

# **A Leadership Case Study in Early Childhood Settings: Transforming from a Nursery to a Children's Centre.**

by

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## **A Leadership Case Study in Early Childhood Settings: Transforming from a Nursery to a Children's Centre.**

Leadership in early childhood education has become more complex in England since the introduction of new policies and initiatives relating to childcare following the election of the Labour government in 1997. Prior to this childcare provision and early childhood education had been a mix of commercially oriented and publicly funded organisations, with nursery schools or classes dominating the educational provision. In 1998 the government signaled its intention for families to be given the choice of looking after their children full-time, or to combine work, education or training with parenting in a balanced way through the publication of the green paper entitled "Meeting the Challenge of Childcare".

A number of government departments are involved in this initiative, including Health and Work & Pensions as well as Education which has played the leading role. The principal mechanism created within the Department for Education and Skills to deliver this ambition was the Sure Start, Extended Schools and Childcare Group within the Children, Young People and Families Directorate. The Group works with local authorities, Primary Care Trusts, Jobcentre Plus, local communities, public agencies and voluntary and private sector organisations and aims to ensure delivery of free early education for all three- and four-year-olds; affordable, quality childcare and after-school activities in every area; and children's centres and health and family support, particularly in disadvantaged areas where they are most needed. It works with parents to build aspirations for employment and for their children's education.

Sure Start is the programme designed to deliver the best start in life for every child, aiming to bring together early education, childcare, health and family support by:

- increasing the availability of childcare for all children
- improving health and emotional development for young children

- supporting parents as parents and in their aspirations towards employment.

Sure Start thus targeted a number of areas within the country where there were significant concentrations of socio-economic deprivation to work in partnership either with existing providers or develop new provision. A key element in this strategy has been the introduction of the Sure Start Children's Centre programme, based on the concept that providing integrated education, care, family support and health services are key factors in determining good outcomes for children and their parents. Children's Centres are places where children under 5 years old and their families can receive seamless holistic integrated services and information, and where they can access help from multi-disciplinary teams of professionals. Local authorities have been given strategic responsibility for the delivery of children's centres and are planning their location and development in consultation with parents and other key partners.

Karen is the head of the Centre I visited in June, 2006. The provision grew out of a maintained nursery school which was designated a Children's Centre in September, 2005. The Local Authority which had established and maintained nursery schools long before early years provision became statutory is a large county in the English midlands. There were five such schools in the county, each of which provided morning and afternoon sessions for pre-school children and often this provision included lunches for the children. In addition to the five specialist schools, large numbers of infant and all age primary schools also ran nursery provision and the county was, in effect, anticipating the need and desire for effective pre-school education for children in their early years.

The Children's Centre studied was one of the first to open in the county and the building had expanded to include facilities for the local community in addition to extending the range of child care. Capital funding for the project had come mainly from Sure Start, although the school had also been able to contribute through the devolved capital funding they received from the local

authority. Work on the physical expansion has commenced with the first tranche of Sure Start funding in 2002 and had proceeded in three phases until 2005. By the time of my visit all child care and nursery schooling was in place and the principal concerns were a number of unresolved issues in relation to governance and management of the provision.

Despite the non-statutory nature of the specialist nursery schools they had been treated in a similar manner as all other maintained schools in that they established governing bodies and were financed by the local authority. Their governance and management structures mirrored other schools, therefore, and there was a general expectation that the school would operate within local authority policy guidelines. Direct responsibility for the supervision of the five schools was given to a senior officer within the Local Education Authority, however, with this line of accountability being retained for several years after the School Improvement Service was contracted out to a third party provider. In effect, therefore, although the five nursery schools were categorised as maintained they were treated differently in operation than other maintained schools. This was changed following the retirement of the named officer from the local authority and the contracted service became responsible, allocating a link adviser to the schools.

The adaptation of the maintained nursery school to a Children's Centre introduced further agencies into the funding streams and accompanying accountability structures, with the subsequent relationships still remaining unclear at the time of my field study. Children's Centres are intended to provide integrated services that meet the needs of a number of government departments and authorities. Consequently they are designed to match a range of policy initiatives from social and health agencies as well as those relating to educational objectives. Central government has been extremely active in the field of early childhood education and support with their efforts being focused on the identification of appropriate curricula and child care. The subsequent introduction of curriculum objectives for all children, accompanied by the Every Child Matters policy initiative, have largely defined what should be seen in any organisation seeking to establish and maintain

suitable provision for pre-school children. Funding has been directed largely through Sure Start which has established a number of mechanisms to authorise and pay for such provision. The field has been open to commercially based organisations as well as those emanating from local government, such as maintained nursery schools.

The Sure Start policy is a targeted service, however, that aims to meet the needs of those in areas where there is evidence of low socio-economic status. This was originally set at the bottom 20 per cent, although that category has now been widened to 30 per cent. At the time research was conducted for this study five Children's Centres had been authorised across the county, with more likely to come on stream once the effect of increasing the funding criteria started to play out.

The Centre I visited was philosophically based on a model of maintained nursery schools, therefore, with the local authority seemingly working on the principle that this was little more than Extended School provision. This assessment is backed by the fact that the roles played by two senior officers within the authority had now been combined to provide support for extended schools whereas they had previously had specific responsibility for early childhood provision and extended schools. The Centre was thus maintaining a governing body which was running alongside the newly created management board which represented the interests of all relevant agencies that were external to the education service. My conversations with both the head and the chair of governing body revealed that they were firmly of the opinion that this was the decision-making body.

Governing bodies are, by dint of relevant legislation, the principal decision makers of maintained schools with their authority clearly delineated within the articles and instrument of government required for each school. Children's Centres are different systems, however, with the attendant expectation that alternate lines of accountability exist. The reality of the moment is that the governance of children's centres lacks definition, largely because the speed of policy implementation has seemingly overlooked such clarification.

Consequently centres are developing in a range of alternative models that seem to owe their allegiance to previous structures and systems rather than to a universal specification. Where, for example, a new centre has been built upon a system of child care the ethos that emerges subsequently appears to reflect the social development agenda more than one based on meeting national curriculum criteria. Hence the centre I visited was largely focused on creating the most effective environment to support children's learning, thus building on the expertise they had from being a nursery school.

In a power vacuum such as this the most dominant force (and voice) will lead the process of defining provision. Karen was clearly the leading professional figure, backed by a governing body who clearly thought they were in charge. The consequence was that educational objectives were at the forefront of strategic and operational decision-making. The position was consolidated further by the lack of a dominant agency in the town due to the anticipated end of the local Sure Start and the introduction of Local Children's Partnerships with the remit to promote and oversee family support for children from birth to 19 years of age. Instead of there being a clear policy focus arising from the security of the funding base that accompanied the Sure Start initiative there was, instead, an emergent alliance of agencies and interested participants that was yet to determine the local agenda. In this environment it is possible to steer your own course and this is precisely what Karen and her governing body had done.

This is not to say that they were politically motivated and active, rather they acted on motives of expediency and real concerns for children's learning. It would be impossible to describe Karen as manipulative as she is basically a nice person, with the interests of children in her school being her principal concern. Nevertheless she was sharp enough to know how to get the best from the system and in that way is not very different to most other headteachers I have met from different phases of education who also know how to get the best for their school. The centre was thus an extension of the highly successful nursery school she had been running for several years.

The Centre consists of three basic elements. Firstly, there are day care facilities provided by an external provider. In this instance the provider was the Pre-Service Learning Alliance (PLA), a national organisation with trust status that attempts to keep running costs to a minimum, thus reducing the cost to parents. Equally this could have been a commercial profit-seeking organisation. Day care facilities are available to all children 0-5 years of age and open at 8.00 a.m. to provide breakfast to a number of children. Technically day care can remain open to 6.00 p.m., although it was actually closing earlier as at the time there was only one booking for a child that took them to 5.00 p.m. Day care services are available all year, with staff on 50 week contracts. Secondly, there is a nursery school with about 100 children, aged three to five years, which offers morning and afternoon sessions. Thirdly there are facilities for local community use with a community development worker who is responsible for promoting and managing adult use of the centre which is mainly focused on supporting parents, either by means of maintaining support groups or through the provision of training courses, with these core services supplemented with the occasional social event.

Day care has two separate rooms, one for children aged 0-2 years and the other for children aged three to five years, as well as staff facilities. The provision is run by PLA and is one of over 100 such services they are running throughout the county. Parents are charged for the care of their children on a cost recovery basis, with workers mainly being paid on or close to basic national rates of pay although supervisors do get marginally more. Staff costs are low because the people involved tend to undertake the work as community service and would most likely have worked as volunteers in former times. The service consists of a range of blocks of time available throughout the day, although at the time of my visit the local PLA coordinator was seeking to establish greater flexibility of attendance and to ensure bookings for placements outside of term-time were made far enough in advance to allow for proper staff planning. In some ways, it seemed, local practices had subverted the central policy of PLA leaving them exposed to undue risk, particularly in determining appropriate staffing levels. Her task was to

challenge established custom and practice, not only to keep costs down but also to widen the range of possibilities available to service users.

The nursery school operated the standard practice of morning and afternoon services, although the advent of Sure Start had enabled parents to choose all day provision and for the children to have lunch at school. The school still ran to normal school day and term times which meant that they shared a number of children with day care, with a pattern of engagement that could include, for example, breakfast in day care, the morning, lunch and afternoon in the school and the early evening back in day care. The sharing of children in this way created a number of opportunities and challenges for leading and managing both the school and the centre, with those issues being explored more fully later in this chapter.

The nursery school based its educational practice on High/Scope, an approach to children's learning that is widely used in early childhood centres. High/Scope claims to recognise the unique nature of each child and seeks to develop their confidence by building on their previous experience. Children are encouraged to use their own initiative by the scheme and develop their own interests. Every day the children follow the High/Scope model of planning their own work, doing their own work and the reviewing what they have done. The curriculum is based on the areas of Language and Literacy, Number, Space, Time, Movement, Music, Creative Representation, Initiative and Social Relations, Classification and Seriation. This understanding of the curriculum is combined with the Foundation Stage Curriculum as both curricula are play based and believed to offer children the foundation of knowledge, skills and ideas that they will build on throughout their lives.

### **Governance, Leadership and Management**

As suggested earlier, the philosophy driving the focus of the Centre's provision is based very much on the creation of effective learning environment. Karen and the rest of the nursery school staff believe that real learning cannot take place without addressing the social welfare agenda that tend to be evident in areas of deprivation, but seek to enhance children's



learning in conjunction with the family and not to supplant them. In other centres and local authorities there have been examples of family influence on children's learning being relegated in favour of the professionals who staff the centres, although the early indications from the national evaluation of local Sure Start tends to show educational attainment and achievement to have been suppressed when such intervention has been allowed.

Since becoming a designated Children's Centre, therefore, Karen has worked to change the nature of leadership and management within the new organisation, although she is yet to make serious inroads with the governing body. Central to the changes that have been evident is in the role of Deputy where the incumbent, Sue, has been encouraged to widen her remit and has been one of the early participants in the National Professional Qualification for Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL), a new leadership development programme devised by the NCSL. NPQIC was based on a model of leadership development in early childhood provision that had been successfully operating for some considerable time. One of the features of the programme was a focus on what women in general and feminine attributes in particular can bring to the practice of leadership and management. The field of early childhood education is heavily populated by women who have, Sue claims after her successful learning experience on NPQICL, particular strengths that can be applied successfully to these largely feminine environments.

From September, 2006 Sue was to have line management responsibility for Day Care services, although this was recognised by all parties as a convenient and logical arrangement as this move would blur the lines of accountability even further. Technically and legally the management of Day Care services was the responsibility of the employer, in this case PLA, so Sue's involvement was under the auspices of mutual understanding. Indeed, I was privy to an open discussion between the employer's representative and the school leadership team as to how this devolved responsibility might play out in practice. In effect, it was agreed, Sue would provide direction and decision-making at the local level, but would always be working within a frame

of reference provided by the employer. Consequently, issues relating to staff management that shifted away from day to day responsibility, such as disciplinary action, would need the direct involvement of the employer. It was evident in these early days of discussion that subsequent management arrangements would depend on trust a great deal of the time as it was impossible to predict a wide range of possible situations prior to the proposal for local management becoming active.

This worked example did open a range of possibilities, however, for the establishment of devolved and coordinated management activity by the school on behalf of employers. Clearly this provided Sue with a golden opportunity to apply the learning accrued through the NPQICL development programme and to broaden her experience of management. Identifying leadership responsibility was a different challenge, however, and one that lacked definition at the time of my field research. As the headteacher Karen had identified the need not only to coordinate and spread the management load, but also to seek coherence of the impetus provided by each of the agencies supporting the Centre. To her mind this was an issue for the governing body and one that they had yet to address.

Leadership is about making choices between competing options, with effective leadership being exhibited by those who make informed choices (Male, 2006). The Children's Centre had been established within a matrix of agencies, some of which had yet to realise their own identity in this new configuration of child care and educative services. The governing body, which had been the axis of power when the provision was merely a maintained nursery school, had been traditionally introspective. In that mode it had been concerned largely with the educational provision on offer to the children and their academic progress, with little emphasis on or engagement with external politics. Consequently they were ill equipped to cope with the political landscape that now faced them as they underwent the transition to a Children's Centre, underpinned by multi-agency work. This was one of the key issues identified by Karen that needed a different perspective and set of behaviours from the governing body if their declared learning objectives for

the children were to be met by the new centre. As a case in point the forthcoming Local Children's Partnerships probably offered equal opportunities for beneficial or detrimental exploitation amongst the membership. There was every chance that to be successful in the pursuit of resources and circumstances that favoured any one partner in the future there would need to be a sustained, politically motivated, focus on the partnership by the most powerful members of that individual agency or organisation. This was alien behaviour to the governing body of the maintained school, but was deemed to be an essential transformation by Karen who had seen over 30 nursery schools closed across the nation in the previous year as they 'lost' the fight with other local providers of child care and/or education services for children under the age of five years.

It is at this point that we can see the political and critical perspective required by the head in order to lead effectively in the early years setting. In this case Karen had identified the need to engage actively with new partnership arrangements in order to secure the future of the organisation to which she and significant others in the leadership structure were personally committed. The criticality she exhibited was to recognise that the governing body, her most powerful ally, was not ready for such engagement. At this point she was very definitely the leader and was exhibiting all the qualities so strongly recommended by Senge (1990) in that she was leader as designer, steward and teacher. Her she was identifying the future shape and behaviours needed both to survive and thrive (designer), was acting as keeper of the flame (steward) and helping others become more adept in their actions in the external environment (teacher).

## **References**

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Interview:

30<sup>th</sup> June, 2006

Karen had been head of the nursery school for seven years, having been curriculum coordinator. When the previous head had left unexpectedly she was persuaded to take the job. Although she viewed the headship as a challenge she still felt that the role as curriculum coordinator was more demanding in that she took home incredible amounts of work. The transition to headship resulted in a change of focus to school leadership which she described as "huge" as she did not get any support for her induction, did not have a job description and so was not really sure what the role was. Her main support came from other headteachers of nursery schools, although she did go on the Headlamp programme run by the county which she described as "very good". The link adviser from the local authority was also helpful, particularly as she had relevant and recent experience as a headteacher in similar circumstances.

She described the job of headteacher as being "very scary" as a number of major initiatives, such as Performance Management, were being introduced. These innovations brought turbulence to the job which extended her period of transition to the point where she felt comfortable and competent to nearly three years. In 2002 however, Sure Start came to the town bringing with it a new agenda for headship. Funding became available for new facilities which was then combined with a Nursery Development Grant from the local authority in order to allow them to build a new community room and a pre-school room. There was still not enough capacity, however, so when 'dual-centre' funding became available the school applied in order to expand their provision further. There were some three years of building work in all, finishing in the previous August. In that respect, therefore, the Centre was still in its first year of full operation.

Her daily routine is basically operational. She starts each day by setting up the learning materials for the morning session. On the days I visited, in high summer, this task consisted of setting out a large number of items and play

materials in the outside area and included the filling of water features with buckets carried from inside the building. She is also SENCO so often schedules meetings in the mornings to review individual education plans and children's progress. Administrative activities she describes as 'tidying up', a casual phrase which usually meant attending to her in-tray and other emerging issues as well as routine correspondence and filing. In the afternoons she teaches, an activity for which she prepares assiduously every evening. Major tasks, such as the drafting of the school's self-evaluation form (SEF) is also done at home and usually at times outside of the school day.

The pattern of her activity across the year has changed since the opening of the Centre and she now goes into the office at least twice a week during the school holiday period, except when she has her own holiday. Then the basic rule is not to go to the office. This has meant change to her behaviour where in the past, as the headteacher of the nursery school such attendance was entirely voluntary she now feels that she should be present throughout much of the 50 week working year. Interestingly there has not been any reconsideration of her terms and conditions of service and neither has there been a salary increase. When I pressed her as to whether her workload had gone up she indicated that changes had been made to the deputy's job that had seen the transference of some duties to the deputy, such as classroom observation and work on curriculum development, which has changed the nature of her own headship. In addition Karen gets additional support from a SEN worker for the Centre and a Community Liaison Officer who organises and runs parent workshops and adult learning, thus relieving her of tasks that she would have previously done. In summary there are more people doing the kind of work that she would have been doing as headteacher of the nursery school.

She perceives the major challenges of leading the Centre to be: governance, funding, sustainability and keeping the ideal of the Centre being a community facility, working to support the parents and children that come.

Governance was a worry for although the governing body and the management board had worked side by side and this had not been problematic so far, this was not along term solution and neither was the same level of funding guaranteed. Getting the two bodies together was an important objective. When asked how she might assist such a process she indicated a need for alertness on her part as to what was happening in major local policy making structures such as the Children's Partnership Board and the Children's Centre Development Team in the county. The governing body was not strong enough in its current format, she considered, to be influential in this arena. The governors needed to be looking outward and more strategic, rather than operational. This would be a hard transition, she thought, because there was so much change and it was difficult enough for full-time professional staff to keep abreast of events and policy options, thus making it extremely difficult for part-time voluntary governors to be able to make informed choices. "They do not see themselves as people who can change things, rather they see themselves as people who manage things". Joining the governing body and the management board together might be one way to make them powerful enough to invite members of the local policy makers to their meetings to discuss proposed initiatives in advance of implementation.

This placed the onus on heads to provide the strategic overview, a situation that had been predicted some three years earlier by the national Nursery Headteachers Forum which had suggested that they were in a 'do or die' scenario. Nursery schools would have to seek to work toward Extended School status or to become Children's Centres otherwise there would be no support for nursery school education. She considered the focus of attention should be balanced between social welfare and education in early years provision and saw her role as seeking to maintain that balance. It was easy to see how the social welfare agenda could dominate early years provision, with major policy initiatives such as Every Child Matters being at the forefront of government policy. Clearly, in her opinion, it was impossible to educate children successfully without appropriate social support, but this should be viewed as a means an end rather than an end in itself.

The conclusion was for heads of Children's Centres to keep driving the learning agenda and to keep families directly involved.

*Sustainability?* 150 families attend on a daily basis, but they actually spend very little time overall in the Centre as their children move on to mainstream primary schools. They do, however, typically spend almost two years in such contact because of the additional provision made by the centre where the nursery school would only have had the children for about a year. Nevertheless it is difficult to get strong parental involvement and it is constant struggle and huge effort to sustain this commitment. Inevitably this became a very personal issue for the head who had to not only walk the talk, but to repeatedly engender the necessary enthusiasm within the community.

She felt the fact that Sure Start local funding is ending to be a major concern, because in this town's scheme she considered parents had really been really at the centre and were consulted all the way through, forming a good percentage on all the management boards. This had been a really good structure to work with from her point of view and very empowering for parents. Her principal concern was that if that way of working was diluted she wondered whether that level of responsiveness to need would still be there.

*Next stage for Centres?* Keep learning at the top of the agenda. Be mindful of childrens' welfare. "I think the exciting thing is the partnership working. I think it is wonderful that we are working with the pre-school , working with the babies and working with other agencies – all working towards improving learning for children. It is actually happening, so to be in a childrens' centre at this time is probably the best place to be."

"Yes, it's making me happy. [Happier?] Yes, it is more fulfilling knowing that you are meeting young childrens' needs." So, it is broader professional role and one she is happier with. [Is it sustainable?] "Sue and I went on some training and it became very clear to me that I am very committed to High/Scope and that is where I think the happiness and the excitement is and

what I do not like is working in the office. So what I have to do is adapt High/Scope ways of working to the office.”

“It is hard, but it is not too hard because the rewards are there.”