

**Children's Centres: the new frontier for the welfare
state and the education system?**

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Engaging with the struggle

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These are exciting times to be working in Children's Centres. Currently we have 800; by 2008 there will be 2500 Children's Centres in the 30% most disadvantaged wards. By 2010 we will have 3500 Children's Centres - one in every community. In 2004 Tony Blair described Children's Centres as the new frontier for the welfare state and the education system. I think that Children's Centres can be much more than that. It seems to me that they are the hope of progressive politics, combining as they do parents' and children's individual choices and aspirations, and families' sense of collective identity and belonging within their communities.

Those of us who work in Children's Centres all want to help families participate in the re-shaping of the shared context in which they live out their individual lives. In Children's Centres we are concerned with big issues and for the first time the Government has invested large amounts of money in early childhood services. I have worked in the early years field for over 30 years in the UK, Brazil, Papua New Guinea and for those 30 years we have had to develop services on a wish and a prayer. Pub crawls on a Friday night became the norm when I first came to work in Corby in the 1980s, rattling a tin for children. At last central government and local authorities are beginning to address the issues of transformation and change for children and families in our poorest communities. Some of us may feel that we are not going far enough, that we may not be working fast enough and that the investment is still insufficient if we are to sustain the important work that is going on, but at least we are going in the right direction.

Even the descriptors for our poorest communities have changed over the last 30 years. When I first started to work with children and families in the UK we talked about education priority areas (EPAs), communities had labels such as 'socially disadvantaged areas', 'low social economic areas'. Now they are called 'Super Output Areas' a term that is somewhat hard to understand, but is less a judgement on the community and more a recognition of the incredible amount of work that still needs to be done if we are to have a more equal society. In Children's Centres staff are working towards equality of opportunity and social justice, they are committed to developing the social capital and cultural capital in areas where families are experiencing poverty, and they are committed to developing Children's Centres as learning communities.

The poorest communities in England throughout the 1980s and 1990s began to feel like guinea pigs for Government strategies and Government interventions began to sound like viruses. We had the Community Programme (CP), the Community Enterprise Programme (CEP), the Volunteer Project Programme (VPP), MSC, ESF, Urban Aid and the rest.

Then in the 1990s we had 'the zones', the Health Action Zone, the Healthy Living Zone, the Education Action Zone, and the workers began to talk about zone fatigue. The word

community became an “aerosol word to be sprayed onto deteriorating institutions in and attempt to deodorise and humanise them.” Meanwhile, almost in spite of Government initiatives, communities developed, more or less cohesively, often unified by their experience of oppression. In the 1950s Corby for example was advertised in the press as a town of ‘milk and honey’; a haven for steel workers who poured in from Glasgow and from Eastern Europe. Then, in 1982, the steelworks closed and the infrastructure of the town collapsed. As part of the town’s regeneration strategy an integrated centre was set up on Pen Green Lane. We described our services in 1983 in this way: “In every small community there should be a service for children and their families, this service should honour the needs of young children and celebrate their existence. It should also support families however they are constituted within the community.”

Honouring the past is a critical principle of sustainability and in Children's Centres we are very concerned with sustainability and sustainable development. The Children's Centre we developed in Corby in 1983 built on a 100-year tradition in England and was hugely influenced by those pioneers who had gone ahead. Pen Green built on the work of other centres such as Hillfields, the Dorothy Gardner Centre, the Thomas Coram centre; in the 1970s they lead the way. Hopefully the new Children's Centres will build on the lessons that we learnt in the 1980s and the Sure Start and NNI initiative in the 1990s.

Children's Centres are centres for both children and their families. Indeed some of us prefer to call them ‘centres for children and families’. They need to be rooted in places close to where families live. In most Children's Centres you will find:

- Early years education
- Year-round extended hours provision to support children and families
- Inclusive flexible education with care for children in need and children with special educational needs
- Adult community education
- Family support services
- A focus for voluntary work and community regeneration

In some Children's Centres you will also find training and support services for early years workers across all disciplines. Pen Green also has a practitioner research base and a leadership professional development centre.

Challenging the status quo

In the 1980s the approach that we adopted as an integrated centre challenged existing traditionally delivered services. In 2006 Children's Centres still challenge traditional way of working; they are meant to. Services have to support the needs of both parents and their children so adult community education with basic skills, family learning, access to GCSE's and A' Levels, assertiveness training, and a range of other courses are offered alongside provision for high quality early childhood education and care. Teachers, nursery nurses, adult educators, community social workers, health practitioners all work together to offer a group work programme, with (in some centres) groups running in the mornings, afternoons, evenings and at weekends. These groups include fathers' groups, single parent groups, survivors' groups, parent and child groups, teenage parents' groups, all of which need to be regularly reviewed and evaluated.

Staff in Children's Centres have to be research active. Pen Green staff were research active from day one, because in the 1980's researching, evaluating and demonstrating the efficacy of our work was the only way we could draw down funding, locally, nationally and internationally. We constantly had to challenge our own practice and determine the relevance and accessibility of our services. Parents were highly involved in the research programme. Parents undertake interviews, they document their children's learning, they keep diaries of their engagement with the centre and were recently involved in a mass observation project.

In the 1980s our community was described by one local officer as a dumping ground for problem families, "a ghetto for the poor and elderly". Approximately 50% of the families using the centre were single parents. At that time most early years centres were geared up to working with children and mothers, fathers were rarely involved and there was little recognition of the extended family or the network of other important adults and peers in a child's life. In the 1980s professionals talked about 'hard to reach' families instead of services that were hard to access. In 2006 it is still hard for some parents to access services in Children's Centres. Mary one of the parents that uses the services at Pen Green lives on a new age traveller site. She recently evaluated our drop-in services and undertook a study of the pedagogical influence of parents on the travellers site; she celebrated the way that parents were working with their children in her own community. Mary had to draw our attention to the issues that made it difficult for other members of her community to use Pen Green's services. We had to change our professional practice.

Children's Centres challenge traditional constructs of the child and the family. Staff in Children's Centres are committed to a strengths-based approach: valuing parents as their child's best educators and passionate advocates not just in the rhetoric but in reality.

The aim of Children's Centres is to develop the capacity of children and parents to be competent users of services. Not just 'clients' passively receiving generous dollops of welfare state services but equal and active partners in developing and reviewing the effectiveness of what's on offer. In Children's Centres we are often working with families who are struggling. It is vital in our research programmes and our practice that we help parents to find their voice so that they can identify their critical concerns. In this way we can build up multiple perspectives on critical issues. Then we can develop many more focussed interventions within our community based services. We have to provide services that are really responsive to **all** families within the community. At the same time we have to develop appropriate services for families where there are serious concerns around child protection issues. We have to make critical decisions all the time about the effective use of scarce resources. The decisions we make must be rooted in an evidence base.

In our Children's Centre and in most other Children's Centres, children will be referred by a number of different agencies and families will also self-refer. It is however vital that all families can access the services equally. Within Children's Centres there should be no stigma attached to using the services. The loneliness and isolation that many parents can experience when they have their first child and often with subsequent children, means that they welcome the opportunity to attend groups, like the Growing Together group that we run at Pen Green. In these groups parents meet weekly for support, staff document the children's development with video and dialogue with the parents. Psychotherapists, play workers, family support workers, all help to run these groups which build on parent's deep interest in their children during infancy. Staff work hard to support parents appropriately and provide a containing and challenging environment for

both adult and child. Children are at the heart of all of this work. It is vital that children's feelings are taken into account whilst offering services that support family life in the 21st century.

Working in Children's Centres is also about challenging our professional practice. We have to rebalance the power relationships between citizens and professionals, and create flexible spaces where we can work in different ways with parents. We have to find a way to make our services relevant and responsive for everyone so that all families want to use them. That involves staff in Children's Centres actively going out and working in home-based settings and other settings within the community. It involves them meeting with people where **they** are most comfortable and encouraging them to use specialist services if appropriate.

Leadership professional development

Children's Centres also challenge our conceptualisation of leadership. The complex demands of running a Children's Centre mean that the leader or leaderful team that runs the centre have to co-ordinate different models of early education, childcare, family support and adult community learning, into one institution. This requires a distinctive model of leadership professional development. The construction of the National Professional Qualification in Integrated Centre Leadership means that for the first time we have a new professional development approach to leadership in Children's Centres, which celebrates complexity and actively promotes diversity. In Children's Centres there is a real recognition that there is not one solution to any problem. Strong ecosystems, in Andy Hargreaves words are "bio-diverse". Children's Centres have to respond to their local community so they will all look different and this difference is important. Standardisation is the enemy of sustainable development and it would not be appropriate for all Children's Centres to look alike. They will all have had different starting points and be responding to different cultural contexts.

It is the job of Children's Centres' leaders to disequilibrate existing systems. If traditional approaches to working with children and families had been highly effective then we wouldn't have needed Children's Centres. Children's Centres leaders have to be community activists. In some cases they have to take on traditional bureaucratic systems and structures and they need support if they are to do this effectively. The objective of the new leadership training and development programme (NPQICL) is to offer professional development and professional support to leaders who have taken on these challenging roles.

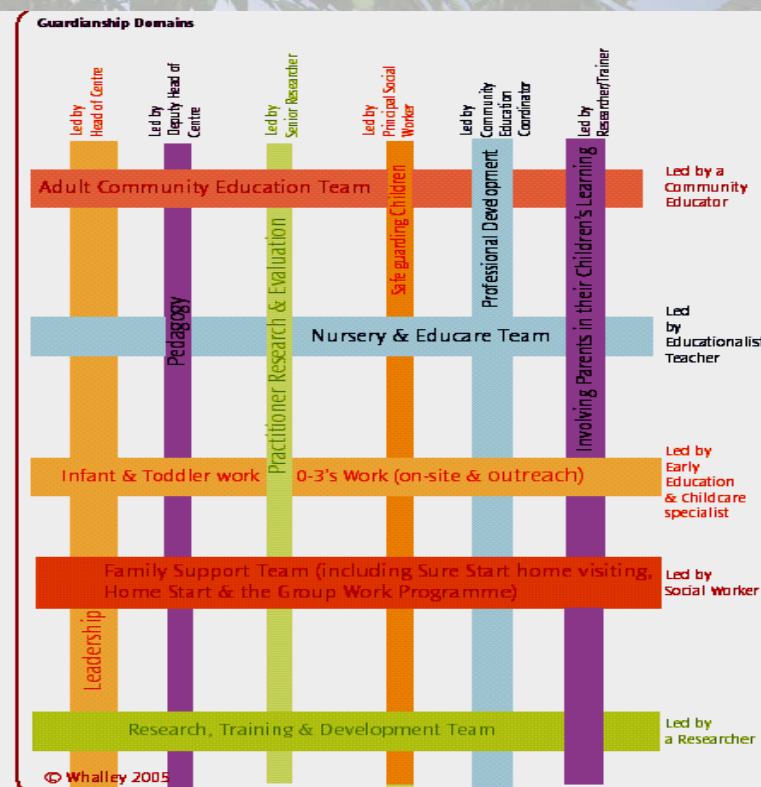
Children's Centres also challenge traditional models of governance within public institutions. In a recent paper for Demos, Tom Bentley describes traditional models of governance as essentially monolithic, often alienating and sometimes persecutory. Children's Centres need to have models of governance that are porous i.e. accessible, personal, engaging, adaptive and enabling. In Children's Centres, parents and children don't use the services in one professionally prescribed way. They may start as a 'referred family' spending up to 37 hours a week in the community drop in; then parents may become volunteers, use a survivors' group, go on to study, visit childcare settings in Europe, become parent managers, co-lead a national conference on parenting, perhaps become paid workers. In our Children's Centres like many others, around 40% of staff started off using the services as parents. In a similar way children may start to use the centre from infancy; they may use the baby nest, take part in the nursery experience, go on to attend after school services and holiday play schemes. Alternatively they may use just a short part-time nursery session depending on the families' needs.

It seems to me that there are four critical factors that have to be taken into account if Children's Centres are to work. The first and perhaps most important factor, is that staff in Children's Centres have to have a shared philosophy, a shared vision and values, and a principled approach to practice. It is extremely hard for parents if practice differs significantly within the Children's Centre. The second factor is the need for a multi-disciplinary and multi-functional team with all or most disciplines represented or at the very least a team with strong connections to other agencies. Thirdly, shared leadership and management and a consistent way of working are critical. It is much more likely in a Children's Centres that you will have a leaderful team of senior staff working alongside newly trained and newly qualified staff rather than one charismatic leader. Lastly, it is vital that services co-exist on one campus or are located within pram pushing distance. For the parents and the children the services need to be seamless. Full integration is however very different from simple co-location; all four factors will need to be in place if a Children's Centre is to be a fully integrated and comprehensive service to its local community.

Guardianship

In Children's Centres we are continually developing new versions of professional knowledge. One of the most useful concepts that we've developed at Pen Green and through the leadership professional training, the NPQICL, has been the concept of "Guardianship", (see diagram).

Developing new versions of professional knowledge: Guardianship



Most Children's Centres have 4-5 'domains' of activity. At Pen Green these domains involve five teams focusing on the following areas of work:

- Adult Community Education Team
- Nursery & Educare Team
- Infant and Toddler Nest 0-3s Team
- Family Support Team
- Research, Training and Development Team

In each domain there will be a core group of staff led by a member of the Senior Management Team. We also have significant strands of activity that cross all the domains and these are:

- Leadership
- Pedagogy
- Practitioner Research and Evaluation
- Safeguarding children
- Professional Development
- Involving Parents in their Children's Learning

Staff in Children's Centres are often from different professional heritages and will have had very different kinds of training. They may well have had experience in a range of different settings. When they come together to work within the Children's Centre they need to be able to hold onto the passions and beliefs that made them go into their particular discipline. However, they also need to work collaboratively and listen to the views of other kinds of professionals working in other domains. Increasingly staff within Children's Centres may be integrated professionals who have had more than one kind of training.

Depending on the historical starting point of the Children's Centre the weaving of professional roles may look very different but most professional disciplines will need to be present and most of the domains. So, for example, a Sure Start Programme that is working towards becoming a Children's Centre may have a family support team with outreach home visiting and a group work programme, and may have a strong social worker either as Centre Head or as a member of the Senior Management Team. Family support and home visiting services are critical domains within any Children's Centre. A Children's Centre that started off as a Nursery School will probably have a very strong Nursery education and Educare programme with an early childhood education teacher taking a strong leadership role possibly as Head of Centre or as the lead Early Years Professional. In any Children's Centre, Early Years Education is a vital domain. In most Children's Centres there will be some focused work with children from 0 – 3 years of age. In a Children's Centres that started its life as a Neighbourhood Nursery this domain may well be the strongest. The lead member of staff in this centre may have begun his or her career as a NNEB and may well have gone on to undertake additional professional development and experience in a range of settings. This child care specialist will need to network intensively with other professionals working in the locality if they are to achieve a seamless response.

In the Pen Green Centre domains and strands of activity weave together to form a tartan. This is very appropriate as the majority of our population hail from Scotland.

Whatever the weave the approach to working with children and families needs to be consistent and from all the evidence the best way to work in Children's centres is to adopt a community development approach.

Staff in Children's Centres need to:

- help individuals to be self-directing
- encourage individuals to have more control over their own lives
- be concerned with raising self-esteem and promoting learning as a lifelong experience
- work towards equality of opportunities
- encourage boundary pushing and constructive discontent (i.e. not putting up with things the way that they are)
- encourage people to feel that they have the power to change things
- be about developing self-fulfilment.

Working in this way everyone feels empowered to start or stop things, to challenge others and meet challenges, to move out front or to fall back. This community development approach is best described by Paolo Freire in his writing on 'dialogue'. In Freire's words staff in Children's Centres have to have faith in other people's strengths, they have to be prepared to relinquish as professionals their fear of being set aside, they have to develop a shared vocabulary rather than assuming the vocabulary of an elite professional group, they have to give up the idea that they have the exclusive hold on knowledge and truth.

In every domain in a Children's Centres staff have to develop a sense of responsibility and accountability. Staff need to agree outcomes and share responsibility for achieving them. It is vital that when we are evaluating our services we work with those that traditionally have least voice in developing services. Outcomes must be negotiated with parents. We need to challenge, critique and celebrate our practice and work collaboratively to improve and sustain our work.

In Children's Centres we are very concerned with encouraging **advocacy** and developing **agency**. Most Children's Centres are located in areas where there is significant underachievement and where there are often cultures of low expectation. Parents and early year's educators have to develop skills in speaking out on behalf of children and themselves. Children, parents and staff need to believe that they can change difficult situations and make things happen in their communities. A central concern in Children's Centres is to develop a sense of agency, which reflects self esteem and self confidence. A child who is high in agency will readily become involved in challenging problems and be appropriately assertive in actions with peers. Parents who have a strong sense of agency will feel able to assert themselves and make their voice heard within the Children's Centres and beyond. Staff who have a strong sense of agency will recognise the fact that they are doing one of the most important jobs in the world and will be able to make appropriate demands for continuous professional development, good pay, good conditions of service and appropriate support.

A central concern in Children's Centres is with the intergenerational impact of long-term unemployment, depression, low income and client status on parents and children's sense of agency. In many of our Children's Centres settings a significant number of parents will have experienced abuse or trauma in childhood and where this is unresolved it may be having a huge impact on their children's affect and agency. We need to be working effectively with parents who are experiencing this kind of vulnerability.

Action for children

Children's Centres are fundamentally about developing aspirational children, parents and workers. In all Children's Centres it is vital that there is **action for children, action for parents and action for staff**. One of the most critical aspects of Children's Centre work is the pedagogical engagement of staff with children. We have to lead the learning. If we lose sight of this then we will not be having the transformational impact that we need to on children's success within the education system. Children's Centres need to be offering a rich curriculum. Staff need to adopt a constructivist pedagogy, encouraging children to be resilient and have a strong disposition to learn. This doesn't come cheap; Children's Centres need to have a strong teacher presence, not just a tokenistic teacher presence. We need early childhood educators who are teachers who can work directly with children in the Children's Centre and have a direct influence on practice. They also need to have time to engage with parents who are working with their children in the home. We need teachers throughout the year, not just during the school year and this is a huge challenge with current levels of funding. We also need highly qualified and highly skilled childcare workers, social workers, health workers and play workers.

Hargreaves talks about sustainable services "being thrifty without being cheap", a phrase that I find useful. Leaders in Children's Centres are committed to using funding effectively. It is vital that we have the kind professional staff in Children's Centres that have traditionally been present in nursery schools, as well as the new kinds of professionals that we'll need if we are to offer an expanded range of services.

Action for parents

We also need in our Children's Centres action for parents. This requires staff to have additional skills and capabilities in engaging with adults as learners. This can be a real challenge for staff whose only experience is working with very young children. We know from Chris Atheys' and Anne Meads' work that children achieve more and are happier when early years educators work together with their parents and share ideas about how to extend and support children's learning. This requires professionals with a deep understanding of both early childhood pedagogy **and** adult learning. Staff in Children's Centres are cultural brokers and mediators. They have to develop a shared language with parents and a shared understanding about how children develop and how children learn, both at home and in the nursery. It is vital that staff understand parent's own theories about the development of their child and their child's learning at home. It is also vital that nursery staff can share with parents their theoretical and practice based understanding of children based on their observations of the child in the nursery setting. Developing this shared language requires consummate skill and continuous professional development. Working in this way has hugely positive outcomes.

Work in children's services always seems to be vulnerable and in the UK we are about to face another comprehensive spending review. Government's priorities can change, like the wind. At Pen Green we still have stickers in our car windows flagging up the danger of our services being closed down or diminished. We have experienced two major

challenges in the past and in 2007 are likely to experience savage cuts. Whilst it is vital that leaders in Children's Centres are ethical entrepreneurs, it is a huge waste of their expertise if they are completely preoccupied with finding funding. Working in a community development way does, however, mean that parents come on board, and parents are the strongest advocates for services, especially during local and national elections. They can be vociferous in challenging the decisions of local authority officers and county councillors if they really own the services.

I think in Children's Centres it is vital that we think globally. Some of the new versions of professional knowledge that we've taken on board during the period in which we have developed a new National Leadership Programme (the NPQICL) have included lessons from indigenous peoples:

1. Always take what people within the community offer and build on it
2. Be aware that pride matters
3. Never humiliate or blame people
4. Find reciprocal ways of working
5. Look to the elders within communities
6. Don't minoritise anybody
7. Insist on complexity.

Multi-disciplinary, multi-functional services have to be complex. We are responding to a complex, changing, and often chaotic world. Children's Centres leaders have learnt to see being described as 'trouble' as a compliment. They have the motto of 'seizing the day and leaving no one behind.'

Linda Lambert, when writing about the early years phase, makes the statement "everyone is born to lead in the same way that everyone is born to learn". The Children's Centres leader "may be seen as a person in whom the dream of making a difference is being kept alive". Sustaining and supporting the achievement of Children's Centres in their role has been a privilege for staff and consultants at Pen Green over the last 5 years. The National Professional Qualification of Integrated Centre Leadership is a national response to the need to both support and challenge leaders of Children's Centres in their demanding job.

If we are to build the sustainable workforce that we need to deliver the integrated Children's Centre strategy, if we are to develop this new territory, then we need proud professionals. Confident, competent and reflective practitioners who are capable of developing leadership learning **within** their own Children's Centre; and also capable of building a national and international networked learning community **across** Children's Centres.

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