



Families – Time for a change

It is now getting on for a generation since an incoming New Labour government placed children at the heart of its vision and spending priorities. The years which followed constituted a high watermark in investment in education, in childcare and in the reform of services for children - an investment framed by the promise that *every child mattered*.

Those who were children in 1997 are at now the start of their adult life. Some are already parents themselves while others will start their families in the next few years. Can they now expect their children to have a sure start?

The sad reality is that, in 2015, many of those young adults will not be in work. Many, like their parents before them, will push their buggies past the same or different boarded-up shops on housing estates or once thriving town centres. Their children will spend more years in school than at any time in history but, the chances are, will do less well than better off children at every stage of their education. Child poverty is increasing, and the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission has warned of a permanently divided society.¹

Sure Start, emblematic of New Labour's promise of *no forgotten people and no no-hope areas*² has itself been reduced by enforced cuts in spending. Differing views exist about the numbers which have closed, but figures released by the Department for Education suggest, by 2014-15, the available budget from which local authorities provide Children's Centre services had fallen by more than a third since 2010.³

What is the problem?

What problem are we trying to solve? asks Naomi Eisenstadt, the former Director of Sure Start, in an essay for the National Children's Bureau in 2013.⁴ Her question is pertinent.

This paper springs from the conviction that the problem we should be trying to solve is inequality. Family policy cannot prosper in a vacuum, detached from economic and political realities but should flow from a commitment to social justice and be formulated with and by the families it seeks to represent.

This would require, firstly, the honesty to acknowledge that current fiscal and economic policies are putting children at risk; directly through benefit cuts, rising household costs, food and fuel poverty and indirectly, through the loss of local services like children's centres, libraries, playgroups and

¹ State of the Nation 2014: Report of the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission

² Tony Blair Speech at Aylesbury Estate, Peckham 1997

³The Department for Education (2013) 2013-14 Planned Expenditure on Schools, Education, Children and Young People's Services by Local Authorities, p. 3 (Table B) https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/244055/SR35-2013.pdf

⁴ Children's centres: What problem are we trying to solve? Naomi Eisenstadt in Partnerships for a Better Start: Perspectives on the role of children's centres NCB 2013

after-school clubs. The cumulative impact of austerity policies has been greatest on those who are already disadvantaged, taking families, in many cases, to the limits of their ability to cope.⁵ Current levels of income inequality must be contained and reversed.

Secondly, while parents exert the greatest influence on their children's development their access to parenting resources is permeated by inequality. The skills of reading, writing, and numeracy, the ability to access information and knowledge and, increasingly, digital capabilities, are as essential for parenting as they are for social, economic and political participation. Too many families are among the learning poor.

Access to education for those parents who need it should be as full an entitlement as free health care or funded childcare. The barriers that parents currently face to find this help – course fees, childcare and transport – should be dismantled.

In this paper are examples of inspiring work by one children's centre to redefine learning for a whole community and the benefits which have been realised for the families and children living there. Whereas parenting classes offer a relatively narrow set of skills, detached from broader economic and social realities, the approach taken has been to offer *unbounded* learning, with unconditional access for all.

Thirdly, it should be families at the centre of shaping change. The early experimental Sure Start programmes were not owned by local authorities, but were partnerships of those bodies within the voluntary sector; run on community development principles and structured to allow local people a substantial say in actions taken to improve outcomes for children. Over time, that principle has been eroded and the direction of travel appears to be towards increasing prescription, enforced cuts and standardised parenting programmes.

Powerful Literacies

Poor literacy is both a driver of poverty and its consequence. The impact of having poor literacy and numeracy skills affects every part of life, whether completing an application form, doing the weekly shopping, searching the web, making a benefit claim or reading to children. The lack of those skills also prevents people from full participation in society. Yet in the UK, one in six people struggle with literacy. This figure has remained unchanged since 2003. In 2013, the OECD published findings which ranked England, 22nd for literacy and 21st for numeracy out of 24 countries.⁶

Those adults with the lowest qualifications are most likely to be unemployed or trapped in low-paid work. But an inquiry by the House of Commons Business, Innovation and Skills Committee in 2014 found that adults with very low levels of literacy were often unaware of the help which is available or faced difficulties in finding courses which matched their needs.⁷

Having children can act as a stimulus for parents to address gaps in their own education, but many find insurmountable barriers in the way of doing so. Those barriers include course fees, lack of information about what is available and childcare. For those without cars,

⁵ <http://www.centreforwelfarereform.org/library/type/pdfs/counting-the-cuts.html>

⁶ OECD 2013

⁷ Business, Innovation and Skills Committee Adult Literacy and Numeracy 2014

getting to college may be an expensive and time-consuming journey by public transport or, in rural areas, not available at all.

In the FE sector, basic skills courses are often focused on relatively narrow qualifications, particularly GCSEs and not always responsive to adult learner needs. Courses may fail to recognise sufficiently the support needs of those who have been out of education for a considerable time, or the impact of family or financial pressures. Parents can feel that the system has little understanding of the limitations which these pressures impose and as a consequence give up.

The Business Innovation and Skills Select Committee had this to say about Family Learning.⁸

Family learning provision must be at the heart of schools and community centres, so that learning is rooted within communities, especially those that are disadvantaged. However, the evidence we received, including that from the Government, showed that despite overwhelming support for family-learning schemes, they are hampered by a lack of long-term, consistent funding. We recommend that the Government must commit to the long-term funding of family-learning schemes, and must set out in its response how this funding will be provided.

Parental education has been shown consistently to be a key factor in predicting children's achievement, yet the focus of early intervention policies is largely on birth onwards, on futurity rather than the here and now. Although considerable attention is given to engaging parents in discrete activities such as playing with and reading to children, less is given to the enabling role that the education of adults could play in the transfer of literacy to children. Research evidence shows that effective community learning also strengthens families and enhances parenting practices.⁹

Hope

In 2010, we published an evaluation of HOPE, an extraordinary family centre and social enterprise in Herefordshire. From a small rural playgroup it has developed into an all-purpose centre for the community, providing outstanding education for children, support for families, learning for all ages and economic and social regeneration. Some parts of the reach area are among the most deprived in England in terms of education and skills deprivation.

Adult and community learning has always been at the heart of the H.O.P.E. Long before it was designated as a children's centre, classes were offered firstly in a literacy bus parked in the town's main car park. That provision has grown substantially and now includes cooking, yoga and growing food, healthy eating and dental health, first-aid, IT, sewing, art and photography, confidence building, work skills and ESOL. Many of the courses embed help with basic skills.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Community Learning and families 2014 NIACE

Having established adult learning, family support and early education, H.O.P.E. obtained funding for a training centre, small business unit and the creation of a small number of social businesses. The learning offer is shaped by users. It relates to all aspects of family and child well-being and there are no enforced age or other constraints on who can participate. The centre is used by retired people, teenagers and families and by adults with learning difficulties or other disabilities.

M- was encouraged to come to H.O.P.E. to join English and Mathematics courses by her partner who was already studying at the centre. She had struggled at school because of difficult family circumstances.

I thought I could just live on benefits and be a Mum

She had tried college but gave up because of the distance and the cost of travelling fifteen miles, the added cost of childcare and the formality and size of the group being taught. H.O.P.E. offered a more relaxed environment, childcare on site and 1:1 support from the tutor.

In just three years, M- has achieved level 2 qualifications in English and Maths, been inspired to gain skills relating to CV writing, interview skills and job applications and is now studying for an NVQ Level 3 in Business and Administration. She finds the exams difficult but she hopes to finish by July 2015. She has ambition.

M- has also worked while studying. She first became a cleaner at H.O.P.E. and has now moved on to be the receptionist. She feels herself to be a quite different person to the one who first came to study Maths and English four years ago.

I realised I wanted to become a better person

Her children have also benefited. Her courses have encouraged her to be more creative and relaxed with her children, allowing them to get involved in messy play and giving them the freedom to experiment. She has established a reading routine with the children and has also become more aware of how her behaviour can affect her children and their behaviour. She has tried to change to ensure her children do not follow the same cycle as she has.

I never used to read books and did not read that often to the children. I read to them every day now

For her and her family H.O.P.E. has meant that M- is able to provide financial support for the children as well as “bettering” herself. She will encourage her children to study earlier and not leave it as she did. She wants them to do well and take every opportunity to learn/educate themselves.

I want to be a good role model for my children for when they are older

Time for a change

Education can promote achievement not only in one generation, but in generations to come. Parents who undertake learning for themselves frequently report that they become more motivated and more confident to help their children.¹⁰

But literacy, in its widest sense, can provide a tool for understanding the world as well as the word. The environment provided by HOPE provides not only the conditions for self-actualisation – enabling each individual to achieve their aspirations – but encourages families and generations to support each other in reaching those aspirations. By offering access to all, HOPE provides the necessary conditions for mutual support and reciprocity.

K- was brought up in Bromyard and has always lived in the area. At school she failed to achieve G.C.S.Es and in retrospect did not find the school environment helpful or supportive. She worked as a kitchen assistant until the birth of her second child. At the suggestion of the Family Support Team, she joined English and Maths Level 1 courses at H.O.P.E.

In the face of many challenges, K- has gone on to achieve Level 2 qualifications and still returns to the classes each week to help new learners.

Before I came to H.O.P.E. I would not really speak to people much. Now I will engage with them and talk more.

Perhaps the biggest impact of returning to learning is that she is more confident and knowledgeable about supporting her children's learning. She doesn't want them to repeat her mistakes. Learning has also changed their lives in other ways. K now cooks from scratch and the family eat a more healthy diet.

K- volunteered to help out in the H.O.P.E. café, was then offered a paid post and has now been working there for eighteen months. However the biggest change has been her realisation of how much she enjoys supporting others to learn. She is now studying to become a teaching assistant and spends two half-days every week supporting 8 and 9 year olds at the Primary School.

When the Maths teacher at H.O.P.E. suggested the idea I thought that she was mad. Now I am really enjoying it. It is so rewarding knowing that I am helping others to learn. I want to do the Teaching Assistant Course level 3 and eventually work full-time as a teaching assistant. (H.O.P.E.) has been life changing. Without them I would not have had the guts and determination to carry on doing what I am doing now.

¹⁰ Bynner,J. &Parsons, S (2006) From generation to generation www.nrdc.org.uk

Children's centres everywhere should be credited with reaching out to families, including those who are most disadvantaged, providing them with a broad range of integrated activities in a supportive environment. Most offer adult education in some form – ESOL, digital skills, job-seeking skills, English and Mathematics – but this offer is bounded by a combination of factors – the space available in centres, funding for tutors or Skills Funding Agency rules. In most cases, adult education is an adjunct to other provision for children and families.

The H.O.P.E model is a compelling one. Education for adults is here the driver of change for families, strengthening the children's centre itself as the skills gained by parents are reinvested in its various activities on behalf of the community.

Whose voice?

Policies and services are shaped by what people believe. Across the political spectrum there is a wide but unsubstantiated view that the blame for under-achievement rest with poor parenting. In this there are clear echoes of the arguments made by Sir Keith Joseph in the 1970s, described as the “cycle of deprivation” and the culture of poverty theories of the 1960s. Current propositions are that poor parents may be less attached to their children, may even through neglect deprive them of the necessary stimulation to promote neurological development and – more widely – fail to get them ready for school.

Families take a different view. They are more likely to tell of the difficulties of parenting on a low income, or focus on the lack of jobs in their areas, or low pay, the lack of opportunities for children and young people, the problems of finding affordable housing, crime, or the expense of public transport. And as more families find it hard to feed their families, the disconnection of their experience from the intentions of those who govern must necessarily widen. Glimpses of that disconnection are visible in grass-roots action like the sit-in against the lack of affordable housing by mothers in Newham, but are evident also in widespread dissatisfaction with the political system.¹¹

In the history of Sure Start it has been parents who have been most visible in campaigns to prevent the closure of children's centres where they have been threatened by spending cuts. It is not difficult to understand why. Many children's centres are based in areas of few if any amenities. Those children's centres have provided a welcoming and supportive environment, one where professionals are prepared to champion families on the multiple issues which threaten to compromise their well-being.

However not all families make use of this help, preferring to rely on help from family and friends. These informal affinities are rarely mentioned in discussions of family policy, but are at the heart of people's connectedness to each other. Families and friends are a true representation of solidarity – arguably an ideal starting point for change.

In France, the Association Collective Enfants Parents et Professionnels (ACEPP) is an extended network of childcare centres and other projects, the common feature of which is

¹¹ Hansard Society 2012

that they are set up and led by parents with the support of professionals. ACEPP, with partners from Belgium and Germany, have established Parental Universities where groups of parents, with the help of researchers and academics, study selected issues about parenting. The findings are presented by parents to policy makers and administrators. Parents also contribute to the training of teachers and facilitators.

One of the most successful examples of lifelong learning is the *study circles* program in Sweden, which attracts an estimated half of the population during their lifetimes. The study circle concept has been firmly entrenched in Sweden for more than a hundred years and serves as a means of adult education. Study circles receive government support as a means of promoting democracy and use the experiences of ordinary people as a starting point for exploring socially relevant concepts.

Democracy works. The National Evaluation of early Sure Start Local Programmes found that those which were better at *empowering* parents also demonstrated improved outcomes for parents and enhanced home learning environments.¹²

As new spending decisions cut further into local authority infrastructure, children centres may be forced to retreat into limited health and safeguarding services. If this were to occur, the Sure Start experiment, as it was first intended, might well be over in all but name. The loss of those important support services must be avoided but, irrespectively, Sure Start children's centres could and should be more fully realised as learning communities, but run democratically, as mutuals by the community.

What's the problem we are trying to solve? In the manner of defining an answer, the main voice should be that of families themselves, creating their own knowledge and arriving at their own prospectus for action.

For more information visit www.capacityltd.org.uk or email info@capacityltd.org.uk

or visit hopefamilycentre.org or email admin@hopefamilycentre.org

¹² NESS 2007 Understanding Variations in Effectiveness amongst Sure Start Local Programmes <http://www.ness.bbk.ac.uk/impact/documents/40.pdf>