

## CHAPTER 1

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# New Forms of Provision, New Ways of Working – the Pen Green Centre

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The Pen Green Centre for children and their families opened in 1983. It was set up as a multifunctional service for children and families and was staffed by a multidisciplinary team. The centre was financed by Northamptonshire County Council and was jointly managed by the Education and Social Services Departments and the local health authority. In 1983, Pen Green had six staff and worked with 50 children; today the centre is a designated children's centre (June 2004) and has more than 110 staff, including teachers, nursery nurses, social workers, play workers, midwives, health workers and support staff, and we work with over 1200 families.

Corby, where the centre is based, was a steel town in the 1930s with a teeming population of steelworkers who had come down from Scotland and across from central Europe to find work. By the 1980s, when the Pen Green Centre opened, the steelworks had closed, the housing estates were boarded up, shops were barricaded with wire grills, and 43 per cent of the male population was unemployed. Poor nutrition, inadequate housing and high infant mortality rates were all major factors influencing the lives of young families. There were minimal statutory services for parents and young children and very few of the traditional voluntary services for families in need of support.

In Corby in the early 1980s, as in some parts of the UK today, there was no choice of services for parents wanting nursery education, childcare or 'time out' to study. There was no partnership between the public, private and voluntary sectors because there was so little provision. There was only one private day nursery, a small number of registered childminders and a few playgroups. The part-time nursery education that was provided in nursery units attached to primary schools was hugely oversubscribed, and these nursery sessions did not help parents who wanted to attend college or go back to work.

There was also a social services children's centre in Corby, which was perceived by local parents as a resource exclusively for 'problem families'.

The Pen Green Centre was set up in what was formerly a comprehensive school built in the 1930s to provide an education for the children of the steelworkers. The houses that surround the centre were once steelworkers' homes. Sixty feet away stood the last of the blast furnaces that had transformed a small Northamptonshire village into a steel town (Whalley, 1994).

## Problems and contradictions

Corby in the 1980s exemplified many of the problems and contradictions inherent in education and day-care services in the UK at this time. These were some of the issues which staff at Pen Green had to face:

- 1 *Simplistic demarcation lines*: crude divisions remained between those that saw themselves as providers for the educational needs of the child (the local education authority (LEA)) and those supporting the child in terms of welfare and childcare (Social Services, the private sector).
- 2 *Separatism*: there was no tradition of working in an integrated way with other agencies such as health and the Adult Education Services, both of which have a critical role in working with children and their families.
- 3 *Over-professionalism*: the contribution of the voluntary sector had been underestimated, and the energy and commitment of the local community was largely unrecognised.
- 4 *Monoculturalism*: when setting up early childhood services, there had been no attempt to learn from other European countries, such as Scandinavia or Italy, where integrated services for young children have a long history.
- 5 *Europhobia*: the only 'models' generally recognised as successful in the 1980s were those that had been transplanted from the USA. There was very little recognition of the importance of a local diagnosis of need.
- 6 *Compensatory models*: because professionals who worked with parents were still assuming a 'deficit' model of parenting based on the premise that some parents are ineffective and that they can become more effective by being taught a set of 'parenting skills'.
- 7 *Political will*: most early years educators did not recognise the political nature of early years work and had little experience of engaging in political debate.
- 8 *Lack of accountability*: this was manifested as a general lack of awareness of the changing needs of families, and the need for flexible and responsive services. There had also been a failure locally to recognise the issues of the stakeholders' children, parents, families and the wider community.

9 *Poor conditions of service and training*: although early childhood educators were powerful advocates for children and families, they were traditionally fairly passive in relation to their own conditions of service. Staff were accustomed to working long hours with poor pay, inadequate training and little if any non-contact time to be able to plan and reflect on children's learning.

## Working with the community

Pen Green, as a centre for children and families, developed from a perspective 'which regards early childhood services as a need and right for all communities and families, and as an expression of social solidarity with children and parents' (Moss, 1992, p. 43). However, this social solidarity was born, in the first instance, out of conflict.

When the centre was set up, staff had to work with a very vocal and often hostile group of people, since the strongest voluntary group in the local community was a parents' action group *against* the centre. This group comprised local residents who felt that there had not been enough consultation between those setting up the new early years service and those who were expected to use it. They were afraid that the local authority planned to set up a day-care service for vulnerable families, and this was not what they wanted. They were clear that what was needed in their community was a radically new kind of service.

The visions and principles behind the services that were set up at Pen Green were carved out by this 'local action group', local politicians, local authority officers and the newly appointed staff group. Their big idea, their vision for the future, was that in this small community there should be a service for children aged under five and their families, a service which would honour the needs of young children and celebrate their existence. It would also support families however they were constituted within the community.

This vision was underpinned by the belief that:

- the most effective way of delivering coherent education, health and social services to young families was through an integrated centre which would be easily accessible (i.e. at pram-pushing distance);
- services should be flexible and responsive to the needs of all local children and their extended families;
- education and care are indivisible, that the early years curriculum offered in these services should be developmentally appropriate for children aged up to five years and should recognise the central position of play in early learning;
- services should respect and value children and parents' individual differences and celebrate ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity;

- education begins at birth, and services must recognise the key role parents play as their child's first educators, and parents' commitment to their children's early education;
- parent education and adult community education should be made available to parents *within* services for early childhood education and care;
- all the staff working in these settings need to be highly trained, reflective practitioners with equitable conditions of service, adequate pay, appropriate non-contact time, in-service training, supervision, opportunities for promotion, etc.; and
- workers in early childhood settings need to be concerned with power sharing and community regeneration.

## Principles

The staff group appointed to work at Pen Green in the early 1980s were committed to engaging parents as decision-makers in the planning and implementation of work at the centre. They knew that working in this way was not about compensating for disadvantage. Instead it was about acknowledging the impact of poverty on the lives of local children and their families, and encouraging families to take an equal and active role in developing responsive services.

The principles that underpin the work at Pen Green are the principles of community education. Community education should:

- be concerned with individuals' capacity to be self-directing;
- help individuals to gain more control over their lives;
- be about raising self-esteem;
- promote learning as a lifelong experience;
- be about equal opportunities;
- be about pushing boundaries;
- be about constructive discontent and not having to put up with things the way they are;
- encourage people to feel they have the power to change things; and
- be about self-fulfilment (adapted from Whalley, 1994).

## A one-stop shop

Chris Athey (1990) describes the conceptual gulf that exists when groups of people who lack shared experience begin to work together. The newly appointed staff at Pen Green adopted an 'open-door' approach, which helped to bridge the gap between these local parents and the new service. Parents were invited into the centre before the concrete was even dry. They

shared the experience of transforming a derelict comprehensive school, which many of them had attended, into a stimulating and secure environment for very young children and their families. They shared the responsibility for establishing priorities, allocating space and developing the work. Over the next 14 years, the centre developed the following strands of activity:

Early years education.  
Extended hours, extended year provision to support families.  
Inclusive, flexible, education with care for children in need and children with special educational needs.  
Adult community education and family support services.  
Voluntary work and community regeneration.  
Training and support for early years practitioners.  
Research and development.

The centre became a 'one-stop shop' for families with young children in the local community (Audit Commission, 1994). What we at the centre provided for children and families was as follows:

- a high-quality, developmentally appropriate, early childhood education with care provision for young children;
- a place where children could meet, learn and grow; where staff worked hard to meet children's affective and cognitive needs; where there was appropriate provision for children in need;
- an inclusive service for children with special educational needs;
- a seamless provision for parents, with accessible adult education, health and social welfare services all on one site; the centre became a focus for lifelong learning in the community; and
- a centre where parents were engaged in an equal, active and responsible partnership, and shared their concerns about their children's development.

## The changing political agenda

By 1997, the need to involve parents actively in their children's education was high on the political agenda of the newly elected Labour government. Two of the main reasons for this were that the role of parents as their children's first and most consistent educators was by now firmly established (Barber, 1996, p. 244). The link between parents' own experiences of the education system, their attitudes and expectations, and their children's

achievement was also acknowledged as a factor of even greater significance than school improvement (OECD, 1997).

In 1997, the government recommended that there should be a fully integrated approach to early years education and care across the public, private and voluntary sector. Supporting parents and training parents were identified as major tasks for early childhood educators in all settings (DfEE, 1996,1997).

## Early excellence centres

In December 1997, the government launched its Centres of Excellence programme (DfEE, 1997), offering financial support and defining standards for those individual centres or networks where flexible, high-quality, early years education and care were offered alongside education and training for parents. This government initiative acted as a catalyst, inspiring many local authorities to bid for funding to improve existing services or to initiate projects.

Pen Green was one of the first centres designated by the government as a Centre of Excellence. The additional financial support the centre received meant that we could increase our educational services to both children and their parents with new after-school programmes for school-aged children and for family education. The government acknowledged the work of the centre in providing local and national training: 'The centre is ... a focal point for training early years educators in the public, private and voluntary sectors and is playing a major role in the dissemination of good practice in early years provision' (DfEE, 1998, p. 19). Under the Early Excellence Programme, Pen Green was allocated funding for a new family education annex, which provided badly needed accommodation and space in which to set up our research and development work.

## Education Action Zones

Another government initiative that had an immediate impact on the Pen Green Centre and on Corby was the establishment of Education Action Zones. Early Action Zones (EAZs) were set up to galvanise local schools and improve educational achievement. Most EAZs focused on work in the secondary phase, but some had an early years component. All EAZs had as a primary task the raising of parental expectations. Data generated from the schools in Corby in 1997 identified the area as one in which children were significantly under-achieving. Corby had three schools in special measures and in 1999 was declared an Education Action Zone.

Statistics showed that there were very few adults in Corby who had undertaken further or higher education, and this was confirmed by interviews that we had completed with parents using the centre. Eighteen out of

the 22 parents who completed our interview schedules had left school at, or before, age 16. The majority of the parents who responded felt that 'school had not brought out the best in them'. Perhaps because so few parents in Corby had continued their education after 16, and because most parents experienced education as a disempowering force in their own lives, a culture of low expectations had developed.

### ***Corby Sure Start***

In 1999, the government introduced another major initiative, the national Sure Start programme (DfEE, 1999a). This programme was designed to offer comprehensive support to families with children under 4 years in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. A Sure Start Unit accountable to both the Minister for Health and the Minister for Education was set up. Identified communities were invited to prepare proposals for innovative multidisciplinary work. The programme had a strong community development strand, and there was an expectation that local people would be involved in developing local bids.

Pen Green became the lead partner for Corby Sure Start and worked in collaboration with all the other statutory and voluntary agencies concerned with family support. A particular feature of the Corby Sure Start programme was that large numbers of parents were involved in conceptualising the local targets and programmes of work. Parents who had been involved in Pen Green for several years became powerful advocates for other parents living in the extended catchment area that was the 'Sure Start community'. A parent-led needs assessment was immediately set up to assess the effectiveness of local services for the 103 new families whose children were born in the previous year. Parents were recruited, paid and trained in interview techniques. They constructed an interview schedule collaboratively with staff and then went out and conducted informal interviews (Pen Green Research Base Report, 2000; McKinnon, 2005). This provided rich data for the new Sure Start programme, data which were analysed and then shared with local agencies. Parents presented the data at local seminars and conferences, and professionals were able to use very creatively the constructive feedback they were given. Within a few months, professionals were already beginning to make services more accessible and responsive to families.

### **A learning community**

By the late 1990s, what we had created at Pen Green was an environment in which:

- children, parents and staff were encouraged to be good decision-makers, able to question, challenge and make choices;

- there were opportunities for staff to become highly trained reflective practitioners, with good levels of support and supervision, in an environment where they could build satisfactory relationships and feel valued personally and professionally;
- staff consulted with and felt accountable to all the stakeholders – children, parents, staff, the local community, the LEA and local authority; and
- parents had become advocates for their children and were beginning to share their understanding of their children's learning at home with nursery staff.

Over 17 years, we had been able to develop a comprehensive parent partnership programme. More than 6,000 local parents had been involved (Whalley, 1997b), and staff had established a model of cooperative working that respected both the learning and support needs of parents, and the children's right to high-quality early years education with care.

Our work with parents was underpinned by the belief that all parents had a critical role to play as their child's primary educators. We were aware that young children achieve more and are happier when early years educators work together with parents and share views on how to support and extend children's learning (Athey, 1990; Meade, 1995). The belief that parents' involvement should be a key feature of any high-quality early years provision has been well supported in government reports from the Plowden Report in 1967 to *Excellence in Schools* in 1997 (DfEE, 1997).

The concept of a 'triangle of care' was developed in the Start Right report (Ball, 1994), which described a new kind of partnership between parents and professionals. Through this equal and active partnership, a secure, warm and stimulating environment could be created for children. Parents, for the first time, were described as having their own proper competence, and parents' deep commitment to their children's learning was finally acknowledged.

The Start Right report made it clear that the key issue for early childhood educators in education and care settings was to develop a strong relationship with parents as the child's first and enduring educators. The role of early childhood settings was to support parents through:

- exemplifying good practice;
- providing information about current research;
- offering appropriate parent education and professional support; and
- helping parents to develop and sustain their sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Research showed that a large number of parents wanted to be involved in their children's early school experiences (Smith, 1990). The involvement of parents in the Froebel Early Education Project (1973–8) provided evidence of deep commitment on the part of parents, who were consulted on professional concerns rather than 'peripheral issues' (Athey, 1990, p. 206).

Research also indicated that children made significant gains when their parents were involved in early childhood programmes (Lazar, 1983). However, researchers were still unclear about just 'how' parental involvement actually benefits children in nursery settings (Meade, 1995).

### **Setting up a research base in a centre for children and families**

Building on our long tradition of parental involvement, we decided in 1996 to establish a research base at Pen Green in partnership with parents, early years practitioners and researchers in higher education. We realised we had underestimated the enthusiasm which parents demonstrated for a deeper and more extended dialogue about their children's learning. We began to see that teaching and learning and curriculum issues, which had previously been the fairly uncontested domain of professional staff, needed to be opened up for a wider discussion with parents in the early years community.

What we needed was a rich and relevant dialogue between parents and nursery staff which could be sustained over time, a dialogue which focused on the children's learning and achievements and our own pedagogic practice.