

The Role of Community Teachers in the Development of Quality Early Childhood Care and Education

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The first community teachers were appointed in Sheffield in 1999, as part of the city's strategic plan to raise the quality and standards of its early childcare and education services across public, private and voluntary sectors. Within these newly integrating services, settings were expected to support and train parents to become effectively involved in their children's learning.

This was a time of great change and increased funding opportunities. New government initiatives were coming on stream such as Centres of Excellence programmes (Labour Party, 1997), and Sure Start (Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 1999a) programmes. Sheffield was successful in bidding for funding for both initiatives.

The Centres of Excellence programme demonstrates and disseminates good practice on the integration of care and education and the running of training and family support services. Sure Start aims to support families with children aged birth to four years, particularly those who are disadvantaged "*to make sure they are ready to thrive when they get to school*" (Glass, 1999: 258). In this process, a diverse new workforce with a wide range of experiences and qualifications was created.

New funding opportunities also appeared in the shape of the government's nursery grant which offered 'free' part-time nursery places, initially to children aged four. Receipt of the grant was dependent upon providers becoming 'eligible providers' through planning "*activities and experiences that help children aged three to five years make progress in their development and learning*" using the new Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage of Learning (DfEE/Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2000: 8).

This was later accompanied by new Sessional and Day Care Standards which were introduced by the government's inspectorate service (Office for Standards in Education [Ofsted], 2001) for all day care providers. This led to settings regularly undergoing more rigorous Daycare and Education inspections. Providers suddenly had to be accountable on many different levels and were often entering uncharted territory, especially in terms of planning and assessment and education inspection procedures. To help support them in this process, and to raise quality, the community teaching team was established.

The Aims of Community Teaching

The aim was to provide flexible, outreach training and cross provider support in the following key areas:

- planning and providing for children's learning
- promoting partnerships with parents
- developing links between providers
- working with other agencies

The project and team were set up and co-ordinated by a Sheffield Young Children's Service manager with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), who was also a highly experienced Early Years practitioner. Rigour was built into the model through regular community teacher meetings, weekly timetables, medium and long term planning overviews, case notes and evaluations. Evaluations were collected from all staff and parent training workshops which provided a useful insight into future needs. Other, informal evaluations, appeared within Ofsted reports and references to the community teachers' work were published in local authority, Early Excellence and Sure Start quarterly and annual reports. Community Teachers' own in-service training, came through conferences and special training events at local and national level, and through regular Local Education Authority (LEA) early years education co-ordinator meetings. Joint training opportunities were also provided, for example, by the LEA Advisory Service, its Educational Psychology Service and local family/lifelong learning initiatives.

Getting Started

Initially, the team comprised two highly experienced early years teachers, each with a cluster caseload of about fourteen early years providers in two of the most disadvantaged areas in the city. They were based in two children's centres, one of which housed Sheffield's 'trailblazer' Sure Start/National Children's Home (NCH) project. One post was jointly funded by Sure Start, the NCH and the Sheffield Young Children's Service. The other post was funded from Early Excellence money. Each cluster patch covered one of the city council's twelve designated planning areas.

The main focus of support was on those settings in the private and voluntary sectors receiving nursery grants or those in the process of becoming eligible providers, however, some support was also given to under three's workers to resource and plan rich opportunities for children to play and learn. Support in schools mainly consisted of setting up and running parent workshops and tandem working with teachers to set up and run specific Sure Start/NCH and Early Excellence projects such as speech and language development programmes.

As there was no blueprint for the role of community teaching, there was enormous potential for innovative practice and vision about how best individual providers' needs

could be met. By 2001 the team comprised five more highly qualified and experienced early years teachers.

The Strengths of Community Teaching

The strength of this outreach model was that providers could be supported to develop their own practice from *within*. It would value diversity and offer:

- rapid response
- tailor made support/training
- active learning
- role modelling

It would also promote:

- parental involvement
- reflective practices
- community links
- collaborative/multi agency working

The Community Teachers' intimate knowledge of both settings and staff ensured support could be pitched at a realistic level given the usual restraints of time, money and training. Once a good rapport was established, staff became more confident about developing their practice.

The Framework for Community Teacher Support

Key Objectives and Principles

Young children learn best through play and first hand experiences in an environment which is rich and stimulating both indoors and outdoors and when the following is in place:

- Good organisation and management
- Well trained and supported staff
- High quality resources
- Carefully planned, purposeful play experiences
- A relevant curriculum
- Effective partnerships with parents

This work was underpinned by the community teachers' in-depth knowledge of how children learn and develop. The pattern of support varied enormously from setting to setting and ranged from on-going support, training and development, to intensive periods of support. The amount of time spent in each setting also varied according to need. Settings required a lot of support during pre-and post-Ofsted or Day Care Standards inspections as did settings requiring additional support for a child with special needs or where staff had specific in-situ training requirements.

Community Teachers sensitively role modelled good practice and supported settings to review their organisation and management, establish current and future training needs, audit resources, identify resourcing needs and to write new policies and plans in accordance with their eligible provider status. Planning for outdoor play was often difficult for settings with little or no access to outside space or a lack of funding to develop it (Ouvry, 2000). Providers were also supported to apply knowledge acquired through outside training to their own settings - something they often found difficult to do.

Community teacher funding enabled sets of high quality resources or toolkits to be loaned by providers on a short term basis along with training videos and 'good practice' books. Information from Early Years conferences and other training opportunities undertaken by Community Teachers was regularly disseminated back to settings.

Community teachers also played an active or advisory role in setting up new nurseries, toddler/baby groups and creches and often played a key role in the purchasing of new resources and planning the curriculum and environment in collaboration with parents and other key development workers.

Planning and Providing for Children's Learning Also Requires:

- a balance between child/adult initiated activities
- appropriate adult intervention
- differentiation
- observation
- assessment

A lot of providers were on a very sharp learning curve implementing all that was required at this time and Community Teachers occasionally provided some welcome 'breathing space' by covering staff during transition periods or by enabling them to visit other settings to observe good practice. Staff were also supported to make long and short observations of children, to plan differentiated activities (Athey, 1990) and to devise manageable record keeping systems. Within this strand, community teachers also provided support for children with special needs.

Planning and Providing for Children with Special Education Needs

Staff in the private and voluntary sectors often required a great deal of support in planning and providing for children, for example, with disabilities and challenging behaviour. Community Teachers all too frequently encountered children who were being permanently excluded or disadvantaged in some way.

Key Action Points

- Early identification
- Partnership with Parents
- Intervention Strategies
- Signposting

With support from the LEA Early Years SEN support staff, Community Teachers shared these key action points with providers which helped them to know what to look for, to value parental information sharing about a child, to know where to go for help and to acquire some strategies for tackling problems.

Promoting Parent Partnerships

Whenever possible, Community Teachers supported staff to develop parent partnerships in all settings including those with a high proportion of working parents and tight daily schedules to keep by:

- Creating a welcoming, informative environment
- Involving parents in their children's learning
- Running parent workshops
- Developing transition links/home visiting
- Trying to involve 'hard to reach' parents
- Supporting staff to write "Learning through Play" booklets for parents
- Setting up book loans, emotional literacy packs and toy libraries

Community Teachers regularly ran workshops for parents introducing them to the Foundation Stage of Learning Curriculum and highlighting their vital role in helping with their children's learning. Some workshops inspired parents to learn new skills, gain accreditation and to take the first step in training to be early years workers themselves. In the Sure Start/NCH setting, parents groups made over ninety story sacks, which later went on loan to all settings in the cluster. Some of these parents also wrote and created a booklet for others on setting up a story sack project.

Promoting Links between Providers

- Joint training
- Sharing good practice
- Sharing resources
- Transition
- Staff exchanges
- Quality in provision group

Historically, staff in maintained, private and voluntary settings had operated very separately, so Community Teachers encouraged providers to find ways of working

together in a culture of professional development. A 'patch' quality-in-provision group was set up through which settings began to recognise each setting's unique role and strengths in the community. This umbrella group provided a forum for the dissemination/sharing of information and discussions around best practice, local issues, staff exchanges, transition and the sharing of resources.

Working with Other Agencies

Developing working links with other agencies, the schools' advisory service and a range of other development workers, was fundamental to the success of the community teaching model. Community Teachers regularly worked closely with other workers to support settings to develop their practice and often drew on the expertise of other agencies or took part in their discreet training opportunities. Care was also taken not to duplicate each other's work or to give mixed messages. Community Teachers also offered city wide Foundation Stage training opportunities, for example, to childminders, playgroup workers and librarians.

Outcomes

The key strengths of the Community Teaching model - flexibility and innovation - led to the role becoming extremely diverse and complex. It is so inextricably joined up with other workers it would be almost impossible to measure its impact alone. However, the team's expansion stands as testimony to the success of the model.

By 2001, the team comprised five teachers. Today, there are thirteen community teachers working in Sheffield. In the next few years this will rise to thirty one and eventually to thirty-eight. The DfES recognises the need for outreach support of this kind in voluntary and private settings (DfES, 2003) and, in its plans to create a comprehensive system of children's centres, community teachers will continue their work. Although there is little research available about the actual role of community teachers, Marsh and Forde (2005) cite an example of the effectiveness of advisory teaching:

"Christine Stevens (2002) evaluated the work of advisory teachers, entitled Early Years Development Officers (EYDO's) in one county in England. She suggested that, from the data collected from 138 early years settings, the EYDO's work had been invaluable in relation to three key areas: planning, record keeping and assessment, and the writing of policies and procedures." (Marsh and Forde, 2005: 141)

Marsh and Forde were quick to point out that community teaching is much broader than advisory teaching and that the work of the community teacher *"continues to be highly successful and of central importance in raising quality across settings"* (Marsh and Forde, 2005: 152).

They also add that "there is a clear role for someone with qualified teacher status because of that person's training and in-depth expertise in the field of children's learning" (Marsh and Forde, 2005: 152).

Conclusion

It is evident that the strengths of community teaching continue to shape its service while retaining the freedom for innovation and change. The commitment to making quality a reality in the lives of young children constantly underpins the work and although not all settings are equally good, more settings are having consistently successful Ofsted inspections.

Planning and assessment continues to require high levels of support, along with strategies for supporting children with special needs. Direct work with parents still varies widely according to settings and work with hard to reach families still presents difficulties, though it is worth pursuing. Time is always a constraint, especially where collaborative working is involved, but the benefits far outweigh the disadvantages. Having a designated community cluster of settings to support is central to community teaching with its joined up thinking, shared resources and collaborative way of working. Long term, it may prove the best and most cost effective way of raising standards in all settings. The diversity, flexibility and inter-disciplinary nature of Community Teaching has particular relevance during this time of unprecedented expansion in early years provision in the UK, especially in the private and voluntary sectors. It offers robust, outreach intervention which successfully combines theory and practice. It promotes a collegiate atmosphere of support, development and ownership in which the foundation stones of high quality early learning and care can be laid and successfully built upon. It also gives providers an all important friendly face.

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