The Learning We Live By

Education policies for children, families and communities

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capacity
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131 High Street
Teddington
London
TW11 8HH

Telephone: 0208 977 0283

Email: info@capacityltd.org.uk

You can find Capacity on line at www.capacityltd.org.uk

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Biographies

Tom Bentley is Executive Director for Policy and Cabinet for the Premier of Victoria, Australia. He was director of Demos from 1999 – 2006.

Sheenagh Davis is the inspiration behind the H.O.P.E. Family Centre in Bromyard and is currently the manager of the centre. Trained as a playgroup leader and teacher, she drove the long process of establishing H.O.P.E.

Patrick Diamond is a former adviser to the Prime Minister, is a Senior Visiting Fellow at the London School of Economics, and Director of Policy Network

Gill Haynes is the former Chief Executive of the National Childminding Association, is Vice-chair of the Children's Workforce Council and Chair of the New Cross Gate New Deal For Communities (NDC)

Margaret Lochrie is the former Chief Executive of the Pre-school Learning Alliance and is the Director of Capacity

George Low is a freelance educational journalist, who formerly worked as an editor at the Open University and as editor of the weekly magazine 'Education'.

Duncan O'Leary is a Researcher at Demos and co-author of The Leadership Imperative: Reforming Children's Services from the Ground Up, Demos (2005)

Mervyn Wilson is Chief Executive and Principal of the Co-operative College and has worked in the co-operative sector for over thirty years. He is a Director of the Robert Owen Society and a member of the Governance Review Group of the International Co-operative Alliance.

The Learning We Live By: Introduction

By Margaret Lochrie

"*All serious educational movements have in England been also social movements. They have been the expression in one sphere – the training of mind and character – of some distinctive conception of the life proper*."[1]

This booklet will argue that the failure of education to connect, meaningfully, to the experiences and aspirations of many children and adults, or to a wider collective social vision and purpose, is the key factor in the lack of progress made towards reducing educational under-achievement and the transition to a more inclusive society.

For many young people, the experience of childhood is inextricably linked to structural disadvantage. Social class remains the crucial determinant of academic performance[2] and there is an increasing rather than diminishing polarisation between young people who stay on in education and gain qualifications, and those who leave school at 16 or 17, moving into fragile labour markets, low pay and unemployment.[3]

Among adults, the belief that learning can provide aid for living, for improving relationships or for changing lives is, similarly, divided on class lines. Participation rates in learning are lowest among unskilled or unemployed adults, with more than half not undertaking any form of learning since leaving school compared with only 17% of those in the highest income bracket.[4]

As parents, adults are key to their children's achievement. Research provides a clear model of how parental involvement works in transmitting intergenerational educational success. In essence, the active factors are warm parenting, constructive social and educational values and high aspirations relating to personal fulfilment.[5] However, many parents, faced with adversity, find it hard to draw on those aspirations and the respect for schools and sense of identity of purpose, which once existed, is considerably eroded.

1 R.H. Tawney: The Worker's Educational Association and Adult Education: The Radical Tradition, George Allen and Unwin 1964

2 Llanelli, C. & Paterson, L. Education and social mobility in Scotland in the 20th century: ESRC 2006

3 Jones, G. The Youth Divide: Diverging Paths to Adulthood: Joseph Rowntree Foundation: 2002

4 NIACE: Adult Participation in Learning: NIACE Briefing Sheet 66: 2005

5 Desforge, C. and Abouchaar, A. *The Impact of Parental Involvement Parental Support and Family education on Pupil Achievement and Adjustment: Literature Review*. Research Report No 433 DfES: 2003

Education policy has been the subject of an unremitting and at times bewildering series of reforms by both Labour and Conservative administrations since the creation of the welfare state. To the ordinary person, for whom, perhaps, children provide the main or whole point of having an education system, the fine distinctions between grant-maintained, foundation and specialist schools and city academies may be wholly obscure. As a 'brand', education lacks any comprehensible values and a clear overall identity.

Since the 1980's, education policy has rested increasingly on the freedom of schools to operate within 'quasi-markets', recasting parents and children as educational consumers. Yet the operation of schools in the market place and the positioning of education as a consumer choice, is considered by many to disadvantage those who are already least well-placed to exercise power as consumers. At an abstract level, constructing education, or other public services, simply as an extension of consumer choice, displaces an alternative concept of public provision, organised on principles of solidarity and mutuality, valued by all and available as a right when needed.

New Labour has devoted significant additional resources for education to disadvantaged areas, but in other respects its education policy has been characterised by targets, competition and market reliance. In policy terms, traditional battle lines between left and right have been drawn around the issue of selection but, in a very real sense, this is to miss the point. Recent research suggests that education policy by itself contributes little to the rate at which people move between social classes and comprehensive schooling is neither less nor more effective at promoting social mobility than a selective system.[6]

These observations and the findings from which they are drawn are, for the most part, not new, but there is a sense in which time is running out for the realisation of constructive alternatives. Poverty and inequality remain endemic in the UK, voluntary or enforced disengagement from education is increasing among young people; such is the sense of helplessness about the fracture lines in our communities that serious political thought is being given to identifying 'high harm' children, before they are even born.

And the years since New Labour took office have provided the highest watermark of investment in education and other public services, compared with the previous two decades; the highest benchmark for action to eliminate poverty and its consequences, particularly among children. If the project is felt to have run aground, it does not bode well for the future.

6 Llanelli, C. & Paterson, L. Education and social mobility in Scotland in the 20th century: ESRC 2006

Thirty years ago, Mia Kelmer Pringle, a former director of the National Children's Bureau, observed that

"*A willingness to devote resources to the care of children is the hallmark of a civilised society as well as an investment in our future.....Granted that more needs to be found out about how best to promote children's all-round development, surely enough is known already to take action*."[7]

The *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* programme represents a new radical shake-up of services for children, built around the aims of being healthy, being safe, making a positive contribution, enjoying and achieving, and achieving economic well-being.

In these aims, *Every Child Matters* offers a clear and unambiguous promise to every child, every parent and the country as a whole. If it were, however, to become the hostage of managerialism, of downward solutions or to simply lack the resources to be effective, the very ambition which propels it could easily unravel, materialising instead as helplessness, spiralling morale, the sense that there is nothing left to try.

This short booklet springs from the conviction that *enough is known already to take action*. The perspectives offered by the different contributors take – as a starting point – that education policy cannot exist in a vacuum, must be meaningful to all and has to be aligned to a wider vision of social justice and the nature of a good society.

Among other things, this requires the honesty to acknowledge the root cause of problems and to abandon the language and rhetoric which hide the real fractures in our society – poverty, racism and inequality. This language, which includes the extended over-use of terms such as *vulnerable, hard-to-reach, high-harm*, runs the risk of locating problems entirely within individuals or groups of people, without properly identifying the economic, historical or even global antecedents of the particular problems faced by children and adults today.

In this context, the article *No Child Left Behind* argues that *Every Child Matters* should require all those who are part of the children's workforce to have, as an essential element of professional development, training and understanding of poverty and its impact on children and family well-being.

7 M.K. Pringle. The Needs of Children. Hutchinson & Co, 1977

In the debate, earlier this year, around the winding up of the experimental *Sure Start* programmes and the transition to Children's Centres, some of the most compelling voices were those of parents. In making links between education, regeneration and social change, many Sure Start programmes adopted an approach not dissimilar to community education models of the 1970's; recognising economic and educational inequality, celebrating diversity, and moving away from hierarchical forms of organisation. Supported by voluntary and community organisations with experience in this field, these projects have in some cases facilitated a process of change, not just in the lives of individual families, but in the community as a whole.

What might this mean for emerging children's centres, as they move into the mainstream of local authority provision, in terms of their governance and organisation and for the relationship between professionals and parents? Gill Haynes argues for an enhanced role for children's centres in delivering economic well-being, expanding the core offer to include more training opportunities for parents.

As a related issue, will the levels of funding available to local authorities for children's centres be sufficient, or will the available funding limit their effectiveness in providing childcare and family support, on the basis of need? Sheenagh Davies explores this in the context of the work of HOPE – a unique children and family centre in the Midlands.

Post-16 education, now largely prioritising literacy and the skills required for a well-performing economy, historically had a robust connection to learning for personal development, the intrinsic value of learning and the betterment of society.

Few could argue with the need to address the poverty of opportunity which is faced by adults lacking qualifications and basic skills, or the barriers which this creates to finding employment or to escape low pay. But, as George Low reminds us, *Skills for Life* cannot be, by itself, a sufficient response to the learning needs of adults, to support them in their understandings of contemporary life, in their role as parents or as members of a social democracy.

Parenting is a challenging responsibility at any time. Poverty, isolation, poor health or competing responsibilities at work make it harder. The accumulated experience of family centres like HOPE suggest that what is now required is a more substantial and universal family learning offer, reflecting the importance of the early years and the significance of the family as a context for learning.

Every Child Matters offers a vision of all parents being able to support their children to achieve the five desired outcomes, but is silent on the issue of a strategic plan to get there. Parental education has been shown to act as a protective factor across a wide range of family and child development variables. The infrastructure – in the form of a large variety of largely unconnected initiatives and programmes – is substantially there. As research has brought us to a fuller understanding of the family as the key transmitter of educational success, the potential of family learning, as a gateway for change, assumes added significance.

But it is in the need for education to be capable of fulfilling individual human needs that the greatest challenge may lie. In *Another Wasted Opportunity?* Patrick Diamond reminds us that disadvantaged children are still those most failed by the system and that an equitable system must deliver the greatest share of resources to those most in need.

The *personalisation* of learning, now becoming part of the language of education, is at risk of being stillborn until it can adequately encompass the subjective and accumulated experiences of many children, of their home and family and community and any resulting disjuncture with the world of school.

"*Walk a mile in these shoes*" comes to mind in Gill Haynes' analysis of women returners to education and training, the initial fragility of their confidence and the significance of the subject matter – childcare, children and families – for creating emotional resonance and solidarity. This kind of learning, which draws on feelings as well as ideas and has a direct practical application, is near to an ideal model.

A further linking principle, of all the contributions, is in their commitment to learning as a form of empowerment and as a tool for social change. In this sense, the return to an earlier socialist like Tawney and the organisation most closely associated with him, the WEA, is less a retrospective than the search for a new start.

As Patrick Diamond observes, greater equity of result requires a new relationship between the state, public service providers, the community, and citizens.

The concept of disadvantage can obscure the ways in which the organisational culture of schools and other institutions may reinforce, unintentionally, a dominantly middle-class strand of culture and the trap that schools may fall into of regarding the community as 'out there'.

New Labour has chosen to move away from a welfare system based on rights to a culture which emphasises responsibilities. This is to be welcomed, but education, with other public services, should share in that culture of responsibility. Tom Bentley and Duncan O'Leary describe the potential of *local professionalism* as a means of effecting change in children's services and improving outcomes for children.

What would a recasting of the traditional lines between school and community and between parents and teachers mean in practice? To what extent could schools and other services involve children and parents in this dynamic, incorporating their perspectives of community and citizenship and their ideas for local problem-solving – as a mainstream element of the curriculum?

Mervyn Wilson explains how the cooperative movement is renewing itself and why education has been one of the principles that have underpinned the global co-operative movement since its inception.

Twentieth-century organisations like the Co-op, the WEA and the playgroup movement provided examples of people coming together to use education as a means of achieving individual and community benefits through self responsibility and mutual self-help. In so doing they created their own organisations, in some cases mobilising large numbers of people as champions for and producers of learning.

In a particular sense, these organisations are the secular equivalent of faith schools, in which education is combined with commitment to a purpose, based on a shared identity.

Today, such organisations may be classed as social enterprises, which, elsewhere, have been recognised as having the capacity to address the needs of communities in a new way. Here in Britain the voluntary sector is increasingly looked to as a partner in combating social exclusion, but perhaps the more radical, but ultimately satisfying challenge would be to also recast the mainstream of education in this same way? If there is one thing that the different contributions to this booklet show, it is that the will and the knowledge, among those who work with children and families, are already there.

Another Wasted Opportunity?
Reflections on Labour's Education Reforms

By Patrick Diamond

The Labour Party's widely heralded but controversial education policy launched shortly after the 2005 election was badged as a flagship reform of the historic third term. It promised to transform the quality of state education after decades of mediocrity that had held Britain back socially and economically. But instead of forging a progressive education settlement that will endure for generations to come, the Education Act may prove to be yet another wasted opportunity.

Inevitably, much of the bill's radical edge has already been blunted. The proposals for autonomous trust schools fall far short of the diversity that flourishes in the classic social democracies of Northern Europe – especially in Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands. Plans to reduce local authority control over secondary education have also been drastically weakened.

Indeed, opponents of the Education Act assert that the comprehensive system is being continuously undermined through competition, out-sourcing of provision to private operators, and the promotion of 'back-door' selection. The effect of the proposed changes will be to fragment the secondary education sector even further, imposing the greatest pressures on the weakest schools; and the widening of parental choice will lead to the 'super-serving' of the middle-classes.

This line of argument is itself problematic for several reasons. For one, it means defending a system that has never really existed in many urban areas. The most disadvantaged children have most often been failed by the present structure of provision. The middle-classes have either manipulated the system, or abandoned it for the independent sector.

The Government's reforms at least promise an end to the sacred illusion that monolithic provision is sufficient to guarantee equality. An equitable model of educational provision has to embrace diversity, while channelling resources to the areas of greatest need. Programmes of school improvement that rely purely on central direction, imposed targets, and uniform standards have rarely achieved their desired outcome. Neither will 'one size fits all' schools meet popular aspirations in a world where expectations are shaped by highly competitive public and private markets.

Credible strategies of reform must also accept that self-sustaining improvement is most likely to come from below. Since 1945, successive governments have transformed the relationship between the state and the institutions of public service in Britain. In education, for example, schools now relate more directly than ever to Whitehall rather than to local councils. Yet the relationship between the state and the individual citizen remains largely unaltered, despite fundamental changes in British society over the last sixty years.

Instead, reforms should focus on empowering users, where necessary, to demand greater responsiveness, and on the fulfilment of individual needs through greater emphasis on co-production: users and professionals working together to achieve shared goals. This should be at the heart of a learning society. Yet the Government's agenda falls short of this. When it comes to narrowing the gap in life-chances for the least advantaged children, the reforms also lack energy and imagination. It is to this concern that policy-makers attention should now turn.

In Britain, education beyond the basics has always been a concern of the left, given its contribution to democracy and self-fulfilment. Until the mid-1990s, however, it was never a compelling priority despite the strengths in Labour's record, including the Open University and comprehensive admissions.

The Attlee Government itself proposed no landmark Education Act. In a world of heavy industry and full employment, education seemed less relevant to national prosperity. The comprehensive revolution in the 1960s did not focus fully on what and how children should learn. Though James Callaghan launched a great debate on education in 1976, it had disappeared entirely from Labour's priorities in the 1979 manifesto.

The British left's approach to education was also stifled by a set of illusory assumptions and assertions about the role of the state in a modern society. The post-1945 welfare settlement strove to ensure universal access to healthcare, housing, education and local government across the country, ending the 'patchwork quilt' of Edwardian social provision. The consolidation of the welfare state subsequently emerged as Labour's principal objective in power.

The provision of public services by traditional state providers is regarded by many on the left as the touchstone of social justice. This orthodoxy on public services has been reinforced by Labour's abandonment of the rhetoric and aspiration of socialist transformation that reached its climax in the 1950s. By discarding the bold aim of replacing capitalism with socialism, a minority have settled for a modest and conservative defence of the traditional welfare state as the pinnacle of socialist ambition.

Yet enlightened reformers on the left such as the LSE sociologist Richard Titmuss have always recognised that since human needs are infinitely variable, services must cater to individual need.

At first glance, comprehensive education – treating every child the same – would provide equality. But as R. H. Tawney wrote in 1931: "*Equality of provision is not identity of provision. It is to be achieved not by treating different needs in the same way, but by devoting equal care to ensuring that they are met in the different ways most appropriate to them*".[1] The recognition of diversity in public service provision is essential not least as the complexity of inequality and disadvantage has grown, and the post-war certainties of the 1940s and 1950s have evaporated.

As a recent report for the Young Foundation '*Mapping Britain's Unmet Needs*' makes clear, this concerns not only those groups suffering from classic poverty of power, money and place – the poor, elderly, disabled and mentally ill. There are new categories of destitution in the UK that are falling through the cracks of public policy – such as undocumented migrants and trafficked people. The proportion of 'fractured families' has grown inexorably since the 1960s, and 'psychic poverty' – anxiety, stress, isolation – is on the rise.

Inevitably, the trends impact most strongly on children and young people. Declining fertility and accelerating geographical mobility have weakened the traditional support structures of the extended family. Divorce, co-habitation, single-parenting, and births outside marriage have all risen dramatically in recent decades.

Another weakness of the traditional comprehensive model was the premise that schools could compensate children for the long-term effects of embedded deprivation and poverty. As the influential educationalist Basil Bernstein argued in 1970, '*education cannot compensate for society*'.[2] Increasingly, overloaded schools were blamed for a multitude of ills, when in reality they were grappling with the effects of multi-dimensional stresses and strains in the social fabric, as the recent Young Foundation report testifies.

1 See R.H. Tawney, 'Equality', London: Allen Lane, 1931.
2 See B. Bernstein, 'Education Cannot Compensate for Society', New Society, 387: 344-7, 1970.

Of course, there is strong evidence that effective schools can help disadvantaged children to overcome the negative effects of societal pressures. Certain interventions appear to raise standards among children from the lowest socio-economic groups.

These include better pre-school provision, out of-school study support centres, fuller financial help with school meals, and travel to school or college, maintenance allowances, and special programmes such as reading recovery. These interventions also rely on the fairer distribution of educational spending, effectively targeted at the most disadvantaged pupils.

But it also needs a very different approach to schooling in the future. Most significantly, this demands effective institutional integration so that all the key reference-points in children's lives – home, family, parents, friends, school, and community – function more harmoniously to promote well-being and self-development. This will be challenging; as Fine argues, "*Rich and real parental involvement requires a three-way commitment – to organising parents, to restructuring schools and communities towards enriched educational and economic outcomes, and to inventing rich visions of educational democracies*".[3]

The evolution of full service 'dawn to dusk' schools offering the range of activities and specialisms that reflect the diversity of modern community life are an essential lever of change. There should also be far greater emphasis on inculcating emotional intelligence in schools, as Richard Layard and Daniel Goleman have both recently argued.[4] The curriculum must emphasise physical exercise, drama, music and art – treasured skills on which children can fall back for the rest of their lives, and which enable them to explore their own culture and identity.

The underlying premises of the education reforms proposed by the present Government are far from reprehensible. There should be no return to academic selection, nor is any recreation of the binary divide in secondary education likely to raise national standards, and fulfil the aspirations of the majority of parents and children.

Yet the traditional comprehensive model has not produced the radical shift in educational opportunity that its advocates urged in the 1960s. In part, this was a consequence of too little emphasis on what and how children learn when they went through the school-gate; an under-developed school curriculum; and too little focus on the intricacies of how individuals themselves experience 'the learning game'.

3 See M. Fine, 'Parents, Power, and Urban Public Schools, in A. Halsey et. al., 'Education: Culture, Economy, Society', Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

4 See R. Layard, 'Happiness: Lessons from a New Science', London: Penguin, 2006; D. Goleman, 'Emotional Intelligence: why it can matter more than IQ', London: Bloomsbury, 1996.

But it also reflected the evolution of comprehensive schools as hermetically sealed institutions with boundaries that delineate them from the outside world. Only if children were exposed to a protected learning environment that could compensate for the evident effects of class disadvantage would social engineering work its magic.

In the post-war era, these hopes have been confounded. It is clear that public policy cannot achieve its ends in this way. The modern relationship between state and citizen is fundamentally at odds with the doctrine of post-war social democracy that the comprehensive schools epitomised. Instead, greater equity of result requires stronger diversity of provision, implying a new relationship between the state, public service providers, the community, and citizens.

Just as communities are different, educational needs are different too. Uniformity of provision does not guarantee equality of outcome. Indeed, inequalities have widened since the Second World War, despite the introduction of comprehensive schools. Diversity can bolster the pursuit of equality rather than undermine it. In much of Europe, voluntary, co-operative, and charitable foundations are an important component of public provision, in education and elsewhere.

In conclusion, new institutions are required in the 21st century drawing on the best traditions of mutualism and community self-help. As Margaret Lochrie reminds us elsewhere in this booklet, the great reforming movements of the early 20th century – the trade unions, the Workers Educational Association, and the co-operative movement – were committed not to the extension of uniform provision or the central state, but the engagement of localities and people in the shared resolution of the adversities generated by industrial capitalism. As we confront the impact of rapid technological, demographic and global change in the new century, social and educational policy in Britain should re-discover those voices and traditions.

Children's Services: The Professional Challenge

By Tom Bentley and Duncan O'Leary

The Every Child Matters (ECM) reforms offer an inspiring vision for children's services in the 21st century. The legislation seeks nothing less than a complete overhaul of services in the coming years. The reforms are radical not just because of the scale of their ambition, but also because of their emphasis on the wider development of young people – and its close relationship with educational achievement.

The five outcomes of ECM, developed in close consultation with young people, reflect many of the values and aspirations that have been held by public service professionals for generations. As a result, the levels of support for ECM amongst professionals are striking: 90% of local government workers are aware of the reforms and a clear majority believes that they will produce improvements in outcomes for children and young people.[1]

The five outcomes for children

1. Be healthy
2. Stay safe
3. Enjoy and achieve
4. Make a positive contribution
5. Achieve economic well-being

However, the ECM legislation is just that: legislation. If outcomes for children are to improve then the change must take root in the everyday interactions between professionals, young people, families and communities. This will require considerable changes in professionals' practice. As Patrick Diamond describes, services will need to be reconfigured around the needs of service users – requiring professionals to understand their own roles through the prism of outcomes for children rather than by particular professional or practitioner groupings.

In spite of the broad theoretical support for such a proposition, this shift represents a considerable disruption to traditional professional roles, boundaries and status. While legislation is instant, changes in long standing professional practices are not. Years of training and experience are not altered simply by the passage of a bill in parliament – whatever the level of support for its overarching goals.

1 *Children's Workforce Research*, BRMB (2006), accessible at http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR716.pdf

In this way, incentives set by policymakers may have little effect if they jar with professionals' identities and understanding of their own roles and responsibilities. The *Every Child Matters* brand may be a strong one in general terms, but there are no guarantees that the ECM label will be enough to change the specific ways in which professionals go about their work on a daily basis.

The reality of this is becoming clear from a burgeoning research base. A series of reports have identified the need for cultural change within and across organisations to navigate the transition from one set of working practices to another. Research commissioned by the ESRC has found that changes in practice aimed at more multi-agency working could threaten professionals' sense of themselves as specialists through the 'blurring' of responsibilities.[2] And the Commission for Social Care Inspection has found that joint work between social care, health and education services is often constrained by professional identities rooted in traditional forms of practice.[3]

As Demos has argued:

"*The danger for Every Child Matters lies not in an outright rejection from the people being asked to deliver it, but in the day-to-day difficulties of making it work on the ground. Entrenched patterns of professional behaviour lead to scepticism and distrust of the capabilities of professionals from other backgrounds. The temptation to return to familiar habits in the face of major uncertainty can be powerful*."[4]

In other words, ambitious programmes of reform can easily be overridden by the power of professional identities. The real challenge, therefore, is not just to build flexibility into public services, but to increase *ownership* of new ways of working amongst those responsible for their delivery.

This realisation sheds light on some of the abortive or more ineffective attempts at public service reform in recent years. Policy makers have expressed repeated frustration in their attempts to 'transform' public services, pointing the finger at intransigent professionals standing in their way.

"*Public service reforms must be driven by the wishes of the users not the producer*"' has been the refrain.[5] The Prime Minister has spoken vividly of the 'scars on his back' – acquired from attempts to reform monolithic public services into responsive and flexible systems of provision.

2 *New Forms of Professional Knowledge and Practice in Multi-agency Services,* Economic and Social Research Council (2005)
3 *Making Every Child Matter: Messages from inspections of children's services,* Commission for Social Care Inspection (2005)
4 *H Lownsbrough, D O'Leary: The Leadership Imperative: Reforming children's services from the ground up,* Demos (2005)
5 Tony Blair, Speech to the Confederation of the British Indusry, 29 Nov 2005

For their part, professionals have voiced their own frustrations. Many have regarded the various programmes of reform simply as a distraction from the core business of meeting the needs of members of the public. Although the language of 'personalised', responsive services has resonated, many of the targets and mechanisms for performance management have felt alien to their experiences and priorities.

These parallel frustrations are related. In many cases, professionals have resisted, or simply worked around, many reforms which have happened 'to' them by way of government white papers. And the government has responded with closer prescription and heavier regulatory regimes aimed at 'driving through reform' – starting the cycle all over again.

The key to resolving this dilemma lies beyond either scrapping targets altogether or simply devolving power to managers in authorities. Rather, policymakers need to re-evaluate their model of change, recognising that disenfranchised professionals are unlikely to be either bribed or coerced into new practice unless they can recognise clear benefits for young people and their families.

As the national evaluation of Sure Start found, "*Agencies are more likely to collaborate with other initiatives if they believe that the efforts of both organisations are contributing towards meeting not only the same targets, but that those targets are seen to be meaningful*."[6]

In this sense, the resistance to reform in recent years requires a more sophisticated response than the one-dimensional terminology of 'producer interests'. Policymakers need to recognise that much of the caution and even scepticism towards new initiatives reflects a concern to avoid the potentially damaging effects of continual upheaval. This deeper concern for children and young people represents precisely the set of values that we would hope to find in those working in our public services, and should be understood as such.

More than this though, what is essential is that a reforming government is able to make an *asset* of that sense of vocation and moral purpose – harnessing it to drive and shape reform rather than hold it back. This does not mean handing over the reform agenda, wholesale, to those providing services, but rather recognising them as key partners in that process.

6 *Implementing Surestart Local Programmes: An Integrated Overview of the First Four Years,* NESS (2005)

One promising avenue here is what might be described as 'local professionalism'. Local professionalism is more than localism – it sees professionals not just responding to locally set targets, but being involved in the process of assessing need, negotiating targets themselves – and changing their practice as a result. Managerialism, whether decentralised or not, is replaced by an approach which deliberately blurs the boundaries between policymakers and professionals.

This approach is moving rapidly beyond the realms of theory. By drawing heavily on what it means to be a professional *in* Knowsley or *in* Essex, new ways of working are already beginning to emerge because of professionals, rather than in spite of them. One striking example of this approach is a grassroots initiative that has been making waves in the London Borough of Bexley.

Bexley's 'Multi Agency Integrated Services Initiative' (MAISI) aims to co-ordinate services in the area – sharing many of the aims of the Every Child Matters reforms. But, importantly, the project has been designed and driven by a coalition of professionals from local agencies. Working closely with the local authority, professionals in the area are investing time reviewing past cases in children's services and exploring their implications.

"*Looking at our impact on their (young people) lives was a profound shock to us as a four-star service provider*"', writes Bexley's Chief Executive Nick Johnson.[7] "*We went through their files, rewrote their stories factually and chronologically, detailing what happened to their child and family, elaborating on how we had all played our part in responding to their needs as teachers, social workers, GPs or other health practitioners*."

Through this process of reflection, those involved with MAISI have reviewed where practices and protocols need to change in the future, whilst setting a series of ambitious outcome goals to judge progress against in the coming years.

Those involved in the project are enthused. Wendy Greatorex, the headteacher at Normandy Primary school says that the early results are promising: where her school once had twelve children on the 'at risk' list, now it has none. Referrals now happen much quicker than in the past – meaning that 'early intervention' is now as early as it should be. And when you ask what has made all this possible, the answer is clear: "*There wasn't any money to make it happen, but what made the real difference was that everyone was right behind it*", she says. Deborah Absolam, the Director of Children's Services in Bexley is more sanguine – stressing that the project is still in its early stages, but says she is optimistic.

7 *N Johnson, Every Child Matters: how can headteachers lead change,* Bexley Local Authority (2006)

Such examples of professionally-led reform hold some important lessons if *Every Child Matters* is to become more than an inspiring vision. Two areas stand out.

First, there needs to be a rebalancing of the relationship between local and central government. If 'local professionalism' is to take root on a national scale, then it needs structures and relationships which will support that. Demos research in 2005[8] identified one local authority with nineteen different advisors attached to it from central government – each with their own agenda and set of priorities. This kind of onerous and mechanistic performance management leaves very little room for possibilities to emerge at the local level, let alone from professionals themselves. A series of practical steps could be taken:

- The Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) is one example of where a new relationship could take shape – with authorities and central government signing off an agreed set of outcomes (and therefore accountabilities), which would be the product of genuine dialogue between the two.

- Having signed off an outcome-based CYPP, Local Authorities should be allowed to commission advice and guidance from central government, each other, or the independent sector, rather than being inundated with advisors from above. These measures would be important in creating the space for dialogue with professional and young people, rather than compliance with Whitehall.

- More generally, the government should take steps to support a free flow of people and information between central and local government. Michael Bichard has argued that creating a unified public service would help achieve this; forging[9] career paths that integrate local and central government would certainly be a significant step forward. This would ensure that policymakers in central government have a clearer understanding not just of the direction that services need to go in, but also of the kind of processes that are likely to enlist rather – rather than alienate – professionals in that.

Second, to translate a more localised approach into genuine 'local professionalism', authorities themselves need to take steps to move beyond managerialism:

- The insights and motivations of professionals, from teachers to social workers, need to be put at the heart of planning processes. Just as central and local government need to establish a much greater degree of dialogue, so too do professionals need to be drawn into the conversation with managers and, of

8 H Lownsbrough, D O'Leary: *The Leadership Imperative: Reforming children's services from the ground up,* Demos (2005)

9 M Bichard, 'The Profession of Public Service', *Production Values: Futures for Professionalism,* Demos (2006)

course, young people. Bexley started this process in 2005 through a series of workshops designed to shape its CYPP, and it has continued it through the MAISI project. Inevitably, 'local professionalism' will vary from area to area, but its core principles of dialogue and partnership should remain consistent.

- To support this process, new forms of training should be experimented with which equip professionals to take on a more strategic role in their local areas. Again, there are lessons to be learned from practical experiments that are already taking place: Bexley is developing new qualifications, which are designed to reflect the wider set of skills that professionals in the area will need to draw upon in the future.

- Similarly, the National College for School Leadership has been experimenting with new training and qualifications, which aim to provide emerging leaders of integrated centres with the opportunity to create an ethos of community partnership working.[10] Building a greater degree of mutual understanding amongst different professional groupings would help prepare professionals to be part of a richer set of conversations about the future of *all* services in their area.

None of this should be interpreted as criticism of the *Every Child Matters* reforms. Rather, it is an argument that a bold and widely shared vision will not be realised without reappraising how that vision can be translated into practice.

The political race is on for the support of public service professionals. Recent surveys show that traditional political alignments are beginning to blur[11], with the Conservative leader promising a new partnership with professionals. However, what is at stake in the coming years is more than a political realignment.

The convergence of practical innovation, a growing research base, and the potential for political consensus presents an opportunity to reshape children's services for a generation. Profound social change can be a frustratingly slow process. But if government can find new ways of working in partnership with professionals and young people themselves, this time it might just be possible.

10 For details of the National Qualification for Integrated Centre Leadership see http://www.ncsl.org.uk/programmes/npqicl/index.cfm?CFID=1528735&CFTOKEN=74551782

11 MORI, *Disaffected Labour,* MORI (2005)

No Child Left Behind: Making it a Reality

By Margaret Lochrie

The case for eradicating child poverty concerns issues of human rights and child citizenship, even the very nature of what constitutes a good society.

The government has set demanding targets for the progressive reduction of poverty and its elimination by 2020. Launching the Child Poverty Review in 2004, the Chancellor's vision rested on just four words – no child left behind.

One of the first commitments of New Labour was to ensure that education should be a front-line weapon against poverty and disadvantage. This commitment has been backed by additional funding for schools, Education Action Zones, Education Maintenance Allowances, free nursery education and Sure Start.

Nearly ten years on, as a result of increases in tax credits and benefits paid to poorer families, child poverty in the UK has been arrested and is falling slowly. But it is still higher than it was a generation ago and it is widely predicted that the government's poverty targets will not be met. More than 3 million children in the UK live in poverty, because their parents are not in work or are low-paid. Poverty impacts on health, well-being, parenting and family and community relationships. Many children are still left a long way behind, their development compromised even before they reach their second birthday.[1]

Sure Start programmes have formed the cornerstone of the government's drive to tackle child poverty and social exclusion but, in May, the Prime Minister acknowledged that the neediest families continued to be 'shut-out' of the mainstream.[2]

Among the neediest children are those in care. Only about 6 per cent can expect to achieve the five GCSEs at grades A* to C which would provide them with access to further education. This compares with 56 per cent for all other children.[3]

Child poverty is not inevitable. Its dramatic growth in the UK, doubling in the period from 1979 to the 1990's, though paralled in the US, was not part of a more global trend among richer nations. In other European countries, higher spending and

1 L. Feinstein, 'Inequality in the early cognitive development of British Children in the 1970 cohort', Economica, 2003
2 See Guardian, May 16, 2006
3 Barnardos, 'Failed By the System: the views of young care leavers on their educational experiences', 2006

progressive taxation may have provided protection against higher levels of poverty. In UK, experts believe that, to meet its targets, the government will need to extend significantly its policy of increasing redistribution to low-income families.

However, as studies published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation show, increased spending alone is unlikely to be sufficient to end the cycle of low aspiration, under-achievement, leading to unemployment or low pay which characterises the life chances of so many children.[4]

It could hardly be considered wrong for an incoming Labour government to redistribute education spending towards those in most in need. This, after all, was the reasonable expectation of those who had voted for change in 1997. And in neighbourhoods up and down the country, new school buildings, additional teachers and children's centres are tangible evidence of regeneration and growth.

The weakness in Labour policies was in failing to build, outside its own heartlands, a wider awareness of the causes and consequences of poverty and from this, a democratic consensus to tackle and eliminate it.

Poverty affects every one of us in this country, whether directly, as a lived experience, or indirectly, through exposure to crime, social injustice or the discomfort of a divided society. Media events like *Live 8* and *Children in Need* demonstrate that, as a nation, we are capable of short bursts of shared emotional intensity about the need to 'make a difference', but many people are remote from the lives of others, often blaming those who are poor for the problem.

Every Child Matters is a national change programme for children's services, affecting the way in which children will in future experience schools, health and welfare services and the criminal justice system. Its main beneficiaries are intended to be children in care, vulnerable children, those at risk of under-achievement or ill health, teenage parents – all those likely to be experiencing, disproportionately, the side-effects of disadvantage.

Yet the various plans and strategies which underpin *Every Child Matters* are plainly diffident about giving poverty its name. A search of the Extended Schools Prospectus finds poverty mentioned only twice[5], while within the 94 page Ten Year Action Plan published by DfES for the national childcare strategy, the word poverty appears only a handful of times.[6]

4 D. Hirsch, 'What will it take to end Child poverty? Firing on all cylinders', Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2006

5 DfES, 'Extended Schools: Access to opportunities and services for all - a prospectus', DfES, 2005

6 DfES, 'Choice for parents, the best start for children: making it happen', DfES, 2006

New Labour, in its need to capture the centre right of politics and to lay to rest its image as the party of high taxation and spending, is guilty of obscuring the urgency of its overriding policy aim. Children are failed, sometimes by their parents, or by the institutions of society. According to the NSPCC, every week, at least one child dies as a result of an adult's cruelty and each week, 600 children are added to the child protection register.[7] Among children aged 5 – 16, 10% suffer from an emotional disorder; this rises to 20% in families where no-one is working.[8] While not all of these events can be directly linked to income poverty, until and unless we face up to the fact that the experience of childhood is inextricably linked to structural disadvantage, children will continue to be left behind.

Child poverty could provide the catalyst for a resurgence of national identity – around issues of social justice and solidarity – and a commitment by the whole community to improving the life chances of all children. Until now, however, it has been left largely to charities and pressure groups to invoke that commitment.

The children's workforce

Just as government could lead on wider popular education and awareness, it might also want to consider some specific implications for all of those who work with children and families.

Currently, the proposed occupational standards for the reformed children's workforce are silent about poverty. Yet many of those working in schools, nurseries and other services may have little personal experience of poverty and of its impact on family life. At a practical level this can create all kinds of misunderstandings, for example, that parents with no credit on their phones are unlikely to return calls or about the ways in which a child's accumulated and sometimes conflicting experiences of home, school and social networks are affected by poverty and exclusion.

If the neediest children are not to be 'shut out' from the mainstream, then self-evidently, those working with families need a well-developed understanding of poverty dynamics. In the same way that now almost mandatory equal opportunities training rightly requires teachers and others to reflect on their own internalised representations of race and culture, poverty awareness training might encourage reflection on the barriers presented by institutions and understanding of the perspectives held by children and parents themselves.

7 NSPCC website www.nspcc.org.uk/inform, 2004

8 H. Green et al, 'The Mental health of children and young people in Great Britain, 2004@ Office of National Statistics 2005

Achieving economic well-being

Another gap in policy has been in not taking sufficient action to remove the barriers which deter or prevent parents from moving into employment. Children are only poor because of the poverty of their families and severe and persistent poverty is caused, in the main, by worklessness.

The investment in the national childcare strategy – in particular the creation of childcare places in the most disadvantaged areas – has been an important first step. Higher rates of employment among lone parents represent a significant success for public policy, which could not have occurred without affordable and available childcare.

But in some neighbourhoods, childcare places are unoccupied or are not accessed by the poorest families. Sometimes this is because of a preference for informal, family-based childcare arrangements, but a further reason is that these are, typically, the same areas where perhaps more than 50% of the adult population lack qualifications.

The *Every Child Matters* framework is built around 5 aims for children – to be healthy, safe, to enjoy and achieve, to make a positive contribution and to have economic well-being. Of all of these, strategy is least well-developed in relation to economic well-being. Lacking this, schools and childcare providers, working with health and family support services, may mitigate many aspects of family stress or developmental delay among children but will not significantly affect the main root cause.

Family learning, which has a convincing record in terms of further progression and as a tool for regeneration and social inclusion, features in a wide range of disparate policy initiatives connected to parenting, health, basic skills and neighbourhood renewal, but lacks an overall vision or strategy, which is focused on families, particularly those most affected by poverty.

The policy framework for improving adult literacy, language and numeracy skills is set out in the government's *Skills for Life: the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills*. Twenty-six million people of working age are thought to have levels of literacy and numeracy below those expected of school leavers.[9]

Parents with poor skills form one of the target groups, and lone parents are a key target group among benefit claimants. Around a third of lone parents with children aged between 6 and 15 are thought to have poor literacy skills and almost 40 per cent have poor numeracy skills.

However, many adults who are severely disadvantaged in the employment market receive no benefit from *Skills for Life* programmes, sometimes because they don't know about them, or don't have the confidence to enrol, but, more strategically, because of the concentration of further education spending on younger learners at the expense of those over 19 and because programmes are often working at levels of literacy and numeracy well above those most in need. In December last year, the Head of the Adult learning Inspectorate criticised *Skills for Life* for failing to meet the needs of the most acutely disadvantaged adults it was designed to help.[10]

In Tower Hamlets, the fourth most deprived local authority in England, unemployment rates are among the highest, not just for London, but for England and Wales as a whole. Within the borough, nearly 60% of children live in poverty and among the Bangladeshi and black minority ethnic community, poverty is disproportionately higher.

In this context, the issue is not about whether more childcare places are needed; rather it is about how parents can be supported to train for and find work, which in turn would stimulate demand for and use of childcare.

Universal services, particularly early years and childcare settings, have ready access to parents and many can offer an accessible base for learning and other training opportunities and to support parents in the transition to work. This should and could be part of their core offer.

Spending on education is currently focused on futurity, priorities within FE being largely directed towards 14 –19 year olds. But families affected by poverty have to have priority for resources in the here and now, if children are to be supported to have economic well-being. As a starting point they need access to training which is free and/or supported by bursaries and access to childcare in order to study.

9 National Audit Office, 'Skills for life: Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy, National Audit Oddice/DfES 2004

10 Adult learning Inspectorate annual report and accounts 2005 – 06, The Stationery Ofice 2006

An agenda for mutual self-help

A further gap in policy is the extent to which families affected by poverty are enabled to have a voice and role of their own. While, increasingly, Children and Young People's Strategic plans incorporate consultations with children, services continue to be, for the most part, professionally led.

But, in increasingly complex societies, social exclusion becomes resistant to simple solutions or standardised services and here the model of social enterprise can give significant support to identify and address the different and new needs of communities and of individuals most at risk. They can also make a contribution to social capital by developing solidarity, mutual help and the engagement of people in tackling social problems.

Social enterprise mirrors, in a modern context, some of the reforming movements of the early 20th century, like the co-operative movement, the Workers Educational Association (WEA) and the Trades Unions.

Social exclusion is, almost by definition, a state of being in which those affected are not heard. In the past organisations like trades unions and the WEA provided opportunities for people to find identity and purpose and to enter rewarding relationships with others in pursuit of shared economic and educational aims. Those same organisations also provided social opportunities and an introduction and training in democratic participation and organisations. This is perhaps why so many of those involved went on to utilise these skills in political life.

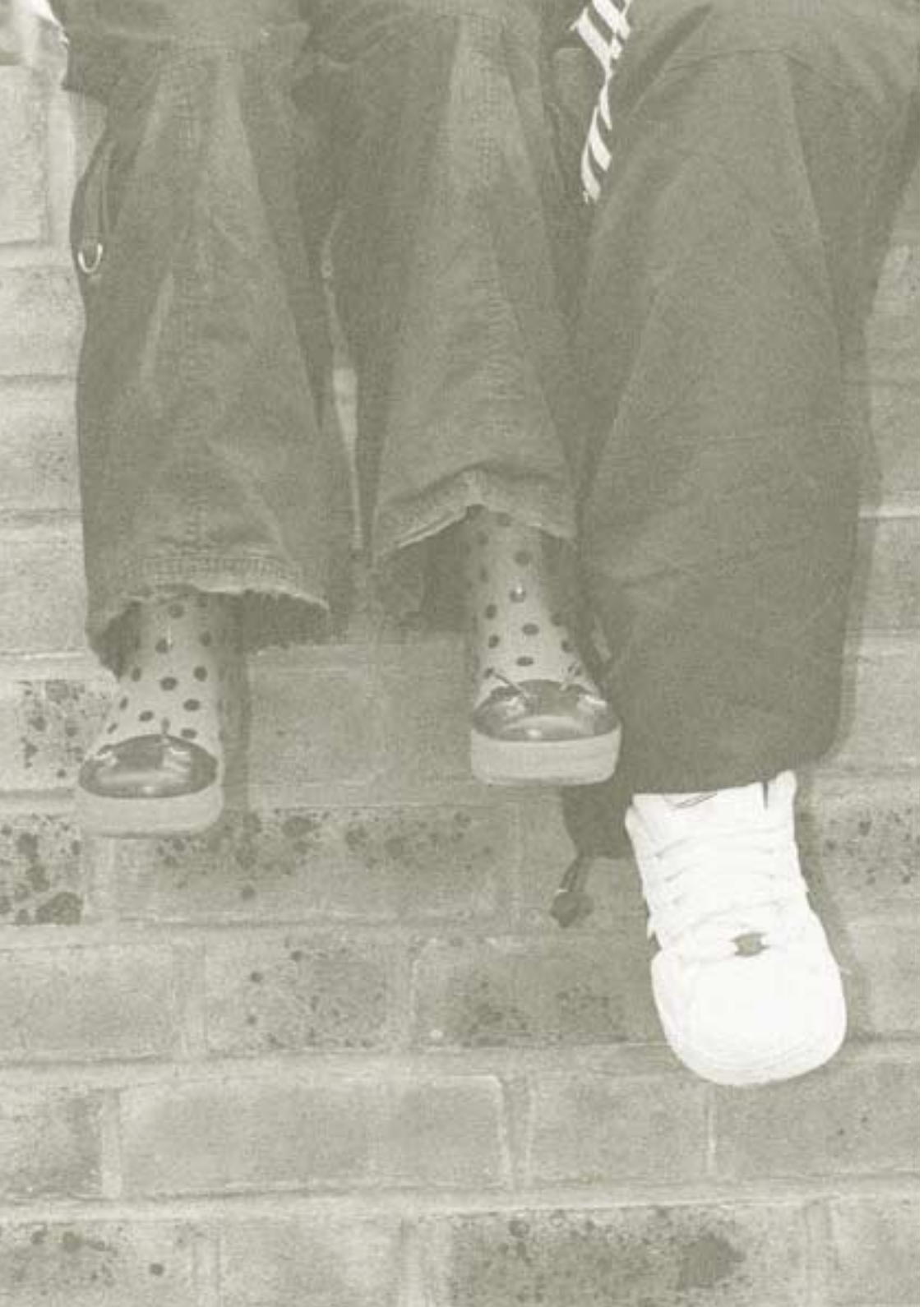
Despite the rapid and substantial growth of the voluntary sector, in the UK and its significance as an economic force, it would be more difficult for a WEA to be formed today. Larger voluntary organisations have found themselves under pressure to adopt a more managerial style, at odds with grass-roots democracy, or to focus on relatively narrow funding priorities.

But the characteristics of those reforming organisations can be found today in a variety of local voluntary and community groups and in social enterprise and small co-operatives, up and down the country, both addressing the needs of and providing a voice for those most affected by poverty.

This was expressed by Tony Blair[11] when he suggested that public services must make greater use of voluntary groups' expertise or risk becoming irrelevant in modern society, but, paradoxically, many of those voluntary groups are feeling a chill wind of unease in the face of the growing state sector.

Education is part a span of policies which link state and family in the service of children and may be the key factor in combating poverty and fostering inclusion. In reality, inclusion is built on a stable and enduring social consensus and universal services, visible to all, owned by all and available as a right when needed. Where those services provide a voice and agency to those most disenfranchised, change becomes possible.

11 Prime Minister's speech to Three Sector Summit 22nd June 2006



Children's Centres – Unlocking the Potential for Families

By Gill Haynes

Widespread acceptance and enthusiasm for the *Every Child Matters* agenda and its five outcomes for children, across the whole of the children's services sector, must count as one of the most significant successes of this Labour government. Throughout England, there are many inspiring examples of people and services going more than the extra mile to make the challenging structures and processes of Children's Trusts, shared budgets, common assessment frameworks, information sharing indices et al, work for their communities.

Alongside the policy makers and development advisers, thousands of childcare workers in private, voluntary and independent settings have also reached out to embrace the new agenda. But alongside this acceptance and enthusiasm, there are also some significant question marks – in particular around the respective roles and responsibilities of parents and children's centres in helping to achieve the *Every Child Matters* outcomes.

The latest guidance for Children's Centres – the government's flagship initiative which builds on the positive work of local *Sure Start* programmes – has a lot to say about parents' views of services and their involvement in the management of children's centres. But it is difficult to see what messages parents, particularly mothers, are being asked to take from the *Every Child Matters* agenda when it comes to 'achieving economic well-being' for their children, especially if they are poor, living in one of the many disadvantaged parts of the country and bringing up children on their own.

This is important because, despite the investment and attention given to the problem since 1997, breaking the cycle of deprivation in the most disadvantaged communities remains the central concern of government – as demonstrated by the focus of the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review and the recent report on social exclusion.[1]

So what is the message for today's mothers, particularly in disadvantaged communities, when they have babies and young children? Should they go out to work or not? What is the best way of achieving economic well-being for their families? And does economic well-being come at a cost?

1 Cabinet Office (2006) *Reaching Out: An Action Plan on Social Exclusion*

In seeking to address this question, people working in the sector are in the same dilemma as parents. For, depending on which minister and which government department is speaking, there can appear to be very different answers.

On one hand, the extension of maternity pay and rights through the Work and Families Act (2006) sends a clear message to mothers that staying with your baby for the first year of its life is a good thing. 'Home is best' could also be a shorthand interpretation of the research in this area which firmly states that 'at-home good parenting' has a significant positive effect on children's achievement and adjustment over and above the impact even of 'good quality' childcare.

On the other hand, the creation of 3,500 children's centres by 2010, with full day care as a core offer in disadvantaged areas and extended services for children from two upwards, backed by a tax credit system which provides support for childcare costs, gives the very strong impression that government wants mothers (particularly lone mothers) to be in work. And of course, the government's message strongly and enthusiastically conveyed through the Sure Start Unit was always that 'work' is the best way out of poverty for families and children.

On a personal level I have no problem with this assertion. My own childhood experience, caused through the premature death of my father and the subsequent history of my mother's return to work in the 1950s, means that I understand very well how poverty can be alleviated through work. But what concerns me today, fifty years later , is that there remains such a widespread lack of understanding at a policy level about the personal challenges involved in balancing work and parenting, particularly when 'work' is low paid and low-skilled and when the 'parenting' has to be done on your own. Without that understanding, it is difficult to see how the appropriate solutions can be put in place.

Most mothers who have spent more than 6 months away from full-time work in the sole company of a baby or toddler know just how difficult it is to summon up the confidence to return to work, even if they have held a reasonably well-paid job after successfully navigating the education system.

Imagine then, the experience of thousands of women who have been described as failures throughout their school lives. When these mothers think about going back to work or starting work for the first time, the additional help and support that they need is much more significant than current thinking allows.

It is true that under the Labour Government there have been pilot projects and demonstration schemes to encourage mothers in disadvantaged areas back to work and there have been some very successful initiatives, like the Wishes Project in Thurrock. But even though there is a body of evidence about what works, the structural changes which should have driven radical reform have not been delivered. Successful 'joining up' at local level continues to happen through the individual efforts of dedicated people.

The impact on women's lives of being branded as a failure at school became evident to me when I undertook a research study[2] on the wider benefits of learning with a group of registered childminders who had successfully completed a Level 3 qualification. Over 70% of the group had no qualifications or level 1 qualifications at the start of the course.

Two comments illustrate just how far reaching the effects of low achievement in compulsory education can be:

"*The benefits of learning in this way have given me the opportunity to prove myself after very poor results at school, that it wasn't me that was unable to learn or that I was stupid, but that no-one had bothered to find the right way for me to learn*."

"*I would strongly recommend (people) take the course. It made me feel good about myself, especially the fact that I achieved this level of qualification. My parents divorced when I was 12 and this had a detrimental effect on my schoolwork resulting in only 2 'O' levels and leaving school at 16. So it has been good for me*."

These comments relate to a taught qualification of some 140 hours undertaken in the childminders' own time in the evenings or at weekends, over a period of about two years. The training was usually part-funded by the local authority; and for most of the women it was important that the training was close to home, could be fitted in with their lives and was run in an informal way.

As well as the tangible results of the training – a qualification at Level 3 on the National Qualifications Framework, opening up opportunities throughout the childcare workforce – the students also recorded their experiences in ways which illustrate what Schuller calls 'the wider benefits of learning'[3]. Schuller proposes a two-dimensional model to illustrate the effects of learning. One dimension represents the effects on individuals; the second dimension distinguishes learning that brings

2 G Haynes, '*Realising Potential*'. University of Sheffield
3 Schuller, T., Bassett-Grundy, A., Green, A., Hammond, C. and Preston, J. (2002) *Learning, Continuity and Change in Adult Life*, London: Institute of Education

about transformation to people's lives from learning that enables individuals and communities to *sustain* what they are doing. It is this sustaining effect that Schuller considers to be one of the most important benefits of learning, which he believes 'has gone largely unrecognised partly through the difficulty of measurement'.

Women who had the opportunity to take part in accredited childminding training recorded a wide range of benefits, which, viewed against this model, demonstrated not only personal benefits in terms of confidence and self-esteem, but outcomes which contributed to the social fabric of the community as a whole.

They said that, as a result of engaging in this learning, they recognised that they provided much stronger role models for their children.

They also said that their experience meant that they were able to support their children's learning more effectively, either directly or through greater involvement in their children's schools.

Over 80% of the women also recorded 'improved psychological health' as a major benefit of learning. From comparing research on the wider benefits of learning for 16-19 year old students, conducted through a survey of FE college lecturers[4], it is clear that improved psychological health is a much more significant outcome of engaging in training and education for women returners than for their younger peers.

These findings are important for children's centres when it comes to the issue of how to support women; particularly lone mothers who want to take responsibility for the 'economic well-being' of their children, but whose own low self-esteem makes it difficult to take the first steps.

The current consultation from the DfES on the Performance Management Framework and Performance Indicators for Children's Centres, asks for feedback about how one of their key aims: i.e. 'to support emotional well-being' could be measured.

One way would be to embed adult learning opportunities in the children's centre offer, not just as a set of words, but as a requirement for continued funding, linked to a further requirement for on-going dialogue and support from local adult education providers and funding from the Learning and Skills Council.

Measurement of 'psychological health' both before and following access to adult education opportunities would provide the evidence that government needs to justify investment; more importantly, mothers with low or no qualifications would be able to develop the confidence and self-esteem they need as a spring board to combining being a good parent with the demands of a working life.

This offer would need to be backed up by free crèche and childcare support during the training programmes and a period of free childcare during at least the first year of their return to work. The current 80-85% cap on childcare costs needs to go.

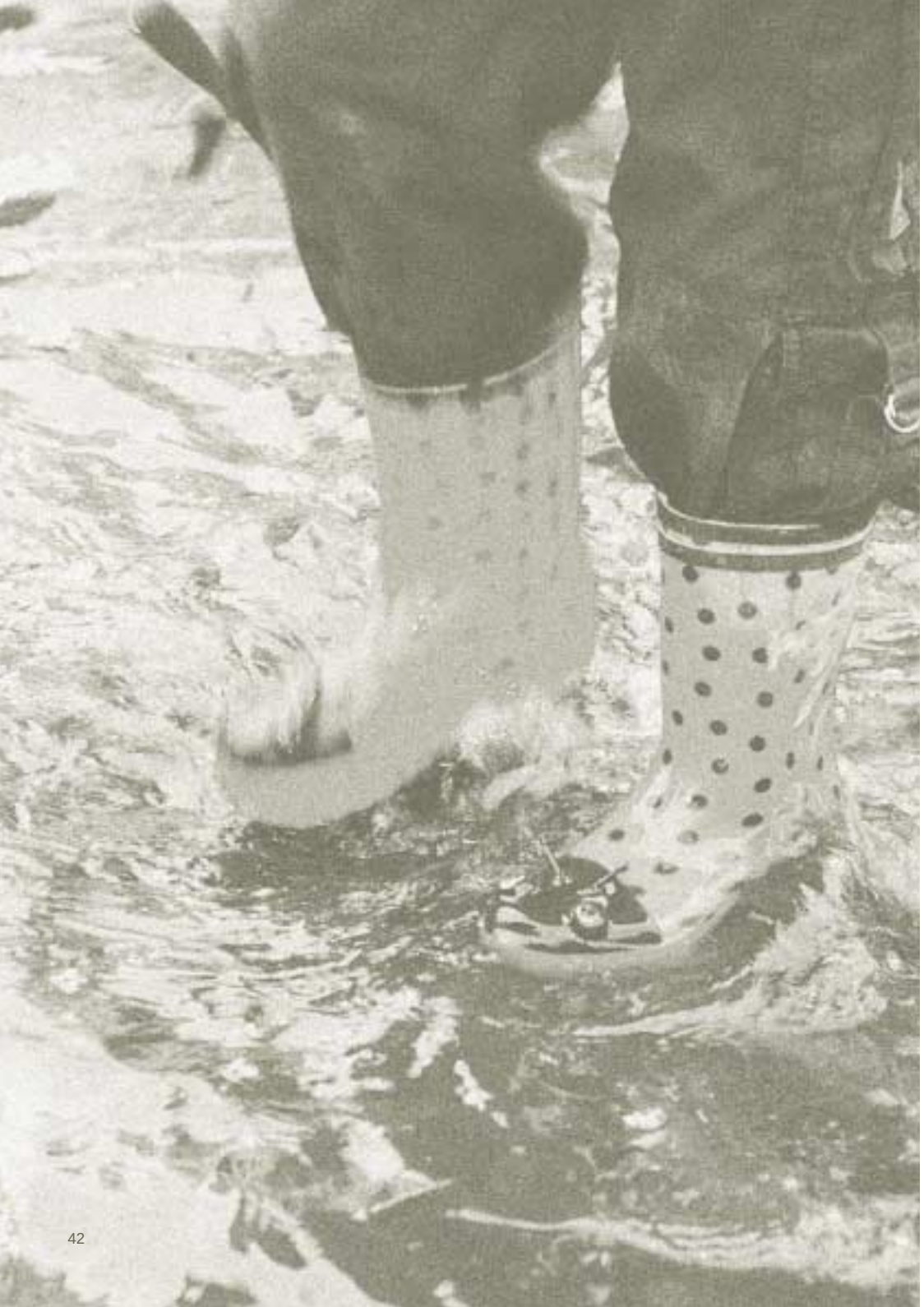
Children's centres could and should be the opportunity of our lifetime to deliver what Brian Jackson[5] described nearly 30 years ago as:

"*A wholly articulated system which organically links the community and its needs with the professionals and institutions it funds*"

Helping parents, and through them their children, to achieve 'economic well-being' should be one of the key messages which parents receive from government when they hear about Children's Centres. Providing the political leadership at national level to get those institutions and people really working together should be the first priority of the next Comprehensive Spending Review and of the next phase of the *Every Child Matters* agenda.

4 Preston, J. and Hammond, C. (2002) *The Wider Benefits of Further Education: Practitioner Views*: Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning

5 Jackson,B and Jackson,S. (1979) *Childminder; A Study in Action Research*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul



Co-operation, Co-operatives and Learning

By Mervyn Wilson

Co-operation and education are inextricably linked. Education is one of the globally recognised co-operative principles. Co-operative education was the precursor of the birth of the co-operative movement in the U.K and – combined with experiential adult learning – led to the development of some of the most successful co-operative enterprises of the 20th century.

It can be argued that achievement of the present Government's education agenda to raise standards is dependent in part on the successful application of co-operative values and processes. These include using co-operative learning to develop, effectively, the interpersonal and team-working skills which are needed in a modern knowledge-driven society linked to new and more diverse forms of governance based on co-operative models.

Internationally, there is a wealth of experience of co-operative engagement with the formal education sector – ranging from provision of services via school co-operatives to curriculum input, to schools constituted and governed as co-operatives.

Can this experience now be used to provide an opportunity to place co-operation and co-operative learning more centrally in the education system?

Co-operative education and the birth of the Co-operative movement

The roots of co-operation are deep and wide-ranging. They are probably best summed up in the introduction to *Consumers' Co-operation in Great Britain*, a publication by a distinguished group of academics in the late 1930s. It stated:

"*The co-operative ideal is as old human society. It is the idea of conflict and competition as a principle of economic progress that is new. The development of the idea of co-operation in the 19th century can best be understood as an attempt to make explicit a principle which is inherent in the constitution of society, but which had been forgotten in the turmoil and disintegration of rapid economic change*".

The process of industrialisation and economic change brought about new forms of exploitation. Working people sought new solutions to address these injustices, solutions based on traditional co-operative ways of working. Their answer was self-

help – by working together they could resolve issues not at the expense of each other, as expected in the new emerging capitalist system, but for the mutual benefit of each other.[1]

The characteristic which differentiated the co-operative model from other responses to the impact of economic change was an understanding of self-responsibility. Many saw change as coming through political reform – such as the Charter – but early co-operators felt that the solutions were in their own hands. They took upon themselves the responsibility to set up new organisations. Self-responsibility became a core co-operative value.

To enable active engagement and participation, democracy, based on one person one vote, became their mode of operation. Equality was essential for effective democracy. Equality meant that all members, irrespective of gender, religious or political beliefs, had an equal say – remarkably radical at that time.

The pioneers added other concepts which have underpinned co-operatives ever since – equity, fairness in financial transactions and solidarity, helping spread co-operation and to build a movement. To these underpinning values other ethical values emerged – honesty in trading, transparency, social responsibility and concern for the community. These values were developed by incorporation into early rules.

The process that led to the creation of many successful co-operatives was educational, discussing and developing these ideas and translating them into working practices. Co-operators studied the works of Robert Owen and his radical ideas for co-operative communities and sending young people to school rather to work in the mills.

Dr William King gathered stories of the emerging co-operative endeavours, publishing *The Co-operator* to help stimulate debate and identify the characteristics that would enable successful co-operative enterprises to emerge. King strongly advocated the study of co-operation and teaching in co-operatives, and the development of co-operative schools.[2]

Co-operative education and 20th Century success

Later examples also demonstrate the critical importance of co-operative education to the birth of successful co-operative enterprises. In the 1930s, Jimmy Tompkins and Moses Coady, adult educators from the Catholic social tradition, started to work with remote fishing communities on the Canadian Atlantic coast. The communities were facing desperate hardship in the midst of the great depression. Tomkins and Coady helped communities explore their needs – the skills they possessed, and the self-help solutions that were possible. The result was an explosion of co-operative activity, known as the Antigonish Movement, which transformed the lives of communities across the region and became a model for others.

A similar pattern was adopted in the Basque Region of Spain in the 1950s, where José Mariaíe Arizmendiarietta, reflected on the growing concerns of unemployment and loss of skills in what had been an industrial area. Through adult education work he convened groups who discussed the skills they possessed and the potential for their communities through self-help solutions.

This led to the creation of numerous co-operative enterprises, combined in the Mondragon Co-operative Corporation, now one of the biggest industrial complexes in Spain; a community of co-operative enterprises. Education remains at its heart, its own co-operative university helping to generate ideas and keep it competitive through innovation.

International Perspective

Despite the scale and diversity of co-operative enterprise globally, it remains largely invisible within the education system in the UK. Early co-operators felt that there was little chance of the mainstream system educating young people in the values and aspirations of co-operation. Instead, they created their own education provision with classes, social recreational and cultural activities for children, for young people and adults.

Co-operative learning methodologies have been deeply embedded within the French education system for many years, supported by an umbrella body, and links with a network of co-operative colleges. In Italy, work supported by the Trentino Federation of Co-operatives established links with schools across the region. From this, a wide range of curriculum materials, including co-operative enterprise activities, were developed for use by schools in the region and subsequently approved by the Italian Ministry of Education as being suitable for use in schools throughout in Italy.

In Sweden, concerns by the consumer co-operative society in Stockholm,, about the need to take co-operatives ideas to a new generation, led to the formation of a new co-operative school, KFS Gymnasium, in a deprived area of the capital city. Its

1 Consumers` Co-operation in Great Britain – An Examination of the British Co-operative Movement – A. M Carr-Saunders, P Sargant Florence, Robert Peers & others – Allen and Unwin 1938

2 Co-operative Learning – the Collection – Co-operative College 1995 ISBN 0 85-195-217.8

learning methods are co-operative, with students learning to work together and to exercise self and social responsibility. With a strong emphasis on the vocational curriculum, including international work placements, the school has developed an outstanding reputation and is now heavily oversubscribed. The Swedish educational reforms which enabled the KFS Gymnasium to develop have also resulted in other new co-operative "friskola" schools – schools that are not state schools but are entitled to the same level of funding per child as state schools.

Vocational concerns also drove the formation of co-operative schools in many parts of Spain. Concern about the loss of skills, and limited career prospects for a new generation led to the formation of co-operative schools, involving parents and their local communities as key stakeholders. Today there are over 750 co-operative schools in Spain, accounting for 15% of all privately managed providers. Using a variety of governance systems, the majority are teacher-led worker co-operatives. Others are multi-stakeholder co-operatives which include parents and the community as well as staff.[3]

In Malaysia, Singapore and elsewhere, school co-operatives are common, providing a range of services, from running the school tuck-shop to the provision of stationery and other student requisites. In rural areas, school co-operatives run allotments and vegetable plots, providing practical experience and agricultural skills. They also provide an opportunity for young people to join and become actively engaged as members of a real co-operative.

In the United States and Canada, student co-operatives fulfil much of the role undertaken by student unions in further and higher education in the UK, but without state funding, offering a range of services through mutual help. Co-operatives also provide support for education employees, with teachers' credit unions being commonplace.

To date, this global wealth of experience on co-operative alternatives to state provision has, as noted, had little impact in the UK, but there are some examples of the introduction of both co-operative governance models and curriculum input.

Co-operative education in the UK

A partnership project between Co-operatives[UK], Co-operatives Solutions and Social Enterprise London, supported by Co-operative Action, has sought to develop excellence in childcare services through the provision of co-operative models.

Models for industrial and provident societies demonstrate the versatility of co-operative forms of governance. Childcare co-operatives have been formed as worker co-operatives, owned and controlled by the employees, user co-operatives, owned and controlled by parents or carers, co-operative consortia, of self-employed childminders or other childcare workers, and multi-stakeholder co-operatives with a mixed membership, including employees, parents, community representatives and representatives from local authorities or children's trusts.

An example of the last is the Milmead Children's Centre Partnership in Kent, which has both community and employee membership of the board.

The Midcounties Co-operative Society, a large regional consumer co-operative society, has also developed childcare services through the Imagine Childcare Co-operative, which now runs nurseries in its trading area.

As the implementation of the Government ten year childcare strategy – *Choice for Parents: The Best Start for Children* – continues, the advantages of co-operative models of provision need to be restated. Such models empower employees and communities and ensure that provision meets their needs, an interesting contrast to other examples of integrated provision.

Another well established co-operative model in the provision of learning is the Robert Owen Learning Academy and its family of co-operatives operating in the England/Wales Borders area from its base in Leominster. It provides initial teacher training and a variety of other projects to a consortium of schools and other educational bodies which form its membership.

Regretfully, changes such as the 2000 Education Act, which anticipated a more diverse range of school provision, have largely resulted in an extension of faith-based schools and not the emergence of a wider range of providers and governance models.

The only serious attempt to form a co-operative school in recent years was at Lowick School in the Lake District. The idea for a community based co-operative came in response to a threatened school closure as a result of falling rolls. Lowick was unsuccessful in its efforts to have a new co-operative model recognised, and, without public funding it was forced to close after a year of operating as an independent co-operative school.

3 Co-operation and Learning – Mervyn Wilson and Mick Taylor CFBT/Mutuo 2003 ISBN 0-88 160-013-4

It now seems clear that simply changing the model for a school facing closure is unlikely to succeed, but there is growing interest in the potential for co-operative clusters, particularly in rural areas. This may well be a template for the future – enabling small schools to benefit from shared services, including a single governance and management structure.

Greater progress has been made in getting co-operation into the curriculum. Many co-operatives established links with schools and local education business partnerships from the mid-1980s onwards, using a variety of education/industry initiatives. Activities such as co-operative models of enterprise and co-operative approaches to learning were introduced, the latter drawing on the experience of the Woodcraft Folk, the co-operative children's organisation. Many of the activities which appeared radical in the 1980s are now firmly established as good practice within the primary sector. Most primary schools for example now have a play canopy (parachute) and use co-operative games and circle time routinely.

Co-operative businesses have engaged in work placements, management secondments and work shadowing and supported literacy schemes through the Excellence in Cities programme.

Perhaps the most radical initiative to date is the lead taken by the Co-operative Group in sponsoring a network of secondary schools specialising in business and enterprise. This initiative is, in turn, supported by a project to introduce co-operation across the curriculum, using the global co-operative movement as a learning resource. The project has provided a unique opportunity to embed co-operative values across the whole school and build links with schools working with co-operatives in Europe and beyond.

The results have been impressive. Andrew Marvell Business and Enterprise College in Hull raised the percentage of pupils achieving five or more A* – C GCSE grades from 30% to 66% in the two years following designation. Sir Thomas Boughey, Co-operative Business and Enterprise College in Staffordshire improved its results from 46% to 74% and St Benet Biscop Catholic High School in Northumberland lifted its results 23% from 48% to 71% between 2004 and 2006.

The Head Teachers of the schools are all clear on the significance of the co-operative ethos and co-operative links to the progress made. Dave McCready, Head Teacher at Andrew Marvell Business and Enterprise College said:

"*The dramatic rise in examination results is due to a number of factors but the impact of specialist status coupled with the collaborative partnership developed through the Co-op network cannot be understated*."

Dave Boston, Head Teacher of Sir Thomas Boughey Co-operative and Business and Enterprise commented:

"*Most business specialist schools concentrate solely on the plc model and fail to include the co-operative alternative to running a business. We are showing young people that the co-operative way of doing business is very relevant in the 21st century*".

Nick Bowen, Head Teacher of St Bennett Biscop Catholic Business and Enterprise College added:

"*I am absolutely delighted with the huge leap in examination results and very proud of the outstanding achievement of so many students this year. In partnership with the Co-operative Group and working with the Co-op Network of Schools, the school keeps going from strength the strength*."

The underpinning values of co-operators resonate clearly with many educators today.

Perhaps the most significant opportunities lie in the introduction of Trust Schools. Could this be the opportunity to combine co-operative models of governance and long-term links between co-operative organisations and schools?

If so it could address one of the fundamental weaknesses of previous co-operative engagement with the education sector – a reliance on work with either individual teachers, or heads, and the danger that the culture of the school fundamentally changes if either the individual teacher or head moved.

The co-operative movement has not previously been able to establish the deep roots within the education system which derive from the long-term engagement that faith-based schools have managed to achieve. Trust schools could provide a unique opportunity to address this, and securing one of the pathfinder projects could be a major step forward.[4]

4 Organic Learning, Mutual Enterprise and the Learning and Skills Agenda – Stephen Yeo NIACE 2000 ISBN 1 86 201 1060

The Government remains committed to its objective of further public sector reform, including further reforms to the education sector. In this context there is clearly scope for a significant extension to co-operative provision in education. The challenge now is to combine the experience of co-operative models in the governance and running of schools, drawing on the rich vein of international experience, the experience of developing co-operative approaches to the curriculum, and using the global movement as a learning resource.

Combining these aspects could not only provide an opportunity to disseminate experience, to mainstream good practice and provide a working model of co-operative education that can help raise achievement, but also introduce practical democratic citizenship skills in schools. This would mean putting values into practice by combining learning about, through, and for co-operation – co-operative learning for the twenty first century.[5]

5 Co-operative Learning and Responsible Citizenship in the 21st Century – Various Co-operative College 2003 ISBN 0 85195 295 X

Hope for Children and their Families

By Sheenagh Davis

HOPE – Holistic Opportunities for Play and Education – recently opened its new purpose-built building in Bromyard in Herefordshire. ITV news reader Wesley Smith symbolically cut the ribbon in a ceremony which also marked HOPE's new status as the first charitable, independently-run, children's centre in the county.

The new centre is a far cry from our previous temporary building. HOPE was started in 1999 in an old youth club, by two parents, as a social meeting place, just once a week, for new families moving into the area and for existing families feeling isolated by lack of transport and money. When those parents decided they wanted to do more than just meet for coffee, the local college was invited to run a course on the importance of play. From there, HOPE was created as a family centre, for a time using an old demountable building and a set of rooms in an adjacent garage.

Bromyard is an area of deprivation in rural Herefordshire, characterised by poverty, drug abuse and unemployment. It was hit very hard by the foot and mouth outbreak and consequently, much of the agricultural work, which provided a way of life for many families, has been eroded. It is a tightly knit community, but a number of families re-housed in the area have brought with them heroin usage and links with dealers.

HOPE also works with both traditional Traveller families, who have their roots in the area, and also with newer Travellers who have settled and made their home in Bromyard and the surrounding area.

The heart of the charity has always been to provide for families using a flexible and holistic approach of quality childcare alongside individual family support and adult training. Many families hear about us by word-of-mouth; others are referred by health visitors and other services.

Family support to strengthen the community

Family support is intentionally framed very widely: from a friendly face for those living in isolation, help with transport issues, parenting skills for families with children with challenging behaviour, signposting to other professionals and services, and sustaining parents into employment, to some of the more extreme issues of drug, alcohol and abuse. Low incomes and expectations and rural isolation are underlying reasons for many of the concerns we see in the family life.

The aim of the playgroup is to encourage independence, build self-esteem and develop resilience. With just 16 children at any time, high adult–child ratios mean children can be given a great deal of individual attention. This obviously has cost implications for the charity and we constantly have to source extra funding to subsidise childcare places.

In the playgroup the children are given small, easily achievable activities which help to increase their confidence and encourage their commitment to completing tasks which, in turn, builds growing confidence. There is a particular focus on using play to develop children's creativity and imagination and we try to use the outside environment as much as possible.

In these respects, the playgroup is like many other high-quality childcare settings; the difference rests in the depth of the problems which some children face and in the need for complete flexibility in the numbers of sessions that they attend. The playgroup provides a calm haven for children from some very difficult backgrounds. There are occasions when children who are expected for a session fail to turn up and if we know that there is a particular problem, we will go out to their homes to see if we can help.

The family group session on a Wednesday morning, which the health visitor attends, has always been held as a social group. The group provides an opportunity for a relaxed and friendly atmosphere in which parents can talk with each other. One group member comments, "*There are no hard and fast rules on a Wednesday morning about what the children do, therefore they relax and then you can relax and enjoy it*."

Adult classes do take up a lot of time with many parents needing an enormous amount of support, both initially, and over the long term. Baby Massage, Parenting Classes, Raising Self-Esteem, IT, Children's Language, Driving Awareness, Healthy Living and Sewing courses are all part of what parents want. By responding with a wide variety of classes to suit all ages, abilities and economic backgrounds, we help to break down age and social barriers within the community.

The parent's interest often starts with a visit to the home from the Family Support Worker, who takes time to build a relationship. We then gradually ease a parent into a short course. Sometimes this will be for a couple of hours once a week for just a few weeks. Unfortunately the funding is often based around a minimum of 10 adults and 20 hours and this can be a huge barrier to joining a group, as parents often lack the confidence to join a large group or the commitment to attend for more than two weeks at a time.

Without childcare, parents would not be able to engage in any of these classes and activities, and childcare is invariably what encourages parents to attend, as they see it as a few hours away from their children. As one parent said, "*the classes give a bit of time for me*."

However, lack of childcare, as the following two short case studies illustrate, is only one of a number of complex barriers to learning, faced by parents. It is our constantly developing understanding of those barriers which has shaped HOPE's approach and way of working. The names have been change to protect identity.

Jo

Jo is intelligent and wants more from life than a cleaning job. Her two children are bright, although her daughter is a handful and needs lots of attention and constant stimulation. Her 16 month old son is already walking and has lots to say. In this respect she could be any parent.

But Jo spent a childhood in fear of her father, who eventually served a prison sentence for abusing her. Her mother, step-mother and social services all failed to protect her. She turned to alcohol as a teenager and got pregnant. Later, the father of her child went to prison where he committed suicide.

Encouraged by a youth worker, Jo wanted to go to college, but childcare was difficult and the bus didn't coincide with the college timetable. She started the course but quickly found trying to balance being a single parent with studying and travelling impossible and when she had to give up, felt a failure.

HOPE started to support Jo through a family worker and encouraged her to attend an IT course. She found that she was able to complete the course. HOPE then arranged a part-time job in a local garage for Jo and helped her through her driving theory test, supported an application for a Princes Trust grant for driving lessons, and, saw her through her test. She was flying.

Then came a bitter and cruel blow. Having been through an immensely difficult childhood, she had a brother who she would defend and protect; this loyalty resulted in a prison sentence for Jo. The whole community was shocked, most of all by the way it happened. On a Friday morning she went to court and from there straight to prison, her 4 year-old daughter literally left standing on the pavement with a neighbour, where I found them on Friday afternoon!

During her time in prison, Jo did numerous courses and when she came back to the community she continued with the IT and literacy. Jo then found herself pregnant by a long term, on/off partner. The relationship went through a difficult time. HOPE supported Jo and helped to secure a really nice house so her partner could move in

with the family. Jo is now undertaking a NVQ in cleaning at the HOPE Family Centre with dreams of college when her son is at playgroup full time.

This has taken place over a period of several years and demonstrates the time it takes to work alongside someone. Now Jo is stable and the house has been a major factor in the stability of the relationship. Jo can again focus on her future. The NVQ is part of a commitment by Jo to start a long-term course. By providing a job, HOPE is helping Jo to see the relevance of the NVQ.

Tina

Tina sits, head bowed, with a curtain of hair hiding her face. She is sitting in the self-esteem group but not really taking part; in fact she rarely takes part in anything or is even able to talk to anyone. This is how we first knew Tina at HOPE.

Tina is a very damaged person. Having only just physically survived a traumatic childhood, it has left deep emotional scars. Unable to make attachments with her children, Tina now finds herself facing the possibility of social services – which failed to protect her as a child – now removing her children.

For seven years HOPE has been working with and supporting Tina, encouraging her to take part in social groups, small courses and be part of the Family Centre. She became an integral member of the parent committee and eventually the HOPE staff would joke when a new course came along saying, "*if you need extra numbers put Tina's name down, she'll come*."

With three children, Tina had no idea what she wanted for herself until we did a small taster course on holistic therapies, when she found she was really good at reflexology. She decided to take this up through a college course, had her hair cut and we saw a caring, smiling face.

Today her benefits were stopped, because she didn't travel 14 miles on a bus with her three children to tell the benefit agency she was unable to work. This is the last thing she needs. What Tina needs is time to heal from 27 years of abuse; she needs someone to talk to, she needs a friend and a dream for her future, she needs the reflexology course.

HOPE needs funding so we can provide the course in the community at the Centre where she is welcomed, where she feels comfortable, where childcare can be provided and transport can pick her up when it is raining. Tina will need support for many years to come. She needs to start trusting people and that takes a long time to develop. An isolated baby massage, IT or other course will simply not fix the problem.

Childcare, family support and training opportunities are the building blocks of our work at HOPE, but they are not enough in themselves to help people to turn their lives around.

The issues faced by parents like Tina and Jo arise, not from an isolated incident or event, but from years of emotional or physical abuse and from the failure of others to intervene to stop that abuse. Therefore a first requirement for us is to have the resources to deliver support over the long-term, with the acknowledgment that progress may only be measurable in small steps.

A second requirement is the acknowledgement that one size cannot fit all. Learning and training opportunities for parents must be built around the needs of individuals and will vary in content, in the hours that the individual parent can give, and in the length of a course, providing opportunities for small achievable steps with links to further education, local business and work experience. For the professionals, this also means being prepared to push back the boundaries of our roles and respond to needs.

In the same way children will need more or less support, shorter or longer times in the playgroup, according to their needs, which will also vary over time. Standard hours militate against this and funding needs to be flexible enough to address individual need.

In a predominantly rural area, transport is a particular difficulty and one of most effective ways of helping parents to develop independence is by helping them to learn to drive. Sadly funding for this is not normally available.

A third requirement is the understanding that provision which is based in the local community, and led by the individual needs and hopes of parents, provides the means of breaking down the barriers of social exclusion. The families who use HOPE come from all backgrounds, but they help each other, creating a community of families.

Until all of these dimensions are thoroughly understood, we at HOPE will continue to spend far too much time on fundraising; time which would be better spent concentrating on families. But we too can measure our progress in terms of small achievable steps.

HOPE is a community of families and professionals. As the latter, we are professional in all that we do, but we are not remote. By being prepared to work side by side with parents and to work widely and creatively to focus on problem-solving and individual needs, change for the better becomes possible.

The Future of Further Education

By George Low

"*I grow old learning something new every day*" wrote the ancient Athenian poet and lawgiver Solon. Deceptively simple, but always memorable, Solon's line sums up the whole philosophy of recurrent education, which should be at the heart of what we all do in further and adult education. While politicians and administrators may target particular age groups for priority programmes – *Sure Start* for the under-fives, vocational training for 14 to 19 year-olds, or basic skills for young workers – there must always be a wider commitment to lifelong learning for the whole community.

Recurrent education has a significance beyond the particular benefits of learning a new skill, or study for pleasure. As research has amply demonstrated, participation in learning yields improvements in health and well-being, family relationships and community cohesion.[1]

Investment in recurrent education is also consistent with the key policy aim of achieving better outcomes for children. Here again research consistently points the way to the importance, for children's achievement, of their own parents' education.[2]

Solon was frequently quoted by Gerry Fowler, one of the brightest stars of the Labour Party in the 1960s. A minister for further and higher education in the Wilson and Callaghan governments, Fowler was responsible for some of the building blocks of recurrent education in this country – the adult literacy programme, grants for mature students, and a coherent system of technical and vocational qualifications.

One day in July 2004 Fowler found himself, unexpectedly, in charge of the office at the Department of Education and Science. He had a grant of £10m to announce for university equipment and buildings. But he saw at once that just a small fraction of this sum could be used to fund the adult literacy programme. He rang up his friend, then chief secretary to the Treasury, and asked permission to divert £1m from the universities for an estimated one million adults with literacy difficulties. It is to this creative action that the current *Skills for Life* initiative owes its origin and present-day existence.

In his constituency at Telford, where he was also leader of the council, Fowler was at the forefront in connecting schools to their local communities through the leisure

1 T. Schuller et al, *Learning, Continuity and Change in Adult Life*, The Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, London 2002

2 L. Feinstein, et al *A model of the inter-generational Transmission of Educational Success*, The Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, London 2004

and library services. Thanks to his pioneering work, Telford is now at the forefront of online teaching and learning.

But there were many in his party and within education, defenders of the 'front-end' model of education, who opposed his ideas. That model, fixed narrowly on the first 20 years of human development, is represented today by those who hold that the quality of education consists, mainly or wholly, in the standards of A to C grades at GCSE and A levels.

But before leaving office, Fowler was able to set up the Advisory Council for Adult and Continuing Education which kept the fires of lifelong learning burning through the early Thatcher years. In the Open University and the new polytechnic universities that Fowler had helped to create, the ideas lived on and flourished, also, in many other countries around the world.

Sadly, the return of Labour government, in 1997, did not bring a revival of recurrent education in the whole meaning of its philosophy and values. New Labour's agenda has much in common with the 'back to basics' philosophy of the Callaghan government, in its pre-occupation with relatively narrow tests of school achievement, but with a market model to update and partially replace the traditional state management and infrastructure located within local authorities.

Now, nearly 10 years on, the chill winds of economic retrenchment are blowing. School-age education and basic skills remain a priority. Further education funding is being focused on the 16 to 19 age group and higher education on the 18 to 24 year olds, with the rest being left to the vagaries of consumer demand and the private purse. Adult education participation rates are dropping – as Alan Tuckett, Director of The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) reminded us in Adult Learners Week this year.[3] The education agenda, as Patrick Diamond reminds us, in scope falls far short of the preconditions for a learning society.

Yet for all the portents of retreat into the shell of the front-end educational model, there are still some hopeful signs for recurrent education enthusiasts to note among contemporary social and economic trends.

The present policy for funding and administering further education is to stimulate specialist, rather than generalist, colleges. But social trends and the results of market research show an increasing demand, among adults and communities, for a broad and general range of subjects and courses. There is, in particular, a growing demand for courses from men and women in their forties and fifties, which is not, currently, being met adequately. Yet Chris Humphries, Chief of the government's Skills Task Force, has forecast that this age group will increasingly need to retrain and re-educate itself in order to accommodate to a changing labour market, over the next 10 to 20 years, in particular, to keep up with changing technologies.

Female employment is at an all-time high and – as it continues to grow – there will be an increasing need for women to refresh and upgrade their skills on returning to work after childbirth or a period away from the workplace, caring for their children. The present growth of family literacy and related courses is surely a pointer to the future but one which many FE colleges have been slow to respond to.

There will be a need for greater flexibility in school and college hours and in the academic year, as the traditional barriers between work and college and between home and school are broken down and as programmes are more closely tailored to the needs and available times for learning of particular individuals and groups. The internet and online learning offer some very promising opportunities for colleges to bring learning to the home and workplace.

Minister of State Andrew Adonis sees the need to create open schools and colleges as one of his most important challenges.

"*I am very struck, when I talk to employers, that the skills at the top of their list are core skills – literacy and numeracy. What almost invariably comes second, though, is what we would traditionally describe as soft skills – creativity, leadership, team building and presentational skills. A big challenge for me is how we can contribute to that*."

One of the first lessons emerging from pilot projects using internet and mobile technology is that schools, colleges and other learning providers can, and should, share the technology. For example, colleges can offer subjects as diverse as Greek language and childcare training, using interactive television and mobile phones. Where, in the past, classes had to be closed because numbers fell below the minimum numbers, students can now be shared, provided the technology and the funding are sufficiently flexible.

Neil Robertson, Head of the Skills for Life Strategy Unit at the Department for Education and Skills, believes the that use of new learning technologies can help the United Kingdom close the skills gap with other advanced industrial countries.

3 The Guardian, May 23rd 2006

"*We have a lot of people telling us we are in the lowest quartile for skills and productivity in Western Europe, that we have challenges from China and elsewhere, and that we are all doomed. I think we recognise this and that technology enables us to do things a bit differently. I am excited by the way it can take learning into different places to make it more personal or more contextual*."

But perhaps the most important and startling impact of the new technologies will be felt in the exams and assessment industry. Lord Adonis sees the use of IT in assessment as playing a very large part of the future in both further education and schools.

"*I think tests and marking will increasingly be online. I am very seized by the flexibility that is now on offer. If we could have more assessments built around the individual, a personalised education system.... that would improve things a lot*."

Advances in assessment technology will also allow more ongoing self-assessment by students and diagnostic testing by teachers. Sport, outdoor activities and even medical examinations can now be monitored and tutored by mobile phones and other advanced interactive technology. Video games and simulation software can make learning fun and creative, where much of the curriculum is now delivered through rote teaching and learning.

There must also be a diminution in the amount of coursework for students and more flexibility in the curriculum to match student aptitudes. Barry Sheerman, Chairman of the House of Commons Select Committee on Education, foresees a hasty retreat from coursework and related assessment.

"*Historically speaking, we thought by introducing more coursework we were looking for more and different talents, rather than just the ability to take exams. We are now retreating on that because ...we did not achieve that goal. If the learning is going to be smart, then the assessment needs to be smart as well*."

There are, however, worries that, although the new technologies can personalise learning and enable the learners to take control of the pace and content, contact and reciprocity between teacher and learner must remain vital.

Arthur Cotterell, former principal of Kingston College and a leading writer on college management, believes that young students still benefit from the relationship with experienced adults, who may not necessarily be teachers but could be lab technicians or even older students.

"*If we are going to have colleges taking in younger students from the schools, then we may have discipline and behaviour problems. Similarly, 16 to 19 year olds..... may lose a lot on the informal learning and relationships side*".

Although the prospects of e-learning and m-learning look promising for bringing learning to all, including those who may have been turned off by their experience of conventional school or college delivery, there are dangers too. The true aim of education, in the spirit of Solon, is to facilitate the desire for learning, but the current insistence on grades and exams, targets imposed on both teachers and learners, may well destroy the spirit of lifelong learning and switch off the learner as soon as the pass grade is achieved. It is not coincidental that, in his native Athens, Solon was also focused on creating a fairer society and increasing civic participation in government. Fast-forward 2,500 years and the potential connection between learning and democracy is as relevant today.

There is also, in the new technologies, the danger of developing an enfeebled culture, in which the critical faculties and creative impulses are sedated and suppressed. As Stephen Uden, the head of public sector programmes at Microsoft, puts it:

"*If we want all kinds of people – young, old and those coming to the world of technology for the first time – to flourish in a knowledge economy, then we need to give them the skills that can enable them to separate the true information from the noise. We must give people the critical analysis skills they need in today's connected world rather than simply enabling them to learn the answer to questions from the syllabus*."

Whatever economic and commercial opportunities and challenges lie ahead for the FE sector, it is in the promotion of lifelong learning and recurrent education as the crucible for the good society that the greatest rewards could be realised. Prison education has already proved its value and needs now to be joined up with the rest of the FE system. Recurrent education has been shown to alleviate many problems connected with family breakdown. Family learning has demonstrated the benefits, not just for today but for the next generation.

Social and ethnic exclusion are, essentially, the consequences of the polarisation of society. Professor John Tomlinson and Helena Kennedy QC have already pointed the way ahead for FE as a unifying force in society. But this can only happen within society-wide respect for, and commitment to, a system of recurrent education based around the goals of individual and social fulfilment.

At the moment, it is true, many of the present policies are pointing in the wrong direction because politicians are using the compass of the front-end model. Fortunately, we still have a powerful pressure-group and advocate in the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education. NIACE has been a store-house of recurrent education ideas and one that has managed to remain free from the too close embrace of central government for the last 30 years. Gerry Fowler recognised this when as Minister he called on NIACE to support him against his flat-earth opponents in government and the civil service. But it will be necessary now to promote those ideas among the younger generation of politicians in order to sow the seeds of a recurrent future. Solon, too, had his enemies, but he managed to leave a lasting legacy – and a democratic one.