

## **Developing projects to improve outcomes for children and young people through university partnerships**

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### **Abstract**

*The Centre for Education Policy in Practice at Bath Spa was established in response to the Labour Government's Every Child Matters agenda. It was intended to develop partnerships and research projects to identify the implications of this agenda for university programmes and student employability, and to enhance the university's standing among children's services professionals.*

*The change in government led to a reappraisal of the Centre's role. The key foci remain: challenging inequality; supporting the active participation of children and young people; using the research strengths of the university to support individuals and organisations on the front line. However, the new political context has enabled a more critical focus on the legacy of the previous government, and the impact of new reforms, not only in the field of education and social care, but more generally in terms of economic and social policy, local governance, and the role of the citizen.*

*This paper considers the challenges faced in maintaining an overview of government policy and establishing partnerships in a swiftly changing political and economic environment, the links between projects, research and teaching, and wider relationships between the university, its students, and the local community. It concludes that this broader concept of partnership working enhances both the university as a whole, and the particular contribution of Education Studies, in terms of curriculum content and opportunities for students to engage with the wider children's workforce.*

### **Key words**

Partnership, equalities, children and young people's voice, community, policy, research

## **Developing projects to improve outcomes for children and young people**

The Centre for Education Policy in Practice (EPIP) at Bath Spa University was created in 2008. It was funded by the University itself, in order to address some key issues arising from the Labour government's Every Child Matters agenda. Its role was defined as

'to develop internal and external partnerships to address the implications of a range of current government initiatives – Every Child Matters (ECM), the Children's Plan and the Integrated Qualifications Framework (IQF) – to identify their implications for BSU programmes and student employability' (Ward 2008: 1).

The School of Education Strategic Plan 2009/12, adopted in February 2010, stated:

'Partnership extends beyond schools to the children's services in local authorities and the voluntary sector. The School's Centre for Education Policy in Practice is intended to form a catalyst for the formation of links and research projects involving such stakeholders.' A key role of the Centre was therefore to: 'enhance the University's standing among professionals in children's services and to supply resources for all programmes (School of Education Strategic Plan, 2010:13).

The original website entry defined the centre as encompassing:

- The experience of children, young people and families
- Changing approaches and relationships within and between organisations delivering services
- The experience and needs of the developing workforce
- The contribution of Higher Education (HE) and relationships between HE providers and employers (Centre for Education Policy in Practice 2010)

These ambitious aims contained a number of assumptions, not least the continuation of the overall government policy of integrating services, the prescriptive approach of top down initiatives and the planning framework based on externally imposed targets. The local authority partnership model, based on Children's Trusts, and the single children's workforce, led by the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC), seemed firmly in place, as did the 'Five Outcomes' established in Section 10.2 of The Children Act 2004. The notion of local partnerships was underpinned by the government's 'Total Place' initiative, which, while acknowledging the role of social capital and the importance of local determination, focussed on making the most effective use of the totality of resources in a given area (HM Treasury, 2010). Despite some initial reticence in 2004, the requirement on schools to cooperate had been strengthened in subsequent legislation.

The overall approach, therefore, was essentially reactive, assuming that the Centre would operate within this existing framework. Nonetheless certain key principles were established from the outset – a commitment to challenging inequality, and to using the research strengths of the university to support positive developments in 'front line' work with children and young people. To these were subsequently added an explicit commitment to developing voice and participation for children, young people and learners, and to promoting innovation.

The original website stated that the Centre would

‘work with a range of internal and external partners and to contribute to critical understanding of the relationship between policy and practice. It will achieve this by:

- implementing and supporting collaborative research projects
- encouraging reflective practice and contributing to the developing evidence base
- contributing to the development of teaching programmes that support the changing workforce
- developing as a knowledge transfer hub within the university and the wider region’

The change in government in May 2010, which coincided with the appointment of a new director in July, was a major watershed for the Centre. Key areas identified in its original mission, such as the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) were subjected to detailed scrutiny as potential sources of bureaucracy, with ContactPoint, New Labour’s approach to information sharing, being abolished overnight. Co-location of services and the role of extended schools fell down the agenda as resources reduced, while the coordination of integrated services and of workforce developments ceased, alongside the reduced role of the Regional Government offices which had monitored these, and the ‘Bonfire of the Quangos’ which saw the demise of the CWDC, among others. Children’s trusts were no longer to be mandatory, while the formal local government based strategic partnership approach was abandoned in the name of local determination and the freeing up of local markets. The role of front line professionals was seen as paramount, with an emphasis on freedoms and autonomy; schools were to be liberated from the requirement to cooperate in Children’s Trust arrangements. A new approach to local partnership – the ‘Big Society’ – was mooted, but this was explicitly presented as a way of harnessing local resources to reduce external funding requirements, while the emphasis was more on individual contribution, than on effective collective provision of services.

These changes represented important challenges for the Centre, but also significant opportunities. The original assumptions of a local authority/strategic partnership based approach has given way to a much broader concept of partnership working with a much wider range of organisations. Changes to school autonomy – not least academies and the new importance of school trusts – initial teacher education, the role of teaching schools and continuing professional development (CPD), linked to the changing role of the Training and Development Agency (now subsumed into the DfE as the ‘Teaching Agency’), have enabled the development of new partnerships with schools. New funding arrangements for undergraduate courses, linked to a focus on access and opening up new potential markets, have provided a further impetus for creative developments, linking the Centre more firmly with mainstream courses. The overall impact of the changes has enabled the Centre to take a much more proactive approach in terms of project development, while working with academic colleagues to adopt a more critical perspective towards the original Every Child Matters agenda (see Simon and Ward, 2010).

As originally envisaged, the Centre was seen as potentially linking with the broader CPD priorities of the School of Education, while offering some undergraduate teaching. However, what has emerged has been the centrality and the complementary nature of the relationship with Education Studies. This is for several reasons; the development of broader critical social and policy perspectives is arguably more relevant to a three- year Education Studies course than to narrower and more time-constrained, task focussed 'professional' developments, while undergraduate students are freer to engage in a wider range of placements and research opportunities. EPIP projects have also provided students with direct experience and practical examples of different types of research. Similarly the initial qualification level of many of those touched by specific projects –young parents, care leavers, forces families, for example – is much closer to undergraduate level, leading to opportunities for links at university level with Widening Participation, Access, and Foundation Degrees. Although some CPD type activity has been offered by the Centre – for example training in emotion coaching techniques for teachers and other professionals – there is a potential conflict between the independent critical stance adopted by the Centre, where training is focussed on supporting the project activity, and market- led CPD, where the focus is determined by those who are paying for it.

A key issue for the Centre has been the pace of government activity since the publication of the Coalition Agenda in June 2010. In 2008 the nature of government policy and policy making was fairly predictable, and therefore the notion of a 'critical perspective' could be almost a comfortable academic exercise, with an option of balancing top down and bottom up perspectives. Since 2010 the development of specific policies – beyond the rhetorical pronouncements – has been much more difficult to discern, as the implementation infrastructure of the previous regime has been progressively dismantled in favour of new and untried institutions. Similarly, the nature of coalition governance has led to apparently incompatible policy frameworks such as the Pupil Premium, against increased autonomy for schools. The role of the Centre within the School of Education has therefore been both to offer a critical commentary on day to day developments of government policy and to develop new ways of testing out the reality of these developments in specific communities and groups. This is of course within an overall economic context where access to resources, both for front line organisations and for researchers, has been diminishing. In some ways this has enhanced partnership working by encouraging projects to work with the research team, to enable developments to take place; however, in the longer term this could make the activities themselves unsustainable, as the research phase comes to an end or research team priorities shift to other areas.

The partnerships developed to date reflect a range of inequalities, context and research methodology, including action research, formal evaluation and data analysis. In the first phase of operation four projects were identified, namely:

- Melksham community 0-19 Resilience, based on emotion coaching
- Supplementary school evaluation and development
- Parent empowerment
- Pupil mobility and achievement

The genesis of each project was different. In Melksham there were effectively two research foci. The first, which was initiated by the Director of the Centre – was in researching how effectively a common issue could be implemented across a number of settings and organisations, while involving the local community. The second, initiated by a group of academic staff, was the specific impact of that particular initiative – emotion coaching – on the outcomes and experience of a range of individual children, young people, and staff within the participating organisations. Funding was obtained both from a university partnership fund bid, and from the local Community Area Board - the new Wiltshire Unitary Authority model for devolved local governance. The project team included staff from Education Studies, CPD and the Department of Psychology, with a PhD student evaluating some of the impacts as part of her final thesis.

There was considerable local support for the project, including significant media coverage which generated interest among the wider professional community - while the former Children's Commissioner, Professor Sir Al Aynsley-Green, stated:

'I am fascinated by the Melksham project since it seeks to achieve much of what I was trying to articulate in my speech 'Should the nurture of children be everybody's business?' I also respect immensely Wiltshire Council's Area Board concept, in trying to build resilient communities, and this model is one that I can see has immense implications, if successful, for rolling out into other places' (Parker and Rose, 2011, p3).

A clear exit strategy has now been developed, including the mainstreaming of the approach within school and organisational culture. Although detailed statistical data is still being finalised, anecdotal evidence both from schools and the youth and children's centres has been very positive. A further – originally unanticipated - element which emerged was the impact of the project on the Bath Spa drama students who participated in the training for both staff and peer mentors. A second project to replicate the findings in a different type of neighbourhood has been funded by another Community Area Board, and bids have been submitted to develop projects in other areas.

The other three projects all emerged from individual organisations. In the case of the Supplementary Schools Project, the Bath Black Families Education Support Group (BFESG) requested support in undertaking a formal evaluation of the effectiveness of their 'Voice Academy' project. This was seen as a useful way of modelling a new relationship with community voluntary organisations and an early aim of the project was to produce a sustainable evaluation toolkit which could be replicated elsewhere. The evaluation report, produced by a member of the CPD team, was published in November 2011 (Wisdom, 2011).

Other contacts made by the Centre with PATH Into Teaching, as part of its contribution to the university Widening Participation agenda, identified several groups seeking to establish supplementary schools in other areas, and this has led to the development of a further research proposal, working with the BFESG and with other universities, to build on the findings of the 2010 DCSF funded research on supplementary schools (Maylor et al, 2010) to examine the development of

supplementary schools in rural areas. This work has also been linked with taught modules on diversity and supplementary schools within the Education Studies course.

The Parents as Partners project by contrast came from a request from a voluntary organisation for support in developing a course for parent volunteers who were willing to train as facilitators for 'Stay and play' groups at a Children's Centre. This was supported by the Course Leader from the Early Years Foundation Degree, using Higher Education Funding Council (HEFC) co-funding. The course itself was subsequently accredited by the university, giving participants the opportunity to gain 20 Level 4 credits, with encouragement to access Foundation Degree and Education Studies opportunities. A separate research evaluation is taking place as to the impact of the course on participants, existing paid workers and on the operation of the groups themselves. The training model has been viewed with interest by other partner organisations in other projects, and may provide a basis for developing a further training support networks for parents and staff within early years schemes. EPIP worked with the voluntary organisation to secure community project funding from the local authority, which has made the project sustainable for the next two years.

The Pupil Mobility project was concerned with the impact of high pupil mobility on different individuals and communities, in terms of school performance, in a Bristol inner city school. While this was essentially a data analysis exercise, it provided significant opportunities for linkage into wider community development issues, research into local early years projects currently being undertaken elsewhere in the School of Education, and with the supplementary school work. Links have also been made with the service school projects outlined below, both in terms of comparative data and increasingly in the intervention strategies used to mitigate the impact of mobility, and enhance pupil progress. Service schools in Wiltshire tend to be more ethnically diverse than others, thereby again linking to the black and minority ethnic (BME) focus of the project.

The themes established in this first tranche of projects – community governance, the role of the voluntary sector, parenting, and impacts on specific communities and groups were further developed from April 2011. In these later phases there has been a greater emphasis on children and young people's voice and agency, as well as the impact of the projects themselves on policy and practice at both local and national level.

In Care In School is based on a collaboration with the Bath and North East Somerset (B&NES) Virtual School and the In Care Council (ICC), to develop an understanding of the needs of children and young people in care in school, from the point of view of young people themselves. Several national organisations, including the Who Cares Trust and the PSHE Association, are on the project team, and ASDAN is providing accreditation for the young people involved. Funding from the local authority has enabled the ICC to develop scenarios, commission a professional film company and actors to script and film them, produce lesson plans and teachers packs. These materials have been piloted in three B&NES schools, and by 58 volunteer PGCE students, with a national launch planned for autumn 2012. ICC members have been

involved throughout, in briefing teachers, PGCE and undergraduate students. Thus illustrates the range of colleagues who have been engaged with the project, in both PGCE and Education Studies. Secondary PGCE students will be producing evaluations of the materials as part of their final school placement assessments, while a broader impact evaluation will be undertaken by academic staff. Further developments are planned to widen the issues to include post 16 and care leavers, and links have already been established with foster care organisations – one of which already uses modules accredited by the university - to broaden training to involve foster carers at undergraduate, and other social care professionals, at Masters level.

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) project illustrates a different approach to partnership, whereby EPIP brought together specific expertise from the Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education in Bristol with a Wiltshire youth service project for LGBT young people. The group were encouraged to identify their own development priorities, which included marketing their activities to other young people, publicising issues around homophobia, particularly in schools, building up their self-confidence, and feeling safe in the street. A presentation to the national 'Schools Out' Conference produced some particularly positive local press and radio coverage, and led to an invitation to develop training materials for Ofsted inspectors, which are now featured on the Ofsted website, as well as linking the group to several wider networks. The group has subsequently produced a number of films, including a 'zero tolerance' campaign around homophobic language in schools. The impact of the project is currently being evaluated, and will provide a focus for future developments.

Several projects have developed with service children, built on earlier work by the researchers in Wiltshire, and linking with the Centre's commitment to children's voice. The Service Children's Forum Project, based in four Tidworth primary schools and funded by the Ministry of Defence, aims to develop enquiry based learning and reflection in the schools and the local community among the current Year 5 cohort, and to establish their role as mentors with the next year 5 cohort in academic year 2012/13. This reflects the general objective of moving away from evaluating adult-centred representational structures such as school councils and children's parliaments, to exploring ways of enabling children to have agency in the real world.

In these examples it has been the university's role as facilitator which has enabled positive developments to take place, while the university presence as a committed, but objective, evaluator has reassured some of those with concerns about the challenging nature of some of the issues addressed, such as local councillors, parents of gay teenagers, or those feeling their professional status as being under threat. Conversely, the involvement of particular partners in the development of our approaches has been crucial, whether on a single partner basis such as in Parents as Partners, or through a complex network, as in the In Care, In School project.

Our growing reputation and contacts with a number of community partner organisations led to the Centre being invited to tender to evaluate the Total Somerset High Contact Families Project, managed via the Children's Trust. The project consisted of a focussed intervention in nine families in one small

geographical area over a period of six months. This took us into a new type of relationship with a wider strategic organisation with specific funding for evaluation activities, which enabled us to link our bottom up research methodologies with wider policy formation, and where we were able to make recommendations for policy development on the basis of our observations of local front line practice (Macer et al, 2011). The project was also attractive to us as one of the last examples of work funded by the now defunct Total Place Initiative, and provided an opportunity to consider critically the implications and potential for maintaining such developments under organisational frameworks emerging from Coalition government policy. Similar opportunities have subsequently arisen in a study of literacy materials for young people in Pupil Referral Units, in partnership with Booktrust, a national charity, and in developing an evaluation framework for a national policy forum, the National Education Trust, both projects funded via the DfE and geared to enabling the organisations to evaluate the impact of their policy and development activities on practice with young people and in the classroom.

The range of policy areas covered, therefore, has impacted not only on the field of education and social care, but more generally in terms of economic and social policy, local governance, and the role of the citizen. Active external partners include local politicians and community groups, schools, children's and young people's centres, statutory agencies such as the Police and Ministry of Defence, both small local and major national voluntary organisations, and children and young people themselves. Within the university, colleagues from across the School of Education – undergraduate, PGCE and CPD programmes have contributed, as have other academic departments – notably Psychology, Creative Writing, Business Support, Widening Participation, the Careers Service, the Students Union and students themselves, from a range of different courses.

This level of buy in to our work has enabled a much wider range of colleagues and students to become directly engaged in different types of research, at all levels, including PhD. Alongside our practical contributions to taught courses, EPIP projects provide some real examples of different activities beyond the conventional classroom environment which illustrate issues covered within the broad Education Studies or PGCE courses. We are building on these to provide opportunities for direct involvement of students at different levels. These include simple participation in activities, opportunities to engage with different models/paradigms of research, using EPIP contacts to develop innovative placements, and making formal academic contributions, which are published on the Centre website. One second year Education Studies student, for example, with an interest in drama, took part in emotion coaching training for Melksham schools, worked with young people on the peer mentoring training scheme, then became so interested that he used emotion coaching as the focus of his primary school placement and later helped with filming the In Care scenarios.

The impact of these partnerships on children, young people and their communities is currently being evaluated through individual projects, using both qualitative and quantitative measures. While it will take some time to develop sophisticated indicators in terms of broader outcomes, there is already clear evidence of a consolidation of existing relationships with schools and settings, as well as some

innovative engagement with newly emergent organisations such as Community Area Boards, school trusts and federations. Relationships are also developing with a much wider range of local, voluntary sector and community organisations than might have been envisaged under the original Every Child Matters framework. The Director of the Bath Race Equality Council identified this community orientation as the key element in any attempt by the university to recruit and support potential students from BME backgrounds (Lalla, 2011).

The Centre has been less successful where policy research has not been grounded in specific partnership activities, such as Troops to Teaching, or Young People's Voice. While there has been huge enthusiasm for these initiatives among potential partners, we have learned that it is the specific partnership activity which actually generates the basis for our research, and thus our contribution to policy development. In our more recent work, therefore, we have been more concerned to tease out the broader implications of our existing partnerships, rather than to continue to generate new partnerships and activities. This is for several reasons. First is the general consensus in partnership literature as a whole that most effective partnerships seek to work through and deepen existing relationships (see Thompson et al, 1991). Second is the issue of sustainability, and third, related to this, is the capacity of a small research centre to maintain a large number of relationships

A final, again unanticipated, consequence of this partnership development has been the importance of the media. The centre has benefitted from positive local media coverage both in developing partnerships with local organisations, and in getting its policy message across to the community. The team which developed classroom materials for In Care In Schools, for example, originally contacted the Centre in response to a press report on the emotion coaching project, while the young people in the LGBT project gained huge kudos from positive reports in local press and radio. Young people have used the media – particularly film - to tell their own stories, which in turn has enhanced the local and national reputation of the university.

While we would argue that the EPIP partnership approach has been beneficial, both to schools and to the university as a whole, there are several caveats. The first is the long term sustainability of funding. The Centre has benefitted from the one-off funding put aside by the University, and from continuing interest and moral support from the management team. However, in order to maintain its role in the future, it will need to secure external funding and support.

Secondly, and related to this, the current economic situation means increasing competition for available resources, whether from trusts or funding bodies, or from other parts of the university. Start-up projects almost always require some modest pump priming funding, which the centre has managed to provide during the present funding cycle, but is unlikely to be available to the same degree in future years. Conversely the willingness of colleagues to engage with projects has had to be tempered with a recognition of existing pressures on their time and often the reduced capacity to engage within other organisations as a consequence of the recession.

In turn this pressure on time, and other priorities, has meant that there has been insufficient time and energy to manage significant changes, and bring all colleagues

along. This implies that, when the current EPIP funding ends, the partnership approach could be weakened by a lack of cultural awareness and an assumption that it is an add-on which can only be implemented with additional resources. There is also the need to maintain quality and academic rigour, which requires resources, time and the active engagement of colleagues across the School and the university.

Finally there are the ethical issues involved. Our research uses case studies to demonstrate inequalities of power, and to demonstrate what can be done to empower specific individuals and groups. Necessarily, our focus is often on the least powerful and most vulnerable in society. However, in doing so we need to be mindful of the impact of our research on individuals and their life chances, and whether our interventions, particularly in action research, create unrealistic expectations and thereby reinforce failure/inequality in the longer term.

The traditional view of a university as an elite 'ivory tower', aloof from the world, is both derided and reinforced in current government thinking. Recent papers on the future of higher education (Department for Business, Industry and Skills, 2011), on HE involvement in teacher training and in other aspects of the children's workforce (Department for Education, November 2011), challenge universities to engage with the 'real world', with economic realities and with those on the front line in the global economy. Yet at the same time, where it suits the government's agenda, as in the debate over A levels, higher education is presented as the guarantor of traditional academic standards (see the letter from the Secretary of State to Ofqual dated 30 March 2012) Of course, this is underpinned by the notion of a hierarchy of excellence among universities themselves. Ministers and Secretaries of State assert that rigorous traditional academic approaches will promote social mobility, raise aspiration and cure all known social ills, driven inexorably by the beneficent pressure of globalisation and market forces (See for example the Secretary of State's Brighton Speech on 10 May 2012 ).

We beg to differ. Global economic decline, the economic and social impact of current government policies, and changes to their funding base undoubtedly mean that universities must re-think their strategies and mission, including their partnership approaches. However, we believe that a university should be rooted in local communities and their needs, and that, especially in the current economic environment, it is only by responding to those needs that the university can survive as an independent academic institution, and fulfil its moral purpose. Further , we believe that Education Studies, because of its unique focus on a universal service, ie schools, has a unique role in promoting such developments, in offering an alternative academic discourse, in working with other departments across the university to challenge practice, and in offering specific perspectives, practical and research opportunities to its students.

The EPIP approach has provided models of alternative practice across the university. It is unashamedly children and young people centred, with a strong community focus and an assumption of partnership as a norm. With schools it has promoted a whole school/cluster way of working, and extended the range and quality of relationships with partner organisations, democratic institutions and statutory services. With professionals, students, parents, children and young people

themselves it has championed active and grounded research, and the widest possible accessibility to the university.

Within Education Studies EPIP has encouraged an active involvement with projects and engagement with different research models and paradigms, as well as developing opportunities for alternative placements and dissertation topics. EPIP has contributed informed and up to the minute teaching programmes, particularly in areas such as policy, multi-agency working and equalities, while promoting cross school/university links and opportunities for students to engage with the wider children's workforce.

We believe, therefore, that the case for a partnership model of working to develop the mission of the university in the current financial political and social climate, and the role of Education Studies in taking this forward, is irrefutable. The challenge for EPIP now is to develop a sustainable model of operation which can be embedded across the Education Studies curriculum.

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