

'Partnerships in learning: in the interests of children, benefiting all'

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The recent death of Professor Sheila Wolfendale saddens all who had contact with and learned from her. "Her death will leave the next generation of teachers, psychologists, parents and carers without her immense knowledge and understanding of children's learning. She had the ability to influence policy makers based on absolute knowledge of the real issues involved in the process. Sheila's inimitable style, fearless humour and unsurpassable integrity afforded her the iconic status that few achieve". Previously, Sheila gave ACSSO permission to reprint this paper, which we do in celebration of her life and work.

Abstract

This paper reviews the nature and scope of out of school learning, focussing upon the home as a learning milieu, and considers the complementarity of home and school-based learning. Family literacy is used as a prime exemplar, as it also fits within the family learning paradigm.

The evidence-base is reviewed for the impact and effectiveness of parental involvement and learning outside schools upon children's development and achievement.

Being a parent/parenting is presented as a lifelong learning experience within lifespan development parameters, and a reciprocal lifelong learning model is offered as a theoretical and operational framework to portray the working relationship between parents/carers, professionals/practitioners, on behalf of children. The inclusion of children themselves into the 'learning partnership' is regarded as a significant development.

Finally, there is an exploration of ethical considerations governing partnerships in learning, in the interests of children, benefiting all and a code of conduct is proposed.

Learning outside schools: evolving perspectives

Learning has traditionally been associated with school; an universal association has long been that 'learning' is a formal activity, best pursued within school settings which are themselves conducive milieux to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and skills taught by trained experts, i.e., teachers.

Since education is universal and compulsory within the most developed countries, and since, therefore, academics and researchers have been through the protracted process of school-based learning, this view has been entrenched, and it is only within the last 30 years or so that it has been challenged.

Research into early learning and language acquisition around American Headstart programmes and their British counterparts (Wolfendale and Bryans 1979) confirmed empirically what, observationally, we know to be the case; that young children learn a phenomenal amount, at home, during their first years. Increasingly sophisticated tools of enquiry, such as the use of video enabled developmental psychologists to record the minutiae of language interaction in the early years, the beginnings of cognitive, goal-directed and intentional behaviour, the acquisition of social understanding, social interaction and social mores (Bower 1977).

When children start school, their learning repertoire is already well advanced, and this is particularly evident in language and social discourse. Susan Houston (Houston 1971) demarcated two registers of language, the school register and the non-school register. On the basis of her research she averred that all children, and particularly socio economically disadvantaged children use the non-school register fluently and naturally with family and friends, whereas their use of the

school register by contrast, seems limited in content and flexibility, with teachers dominating classroom discourse.

These and similar research revelations influenced the moves towards narrowing the learning gap between home and school, especially on behalf of children from disadvantaged environments. The American Head Start (Kelsall and Kelsall 1971) and British EPA (Educational Priority Areas) initiatives (Halsey 1972) were premised upon

- effecting links between nursery/school learning and home learning
- promoting the involvement of parents/carers as 'first educators' in their children's learning and development
- enhancing children's learning through the direct involvement of their parents

Grotberg (1979) in reviewing a number of parental involvement programmes in varying settings concluded that 'parents in fact have been discovered as critical to the education and development of their children' (p. 217). Later research in the UK such as that of Weinberger (1996) was aimed at encouraging teachers to value out of school and home language and to incorporate family and community perspectives into school based curricula.

Although we are far from the earlier 'schools without walls' vision of community-based learning (see chapter 5 in Wolfendale 1983) nevertheless the many, well-documented home-school initiatives of the past twenty to thirty years in a number of European and other countries (USA, Australia, Canada) attest to the erosion of the notion that formal, schooled learning is necessarily superior.

The premise is that home is equally a locus for learning as illustrated for example by the HIPPY Program (Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters) which originated in Israel and which has spread to several other countries (Westheimer, forthcoming). The fundamental ideology and dynamic link between 'informal' and 'formal' schooled learning was expressed thus by Bronfenbrenner

' the informal education that takes place in the family is not merely a pleasant prelude, but rather a powerful prerequisite for success in formal education from the primary grades onward' (Bronfenbrenner 1979)

The scope of family and home-based learning: complementarity between home and school

The recent history of a whole range of home school initiatives has been chronicled (see Bastiani and Wolfendale 1996, Bastiani 1997) with some sources focussing on quite specific innovations, e.g. parents involved in early years settings (Whalley 2001), in parenting education and support programmes (Wolfendale and Einzig 1999), in special needs parent partnership services (Wolfendale 2002).

The spread of family literacy

A majority of home school initiatives has focussed upon the acquisition of literacy, and these developments over a period of about fifteen to twenty years have been chronicled (cf. Topping and Wolfendale 1985, Wolfendale and Topping 1996). These accounts describe the evolution from 'parental involvement in reading' to the more encompassing 'family literacy'.

The home is a prime, rich and fruitful context for natural discourse to take place from birth onwards and a number of projects, such as Bookstart (Wade and Moore 2000) provide early literacy and language materials (picture books, nursery rhymes, audiotapes) to homes with newborns. The UK Government-sponsored early years Sure Start programme which aims to provide across-agency support to parents of young children in socio-economically deprived areas (Eisenstadt 2002) is currently linking with the Basic Skills Agency to develop a 'step into to learning Sure Start' programme designed to equip early years staff to identify and support parents and carers with literacy needs - in this way adult learning needs, as well as children's learning needs are addressed (BSA address in References).

At school age there have been and are many projects epitomising cooperation between teachers and parents, to develop children's functional as well as life-long literacy skills. The UK Government promotes family literacy as a policy initiative, supported by earmarked funding for schools to be availed to implement family literacy programmes.

A current European initiative designed to foster is PEFAL which is led and coordinated by Malta, in association with England and Wales (through the involvement of the BSA), Belgium, Italy, Romania, Spain (author can provide contact details).

Family literacy epitomises 'out of school' home and community-based learning as well as the 'complementary endeavours' of school-based learning

The advent/impact of family learning

The conception of 'family learning' is broad and inclusive. Alexander (1997) conceives of family learning as a term describing the vast amount of learning that takes place in and around families, including personal development towards autonomous action and responsibility, language acquisition, hobbies, leisure pursuits. As an umbrella term, it subsumes organised programmes like family literacy as well as incidental, spontaneous activities around the home and community, all of which denote 'lifelong learning' which is explored below.

The English OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education) view of 'family learning' is more restricted, defining it as 'the focus ...on planned activity, in which adults and children come together, to work and learn collaboratively' (OFSTED 2000, p. 5).

Haggart (2000) describes approaches to family learning, which encompass parenting education, pre-school family learning, home school partnerships, family learning at work and in the community. Another review of family learning (McCormick 1999) identifies a range of activities that are subsumed beneath the family learning banner, which he lists in a frequency table, showing that the areas of family literacy and family numeracy are the most popular, followed, in descending order, by 'children's play, drugs awareness, healthy eating and financial matters' (p.9).

The 'joint beneficiaries' aspect is an integral *raison d'être* of family learning initiatives, although measurement of their effectiveness has tended to focus on children's academic achievement rather than adult learning outcomes for two main reasons, it is suggested:

- i. that enhancing children's attainment has been the main purpose and intended outcomes of studies and projects

- ii. that it is more difficult, methodologically, to agree on adult learning outcomes, let alone to find appropriate instruments to measure such change.

The model of Reciprocal Lifelong Learning that forms the cornerstone of this paper (see below) could provide a framework for the creation of ways of identifying and measure adult learning that relates to shared endeavours.

But, first, a brief look at the nature of the evidence of effectiveness of out of school/school and home related learning approaches.

The evidence for the impact and effectiveness of parental involvement and learning outside schools on children's development and achievement

The nature of the evidence about general home school initiatives is equivocal, according to Dyson and Robson (1999). Their sifting of the 'what works' evidence from several hundred sources has enabled them to conclude that

- there is evidence that involving parents in their children's learning (mainly in the spheres of literacy and numeracy in the primary years) is likely to enhance the attainments of children, to improve their attitudes to learning and to be welcomed by many parents
- there seem to be a number of problems that go largely unaddressed in project reports and the discursive literature, such as: dropout and attrition rates, non-significant gains in pupil attainment, longer-term follow-through, consideration of other influencing variables, ethical and political issues (see later in this paper).

Wolfendale and Bastiani (2000) is a text devoted to the examination of the contribution of parents to school effectiveness. Discussing the crucial notion of 'alterable variables' and distilling the seminal work of American researchers such as Coleman (1998) and Epstein (2001) this author, in Chapter 1 (Wolfendale and Bastiani 2000) summarises the parental contribution to education.

A number of writers have weighed up the evidence, assessing the recorded outcomes of, for example, family literacy programmes (Capper 2000, Millard et al 2000), or undertaking a meta analysis of the field such as that of Desforges, commissioned by the Government Department of Education and Skills (DfES), (Desforges, in press) who concluded the following from an exhaustive literature review:

- the field of parental involvement, family education, parental support is massively busy but drawing conclusions about the relationship between provision, activity and educational outputs is exceptionally difficult because most work is not evaluated and what evaluations exist are technically weak.
- Parental involvement net of parental social class and educational level has a significant effect on pupil achievement and adjustment through the years of schooling. At the primary level the direct effects of parental involvement on achievement are larger than the effects of schooling
- Only 'at home' parental involvement has positive effects on pupil achievement and adjustment
- Children play a dynamic role in shaping the relations between parents and schools
- There is little quality research on parental involvement in the UK. Most of the major conclusions in this report draw upon US studies. Insufficient is known about how to sustain parental involvement to maximise its potentially far reaching ramifications in the UK context.

(nb. These bullet points are taken from a summary list of 17 summary points in the draft, pre-publication version of this report, and can only, therefore, give a flavour of the whole).

Bullet points numbers 3 and 4 particularly resonate with the themes of this paper.

Despite the ambiguous nature of the evidence to date, and variable methodological quality of studies, there is consensus amongst researchers that there is sufficient accumulated data that indicate that parental involvement in children's development and learning, including the out of school dimension, makes a positive difference to children's achievement, and accrues other, related mutual gains and benefits.

Being a parent: a lifelong learning experience

Innes (1999) puts forward a powerful model of cooperate learning, which encompasses the learning experiences of children, parents/carers and families. Echoing one of the key themes of

this paper, she challenges the received wisdom that learning is only a formal, school-based activity, and says

'there are many other places where we learn, and... they each take their place in a wider learning environment' (Innes 1999, p. 22)

She classifies the places where we learn as

- *formal* sites of learning (schools, libraries, colleges)
- *everyday* sites of learning (home, organised leisure, clubs, community)
- *placeless* sites of learning (television, internet/cyberspace) (pages 23, 24)

This conception of learning is that it is ongoing for all of us and is therefore a 'cradle to grave' activity. The UNESCO definition of Lifelong Learning is

'The development of human potential through a continuously supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge, values, skills and understanding that they will require through their lifetimes and to apply them with confidence, creativity and enjoyment in all roles, circumstances and environments'

Although this is a rather long, convoluted sentence, the essence of learning as a continuous process across the lifespan is conveyed.

I would like to advance the proposition that being a parent/parenting activity be viewed as integrally part of lifelong learning and that this conception will enhance ways in which parental involvement can be encouraged and parenting support can be offered and received.

The premise that I would like to put is that being a parent is not a static stage; it is constantly changing and adapting, consistent with being one, albeit, major, life experience.

Psychologists utilise the term 'lifespan development' as a way of conceptualising the path from conception to death (Smith et al 2003). We base parent and family focussed initiatives primarily on the needs of children and consider parenting initiatives as being ones that will benefit children, as has been discussed above. I propose that we need, when planning initiatives, and carrying out research in this domain, to incorporate the view that for parents and carers, such initiatives are also, for them, learning experiences in their own right. If we can address *their* lifespan and lifelong learning needs per se, as well as on behalf of their children, the contention is that we will enhance learning and well being all round. This dimension could be fruitfully incorporated into home-school work, as well as being an underpinning theoretical formulation to support practical initiatives and to maximise parental learning opportunities.

A list of parenting functions - acts and activities carried out routinely, on a minute by minute, day by day, weekly, monthly basis for years on end - reminds us that these represent a constant learning challenge for the involved adults (Wolfendale 1983). Once people are catapulted into becoming parents, it is a steep and ongoing learning curve, finding out about child development, the idea of developmental tasks, milestones. Parents learn a great deal either incidentally or intentionally, when they undertake the shared intimacy of out of school learning.

Features of the lifelong learning experience of being a parent include:

- the direct, ongoing and changing experience of parenting
- the broad-based nature of the learning experience - integrating the learning experience to wider personal and human experience
- accumulation of all experience
- generalisation to future experience (e.g. becoming a parent again)
- investment in and motivation to learn 'on the job'
- knowledge increase (e.g., of child development, child care and education provision)

A Reciprocal Lifelong Learning Model

The inclusive lifelong learning framework advocated by Innes (1999) applies to children, their significant adults/carers, and by extension, to all professionals/practitioners who work with parents, on behalf of children.

A lifespan view of development, as discussed by Smith et al (2003) enables us to take a longitudinal view of events and experiences that influence and shape our lives, and to better understand the short and longer-lasting effects of, for example, social interactions and decision making.

So, to incorporate professional experience and perspectives into an universal lifelong learning model could help us to plan and enact the 'partnership in learning', the title of this paper.

Some writers have considered the *reciprocal* aspect of the working relationship between parents and educators. For example, this author, in an earlier work (Wolfendale 1983) proposed 'a taxonomy of home school partnership - a basis for reciprocity' (Chapter 10); this taxonomy was divided into two domains, which were:

- parents into school (parental presence in and involvement with school)
- school to home (emphasis upon out of school learning)

The principle of reciprocity was expressed as 'mutual involvement, mutual accountability, mutual gain' (Chapter 2 in Wolfendale 1983).

Reciprocal involvement rests on the premise that each person is involved in contributing and sharing information, views, expertise and ultimately the responsibility for actions and decision.

The table presented by Chrispeels (1996) illustrates a reciprocal view of 'family practices which support children's learning' on the left column and 'effective schools characteristics which parallel family practices' in the right column. The lists in each column are mirror-images of each other and encapsulate how these characteristics can be unpacked into a myriad of home school reciprocal activities.

An ongoing piece of research and development is the Home School Knowledge Exchange Project based at the University of Bristol (Hughes, in references), in which teachers, parents/carers and children are working together to find new ways of communicating between home and school. School and home based activities are shared, towards common learning outcomes. There is a mutual exchange of perspectives and information around literacy, numeracy and transfer from primary to secondary education (at the age of around eleven years) and the work is driven by principles of reciprocity.

The *reciprocal lifelong learning* model advocated here for 'partners in learning' rests on the principles and propositions of reciprocity as outlined in this section, but explicitly sets out an encompassing conceptual framework which asserts that

- we continue to evolve and learn from our experiences
- learning is reciprocal; parents give out to their children and gain in return
- professionals/practitioners by virtue of their own lifecycles also continually evolve, learn and gain from their experiences with and on behalf of children, and from contact with parents/carers.

Partnerships in Learning: a triangulated approach

Discussion to date has focussed upon the adults involved in *learning partnerships*. This part of the paper opens out the reciprocal lifelong learning model to incorporate the perspectives of children and young people themselves as lifelong learners and as equal participants. An alliance

of adults and children does not presuppose an equally shared agenda - on the contrary, as with all 'partnerships' there is and should be room for expression and accommodation of differing views and priorities.

A triangulated approach involving adults and children is characterised by joint endeavours operating on these premises

- that children have equal rights to express their views and contribute to decision making on their behalf
- that children can contribute valid and valuable perspectives
- that children's views can complement adult views.

Inclusion of children and young people into personal and educational processes and decision making is becoming widespread in the UK, for example in the areas of special needs (cf. DfES SEN Code of Practice 2001), in early years (Clark and Moss 2001), in assessment (Wolfendale 1998), in dispute resolution (Cremin 2002), and children as service users (Fajerman and Treseder 2000). A rationale is advanced for the direct involvement of children and young people on these grounds:

- *on equal opportunities grounds*: that children have the right to be listened to and to participate in decisions made about them, their education and their welfare; Section 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is the child's right to be listened to
- *on educational grounds*: knowing and understanding what children think helps to plan educational experiences better and to make a better match between task and learner; children's direct involvement in their own learning enhances that learning
- *on psychological grounds*: direct, active involvement in learning increases learning rate and output; cognitive engagement with adults enhances the teacher-pupil relationship.

The research outlined above (Hughes) exemplifies the triangulated approach. Pupils play an equal part in all the knowledge exchange processes.

This area is still burgeoning and outcomes of direct pupil participation are not always amenable to traditional measurement. But face validity - in the form of children's responsiveness to having opportunities to participate in discussion and decision making about their own lives - is manifest and there is consequently much evidence of the empowerment of children and young people in these initiatives (Sinclair Taylor 2000).

An ethical dimension to a learning partnership

This article is predicated on the notion that learning partnerships between children's significant adults and themselves are in their best interests and benefit all partners; the rationale is therefore both humanitarian and pedagogical.

But in order to ensure that the best interests of all participants are met there need to be explicit safeguards built into the working relationship. The home-school literature rarely considers the ethical dimension to partnerships, and yet surely there is a moral imperative to take steps to ensure that home-school initiatives such as family learning, family literacy are governed by codes of conduct.

We can turn to textbooks on research methodology, especially those texts that deal with researching with children, as well as with their parents/carers, for some guidance on formulating an ethical code for learning partnerships. This is an appropriate frame of reference, since many home-school endeavours epitomise research and practice applications (see Grieg and Taylor 1999, Lewis and Lindsay 2000).

A written code needs to start with underpinning principles and values, covering: participants' rights to honest information about the proposed venture, so that informed consent is based upon full knowledge; their right to negotiate anonymity and confidentiality in, for example, reporting upon the venture; their cardinal right, with guarantees, not to be harmed, deceived, stressed or exploited by their participation (MacNaughton et al 2001).

In proposing an 'equitable model of cooperative research' this author (Wolfendale 1999) set out a Code of Conduct for cooperative research, divided into these four sections:

1. Statement of Values and Principles and Purpose of the Code
2. Responsibilities and Commitment by the Researcher(s)
3. Entitlement and the Rights of Participants
4. Responsibilities and Commitment by the Participants

This is a reciprocal model of responsibility and accountability, with the predominant responsibilities resting upon those who instigate the venture and who, perhaps, too, hold the purse strings. Corporate/joint responsibilities would include:

- agreement about who does what, when, where, how (rules of engagement)
- discussion and agreement about forms and extent of dissemination at the conclusion of the venture
- discussion and resolution about who 'owns' the data, i.e. the funders, the researchers/organisers, the participants (and see Chapter 10 in Aubrey et al 2000)

In planning any venture, participants, especially the adults involved, need to make an honest and realistic appraisal of risks and benefits to all. MacNaughton et al (2001) discuss this feature and build into their equation the necessary sensitivity needed to incorporate cultural and linguistic issues.

An ethical, principled approach to Learning Partnerships should provide a number of checks and balances to what is so often an inherently imbalanced relationship, with the researchers/organisers/fund holders retaining power and control over the participants (notably, parents/carers and children). A working ethical code can aim to preserve parity of esteem, and, in terms of the title of this paper, can provide the fullest expression of the reciprocal nature of partnerships in learning, in the interests of children, and benefiting all.

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