possibilities in terms of being a force for change. The project aimed to pilot two practical pupil-led ABCD initiatives to develop the life-skills, resilience, well-being and future employability of the pupils involved by developing the relationship between the school, pupils, parents and the local community. It sought to encourage its pupil participants to recognise, express, purposefully utilise and celebrate their own individual assets along with identifying and harnessing the assets of their respective school as well as those of their local community. In line with ABCD principles these assets would be brought together to develop an initiative as chosen by the pupil participants. The initiatives would be planned and delivered by building upon their assets to address issues and opportunities in the local community.

A project team was established consisting of ABCD skills facilitator from the University, Public Health manager, Students’ Union representatives and an independent project manager. The team were supported by senior education advisors within the Local Authority. Two secondary schools, who are part of the same Multi-Academy Trust and share the same principal, volunteered to pilot the project. The schools are referred to hereinafter as Academy 1 and Academy 2. Each academy decided to select a group of pupils from its foundation learning tier class in Year 9 (aged 13 to 14 years old). Other pupils, particularly older pupils, could not be released from the curriculum in the same way. The foundation classes comprised pupils who were typically isolated, had challenging behaviour, and/or were withdrawn or shy. A lead teacher supported the ABCD project in their respective school.

The Student Union of two universities were approached to explore the opportunities the ABCD project might offer for student involvement as volunteers for their learning and work-related experiences. The team wanted to recognise the local universities are assets for the city and hoped the undergraduates would be regarded as role models, and help make the project fun for pupils, while not being seen by them as teachers. There was a certain amount of informality about the support they gave pupils; the undergraduates were trained to listen, guide and encourage, rather than to tell anyone what to do. The model suggested was one of mentoring and it was anticipated that mentoring would be beneficial for the school pupils and help to raise aspirations; pupils did not necessarily have family members who had been to university. The student mentors’ role was to share their project management skills and other skills as part of a team with the class, so they were acting as role models and mentoring the younger people to map community assets, identify an issue they thought the assets could be applied to and plan and carry out a project to address the issue. An assessment of the merits of student mentoring in schools is provided by (Shaheen 2011) and it is well-documented that student volunteers can make a significant contribution to the wider community (e.g. Brewis, Russell, and Holdsworth 2010; Holdsworth and Brewis 2014). Prior to the launch of the project the undergraduate volunteers underwent appropriate training to develop their skills in leadership, coaching and mentoring. Of the thirteen undergraduates recruited most were studying for degrees in social work, teaching or psychology. Being involved in this project was an opportunity to learn life skills, give something back and gain experience of working with young people in a school environment. The intention for the ABCD project was that an initiative would be chosen and shaped by each school’s pupils, teachers and the undergraduate students and cohere with the curriculum, time available and pupils’ interests. It was conceived that there would be some initial training in the principles of ABCD, on-going support from the local City Council, the Creative Communities Unit at Staffordshire University, which took a leading role, and other stakeholders, as necessary.

# Launching and engagement with the ABCD project

The project was launched in the autumn during the first school term, with an ABCD Introduction Event for everyone involved; project team, teaching staff, Year 9 pupils and undergraduate mentor volunteers. Its success would rely heavily on the schools’ commitment and that of the student volunteers. The event took the form of a workshop which introduced the ideas of ABCD, focused on assets and how they work. It was a mix of providing information, engaging pupils in hands-on activities and the opportunity for everyone to get to know each other. It was led by the one of the project team who is an ABCD facilitator. The venue was the city’s football stadium chosen specifically to enable the pupil participants to feel valued. Indeed, the pupils were excited as this was an ‘out of the ordinary’ experience for them.

On arrival, the first activity involved pupils identifying and understanding their communities’ assets and mapping those. A large map of the city was pinned up and pupils were asked, ‘Where do you go?’ ‘What building and spaces do you use?’ (e.g. your school, local park etc.). Responses were written on post-it notes and added to the map on the wall. Following this, the ABCD facilitator talked about what makes a strong community namely; governance, transport, services, environment, equality, economy, housing and culture. It has to be noted here that the ABCD facilitator is exceptionally talented in tailoring her approach and language for the groups she works with; translating some to the ABCD language into simple, accessible words and activities. The nature of ‘community assets’ was then discussed and were defined by the facilitator as ‘people’ (skills, knowledge, care, relationships, time), ‘organisations’ (community groups, public institutions, private businesses), ‘buildings and spaces including greenspace’, and ‘economic assets’ (e.g. what people produce and consume, businesses, informal exchanges). Then, pupils watched a short film about their city and were asked to notice community assets, community problems and the 8 themes for a strong community. Having ensured students were familiarised with the notion of community assets (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993) the facilitator moved the focus to people’s assets where it was emphasised ABCD starts with the gifts, talents and skills of everyone, especially those who are usually labelled e.g. ‘disabled’, ‘homeless’, ‘naughty’. Pupils were encouraged by teachers and undergraduate mentors to identify and understand their individual assets; what they bring, what are their personal strengths, what they could contribute to the project. To facilitate this audit each pupil was given an individual gift worksheet and asked to consider: What you care about – A gift of the heart; What you know – A gift of the head; What you are good at doing – A gift of the hands. The deliberate focus was on what is strong, rather than what is wrong. Pupils were asked to choose at least one of the gifts they felt they could offer their school team and the local community, write these on a post-it with their name, come to the front and say outload their name and read out their ideas, then place the post-it onto the ‘Gift Basket’. The facilitator then explained how the project would run. While the project team considered the event had achieved its aims, it was apparent that the pupils involved had difficulties in communication, and there was some awkwardness and reluctance to participate. It was evident to the team that pupils generally lacked self-confidence and self-esteem, were self-disparaging and self-demeaning. For example, some exclamations included, ‘I can’t do that or ‘I’m rubbish at that’.

Over the next 4 weeks each school team was involved in preparations to develop a suitable initiative. In accordance with ABCD principles (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993) they undertook more asset-mapping to learn about each other; identifying their skills and what they care about. Over successive weeks each school engaged in a series of walks. Pupils, accompanied by the teachers and undergraduate mentors, were taken out into the community to asset map and familiarise themselves with the community around them. Pupils took photographs and noted down what they could see; around their school, around the school perimeter and within their local community. They chatted to people they met asking what issues they cared about, what they loved about their community and what they worried about for their community. Pupils were encouraged to listen to what people had to say and note what they found out in relation to the 8 topics for a strong community. The project team discovered that some pupils did not know their community at all as they rarely left the street where they lived; they did not really go anywhere and did not know their community. Pupils from Academy 1 subsequently reported that this experience enabled them to ‘use manners’ and develop ‘empathy skills [as] we knew what it was like to be an unhealthy person’; they had found that most people they spoke to wanted to be healthy. As instructed at the Introduction Event, each school team created asset maps and drew up a list of potential projects which were matched to the ideas for the projects. Both teams came up with possible initiatives which were to be narrowed down to one; based on the most feasible in the time available. Five weeks after the Introduction Event each school had identified an initiative to improve the area using their team’s and community’s assets. Again, an ‘exciting’ venue was chosen, a local fire station. This helped maintain the ‘buzz’ surrounding the project. Both school teams presented their idea to the Steering Group using their asset maps and photographs. Afterwards there was a review session to enable both school teams to reflect on: their individual gifts; what they had done so far; what they had learned; what problems had arisen and how these were addressed/resolved; how they would make use of gifts and assets of their team, school and community; how they know the community wanted to be involved; how long the project would take, how they would know if the initiative had worked; what help they would need from the Steering Group. Already, by this stage, some pupils were much more comfortable in speaking in front of others (and the camera) and appeared less shy. Confidence and self-esteem were seemingly improving and pupils appeared to be working well together in their teams.

Pupils from Academy 1 decided to improve the green space and walking space by developing a local garden and park area; hereinafter referred to as the ‘Community Garden initiative’. This involved developing a community garden and marking out walking routes. Although the initiative was planned for the Spring term only such was their eagerness that subsequently, and beyond the project’s lifetime, during the school holidays pupils and parents came back in to work in the garden. The teacher was embedded in this project, which helped get it successfully established. The project built upon what pupils were already doing; a community garden project was already going on. However, to develop the project they completed the community garden, planted crops (e.g. radishes, strawberries) created growing charts and developed healthy recipes for their produce. Furthermore, pupils completed a community audit to consider suitable walking routes and worked out how to set up walking/running routes (a nature/art route) around their local area noting distances and how long each took to complete. They intended to work with the local council to obtain footprint paint to identify the different routes and create signage. Pupils also planned to have a healthy community and gym event to be held in the summer months beyond the lifetime of their ABCD initiative.

Pupils from Academy 2 decided to provide weekly support at a luncheon club which was held in a local church hall; hereinafter referred to as the ‘Luncheon Club initiative’. Academy 2 was subsequently linked to this community group. Pupils assisted the Club by calling at their Bingo sessions, they baked cakes and shared these with the Club’s attendees and chatting to and befriending its elderly members. Further, they supported the other volunteers at the Club for example by handing out tea and biscuits, clearing tables and washing up.

The Community Garden and Luncheon Club initiatives were carried out during the Spring term. The project team ensured frequent dialogue took place between the Steering Group and the schools to ensure all parties were comfortable with proceedings. The project team scheduled time for both schools to feedback on progress half-way through. There was a final conference to review and evaluate the achievements of each initiative and where learning could be shared. The chosen venue for this conference was a well-known local pottery company. Beyond this there was mentoring training provided to pupils in both school teams by the project team so that those involved could then mentor other pupils and continue to work beyond the lifetime of the ABCD project.

# Bridges and barriers presented by the ABCD project

The ABCD project provided a range of opportunities but, not unlike any other such project, was not without some challenges. We have conceptualised these opportunities as ‘bridges’ and challenges as ‘barriers’. A number of bridges and barriers emerged in the project; those of which were particularly significant are discussed below. Regarding the metaphor of bridges, here we are referring to opportunities for making connections or associations between people and/or places, forging links and developing channels for communication. Regarding the metaphor of barriers, here we are referring to challenges, problems, obstacles, difficulties and hurdles which hindered the initiatives in some way and which needed to be tackled.

There had to be significant commitment from the schools to enable the young people to connect with the wider community and also the schools needed to have ownership of the project. As such, it was important that there was effective communication from the outset and the project had the full support of the Principal (head teacher), and also each school’s respective heads of department, lead teachers and support staff. A number of pre-meetings took place with the schools prior to the project being agreed and to ensure that teaching staff were familiarised with the nature and language of ABCD and what the project would be involve. Some of the language to describe ABCD approaches could be considered as exclusive or disconcerting. However, as the project progressed teachers’ comprehension of ABCD principles developed and they embraced it wholeheartedly.

The demands of the curriculum, to an extent, was regarded as a barrier to pupil participation. The schools eventually decided that the involvement of Year 9 foundation learning tier pupils would be appropriate.

A challenge was maintaining links with and co-ordinating the university volunteers (of which, more below) proved quite hard to organise and time-consuming plus the reliability of some was sporadic. Attrition of undergraduates can partly be attributed to changes in their timetable in the second semester where their initial commitment could not feasibly be sustained and in some cases unreliability. The use of university students was considered important as they were nearer in age to the school pupils. It was envisaged they could potentially bridge the generational gap between pupils and project team/school staff and had the potential to become role models. The use of volunteers was found to be a useful way of extending pupils’ experience of community from the start of the project. Thirteen undergraduate volunteers were recruited to work on the project in a mentoring capacity to pupils, to support teaching staff and also promotes their own personal development (Robinson, Zass-Ogilvie, and Hudson 2012). The number of student volunteers dwindled over time, however, and this was problematic in terms of providing continuity of support; some pupils were upset if their university mentor did not turn up as planned. A core of 5 students stayed for the duration of the project to great effect, however. These undergraduate volunteers bonded and formed strong relationships with pupils they befriended providing, personal support, encouragement, critical friendship and another perspective, aside from the project team and teaching staff, to pupils.

Having chosen the Luncheon Club initiative one of the barriers identified by Academy 2 was enabling the residents of the local community to connect with and feel comfortable in the company of pupils in order to build strong (and intergenerational) relationships. This was due to perceptions of a general poor reputation in the local area which was based, unfortunately, on the behaviour and actions of ‘a small minority of young people that can give a bad reputation for the rest’ (lead teacher, Academy 2). This required some persistence to make this particular initiative happen; however, as the Luncheon Club attendees got to know the pupils betters their trust grew and relationships developed.

The project provided an opportunity for university staff and students to work to improve outcomes for some local young people and communities (Robinson, Zass-Ogilvie, and Hudson 2012). Undertaking such work however is complex and both time and resource intensive. However, all those participating in the project, including students, staff and pupils had the opportunity to work together and receive basic training in asset-based working.

# Data collection and project accomplishments

Morgan (2014) perceives the evaluation of asset-based working lags behind the practice of it. The nature of ‘evidence’ and the evaluation of asset-based approaches is also contemplated by Garven, MacLean, and Pattoni (2016). They acknowledge the difficulty of measuring outcomes and recognise ‘asset-based approaches are inherently contrary to the conventional way that research and evaluation are undertaken’ (Garven, MacLean, and Pattoni 2016, 64). They contend however, that all participating parties should be involved from the outset in planning the outcome’s improvement process so that useful evidence can be gathered. They also purport ‘what is important is that the choice of method is appropriate, acceptable to those involved and fits with what the person or group is trying to achieve’ (Garven, MacLean, and Pattoni 2016, 79). As such, to evaluate the merits and limitations of the ABCD project data were collected by one school throughout the duration of the project. The Boxall Profile for Young People (Bennathan, Boxall, and Colley 2010) was utilised as the diagnostic tool to ascertain pupils’ levels of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). This is a means of identifying SEBD aptitudes, needs and development and for periodically monitoring progress against individualised targets. The assessment of each pupil is compared to the standardised emotional literacy scores of ‘competently functioning’ children of a similar age group. As such, baseline measurements were taken by a teacher at the start of the project and were repeated seven months later at the end of the project. The results showed undoubtedly a great improvement on the self-negating element where at the very beginning of the project (and observed in the Introductory Event) pupils were generally negative towards themselves or rejected/avoided being part of new, unfamiliar tasks. At the start of the project pupils’ typical responses and actions revealed their self-consciousness and that they were hypersensitive to disapproval. The end results indicated all students, with one exception, made excellent progress (external circumstances affected that one pupil who was not able to engage in the project as much as the others). The comments made by pupils towards the end of the project provide a flavour of their learning experiences:

‘I have grown in confidence’

‘We have built our social skills’

‘Listening’

‘Not to be embarrassed’

‘Helping older people with things they struggle with’

‘Several skills like how to be confident and when talking and how to grow vegetables’

‘Anything is possible with a “can do” approach’

‘Travelling about outside, gardening and talking to [team] members’

‘To know what their lives are like compare to ours (older people)’.

Qualitative exercises (including written reflections containing a series of prompts) and interviews produced in the form of reflective documentary videos with people involved in the project. Data revealed very favourable results from the perspectives of pupils, teachers (including others not directly involved), undergraduate mentors and members of the community. The lead teachers from both academies considered the ABCD project had been an invaluable experience for everyone involved. In relation to the gains for pupils the lead teacher from Academy 1 explained:

They have learned how to better solve problems when working as a team and it has helped to build a sense of responsibility in students, and a sense of pride when they see what they've done is actually helping others. Staff across the academy have commented upon the changes they have noticed in these [pupils]; [pupils] that many of whom had previously written off in terms of academic ability and desire to achieve. Now they see a group of purposeful young adults who have become leaders within their student body, ambassadors for the academy all because of their participation in this project. We intend to continue with this way of working, not only with this group, but also bringing other [pupils] on board as we recognise the value of this project to improving the lives and opportunities for our most challenging and vulnerable [pupils]. But, more importantly, they have recognised its value too, as one of the [pupils] said: ‘thank you for letting us be part of this project, it has changed us’.

Similarly, the lead teacher from Academy 2 explained how the project had highlighted to pupils how isolated some of the community is and also drawn to their attention issues of which they were not previously aware. Some pupils had overcome communication barriers to make long lasting relationships with someone who is not one of their peers. Being involved in the project had enabled pupils to improve their perceptions of themselves and their community’s perceptions of them. Feedback received from the Luncheon Club was exemplary and it was apparent that the company of the young people had been very much enjoyed. She explained:

From the start of the project our pupils were pushed out of their comfort zones which for them was an alien concept. They have learnt that the boundaries they thought were holding them back are there to push them forward in their development of social and communication skills and they have well and truly gone from strength to strength in developing new relationships and building their confidence.

Being part of the ABCD project involved a great deal of time and commitment of time. Data from the undergraduate mentors who remained for the project’s duration revealed they too had gained much from the project. They noted the changes they observed in pupils over the course of the project and the sense of accomplishment this also brought for themselves, for example:

It was fantastic seeing the [pupils] progress into confident, outgoing individuals, breaching all comfort zones to achieve what they had done. I was particularly proud of [a 13-year-old boy with autism] who did struggle with most tasks at the start, but with a built rapport, this soon changed, and he even did the bingo calling [at the luncheon club]. Now that is a very big step […] and has brought great satisfaction to see him develop […] Not only did the [pupils’] confidence increase, but mine did too! It isn’t easy going into these situations ‘blind’, but being a role model […] and showing that I can do these things, it can give them the motivation to do it too, which was great to see! (Student mentor A)

I feel incredibly proud of the [pupils] and the developments and progress they had made. It really helped me develop my motivational skills as I intend to be a teacher, and sometimes encouraging and motivating [them] was a challenge as they had very little self-confidence […] I was surprised how attached I came to the [pupils], and the pride I felt in the last weeks of the project. I would also say that you have to be fully committed to the project as the [pupils] need the stability and continual reliance of the support of the [undergraduate] students. (Student mentor L)

The project manager offered the following refection:

Seeing the pupils and university students work together and learn together was truly inspirational and heart-warming, and knowing that we’ve really helped the teachers with an approach that will last longer than this one project is also very rewarding.

In a final conference held to celebrate achievements the young people and teachers presented and showcased the projects to a large audience. This was a multi-agency (and public) event on asset-based working held at the end of the summer term. The general sense was the significant distance that these particular pupils had travelled during the duration of the project in terms of basic life skills and developing self-confidence, positive attitudes, working as part of a team, engaging other people in conversation and even presenting to larger audiences.

# Lessons learned and next steps

In terms of lessons learned for schools in light ABCD’s underpinning principles and which may be useful for future similar projects, the team recognised the value of the following matters. Firstly, this ABCD project comprised teachers who were dedicated to its success, which was invaluable. The ABCD approach recognises and values people’s strengths and their capacity to identify the issues which affect them (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993). Developing a meaningful ABCD project through ascertaining and mapping assets, identifying issues and developing local community partnerships and resources (Foot and Hopkins 2010) takes time. Hence, it is fundamental to work with schools that are willing and able to provide high levels of support to enable teachers to be fully engaged in order to mobilise and drive change from within. Second, to develop sustainability plans with schools in order to consider how can this approach be used more widely within the core curriculum and for all pupils; it would be virtuous to have more pupils involved. Third, the involvement of some of the undergraduate mentor volunteers was sporadic. Full co-operation is essential for undergraduates and pupils to be able to build relationships (Brewis, Russell, and Holdsworth 2010), facilitate connections and develop a shared vision for social change (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993). Co-ordination of the undergraduates was time-consuming however and, thus, a more formal ‘contract’ could be introduced. Alternatively, students whose course has a compulsory project or volunteering element could be invited to participate (Brewis, Russell, and Holdsworth 2010). Fourth, as pupils got wet on walks and in the community garden it is advisable to purchase suitable rainwear for project members. This is also an opportunity for ‘team logos’ which was suggested by the schools as facilitating identity in a common social change venture. Finally, purposive collaborative evaluation techniques were used in this study. However, future studies should build in and formalise evaluation methods from the outset as this project revealed there is potential for further pre and post testing and a follow-up study could examine the longer-term impact of the ABCD project over time. Part of the aim of the project was to make connections with the local community; so a more holistic evaluation would be advantageous to determine the extent to which this ABCD project was beneficial for the community, the school and parents/guardians. That said, Garven, MacLean, and Pattoni (2016) purport it is important for asset-based approaches to consider what and how they measure and what counts as evidence.

The project team supported the two schools through to the end of the academic year. As a way forward, it is anticipated that this way of working could be extended to other schools in the city. The lead teachers in the two schools intended to continue to use the approach the following school year and beyond. Two of the undergraduate mentors planned to undertake further work, based on their experiences of this ABCD project, in the future. Despite the withdrawal of some undergraduate students the mentoring approach worked well in establishing relationships between students and pupils. As such, it is anticipated future projects will open up the opportunity to other university mentors but also explore the involvement of young people engaged in other further education and training, possibly including sixth form students or apprentices.

# Conclusion: possibilities for ABCD in schools

Two questions were raised at this beginning of the paper: ‘How may the principles of ABCD be applied in the context of schools as community assets?’; and ‘To what extent does focusing on schools as community assets promote well-being for pupils, the school and the local community?’ We have explained how asset-based approaches are promogulated in the literature as a coherent set of ideas and practices to enable individuals and communities to tackle together the barriers which prevent them from participating in the issues affecting them. Utilising the ABCD model alongside the policies and support of the City Council the project team was able to investigate how young people and the community in which they belong share learning, the development of self-esteem and feelings of well-being, how pupils perceive and feel about themselves and their local environment. The team hopes that the ABCD approach will support the young people, teachers and the wider community beyond the school and help them think about each other in more positive terms and what they can do for each other. It is acknowledged in the literature (Garven, MacLean, and Pattoni 2016) that asset-based approaches are criticised for being local-context dependent and thus the generalisability of findings, the outcomes and processes cannot be easily applied elsewhere. However, as indicated in the paper, there are numerous empirical case studies and lessons have been learned from this project which can be shared and modified accordingly. It is important that schools are mobilised to improve their educational function by being an integral part of community life and not separate institutions (McKnight and Kretzmann 2012). The project did highlight the significance of positive social networks of different types in bringing about social and health development (and potentially economic development) between different groups and generations of people. As such, the project has attempted to connect some young people to their local community and to some of the democratic structures that support the city. While this exploratory ABCD project may be regarded as a pilot, experimental or feasibility study we suggest the project and its achievements can be regarded as promising practice for any (school) community. We would caution; however, this project raises critical questions in relation to upfront initial investment or dedicated budgets for similar future projects and the scaling up and rolling out into the mainstream school system. It has the potential to be cost neutral once sufficient teaching staff are trained in working in this way, however, along with external support in the short term. Further research is needed to help us better understand and evaluate how the ABCD approach works in other schools and their local communities.

# Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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