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## Linking Primary Education and Sure Start to Avoid Low Achievement Later

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**ABSTRACT** This article suggests that many of the 16-year-olds who don't achieve a C or better in GCSE English may have had parents who didn't recognise the value of talking to them from the moment they were born. It argues that a bringing together of health visitors, Sure Start centres and primary schools could help lift many children out of the cultural poverty associated with poor language skills. But it won't help if the cultural poverty of a home is due to economic poverty, inevitably causing parent(s) to spend little quality time with their young offspring.

When David Beckham was criticised in August 2015 in the *Daily Mail* (Buckley, 2015) because his four-year-old daughter was seen with a dummy in her mouth, he responded vehemently that it was a pacifier because she had been unwell when the photographer snapped her. It was a storm in a teacup for the Beckhams but it drew widespread attention to the NHS Choices website's 'Useful baby talk tips' [1], which starts by urging parents to talk to their babies from the moment they are born and ends with 'It's hard to learn to talk with a dummy in your mouth'.

### **The Tail: a sad tale of failure and of sad ways of targeting it**

*THE TAIL: how England's schools fail one child in five – and what can be done* (Marshall, 2013) is a powerful compilation of essays. It is edited by Paul Marshall, who defines 'the tail' as those without basic skills in literacy and numeracy who only gain the equivalent of five D grades or less at GCSE. They are the children who will find it hard to progress to the qualifications they need to get good jobs, and who are least likely to find secure employment during their lives.

The book describes what its editor says is wrong with English education. In my reading it shows that what is wrong in England is that our education

politicians, those who advise them, and most of the contributors to Marshall's book, believe that the prime purpose of schooling is to get good grades in academic examinations. Thus, in the final section of the book entitled 'Manifesto for the Tail' two targets are advocated:

- At least 90% of pupils should achieve the standard of five 'good' GCSEs at age 16 by 2020;
- All 11-year-olds (excluding statemented SEN [special educational needs] pupils) should achieve at least level 4 in English and maths by the end of primary school by 2017.

How are these targets to be achieved? Most of the contributors in this book would put more pressure on schools and teachers, with suggestions like longer school days, tighter control of the curriculum, financial incentives to attract the best graduates and to encourage good teachers into poor schools, better training, teaching priority areas supported by teams of highly skilled teachers, etc.

But the rationale for demanding more from schools is economic, not educational. What is wrong with this discussion of the low achievements of those described as 'the tail'? Of course all young people should be able to meet the literacy and numeracy expectations of their employers – and their customers if they are self-employed. But they deserve good levels of literacy and numeracy for themselves in order to engage in and enjoy much of the written cultural wealth and heritage of the world; to be able to pursue paths of lifelong learning in areas which might interest them; to be able as citizens to understand the political issues aired in elections; to handle the bureaucratic demands of modern life and, when hardship hits, make effective claims for support; and, in terms of eventually becoming parents, to rear their children in homes which are culturally rich. Much of Marshall's book ignores the humanity of education and focuses on its mechanics.

### **Early Intervention Instead of Later School Targets**

However, one chapter in *The Tail* stands out. White, Field and Weedon, drawing on the middle author's *Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances* (Field, 2010), stress the importance of early intervention. A key conclusion is that 'Services need to be better at engaging parents and building on their strengths'.

Gaps in outcome between children from richer and poorer backgrounds emerge early in life and widen during childhood. Right from the start many poorer children are disadvantaged, debilitating their educational attainment and achievement in life: they never catch up with their richer peers. Importantly, while the gap tends to emerge along class lines, the evidence is equally clear that income itself does not fully explain why the gap occurs in the first place. Although a range of factors impact on development in the early years, a

consistent factor throughout is the role of parents and families – for better, or worse.

What may be called ‘cultural deprivation’ damages the life chances of children. It is when families are unable, or unwilling, to provide an educationally stimulating environment for their young or haven’t understood its significance. Although this may be more common in economically poor families, it is not always the case. Nor is it the case that economically rich families always provide a stimulating environment for their children.

Cultural deprivation is my starting point for tackling the vital problem which Marshall’s book exposes – but I offer an entirely different solution to those of most of the contributors to that book. I argue in terms of an expansion and development of Sure Start centres supported by local primary schools. The disadvantages of the ‘tail’ need to be tackled in the crucial years immediately after birth. Trying to reverse cultural deprivation in a young person’s school years is difficult and often fails.

First consider the vital work and current problems of health visitors and Sure Start centres.

### **Health Visitor Service**

Various state-funded agencies get involved with young children: social workers if there is a social problem affecting the child, and doctors if there is a medical problem, but it is health visitors who regularly support families from pregnancy through to a child’s fifth birthday. Health visitors are trained nurses or midwives. A report by the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) in July 2011 described their work in these terms:

They support families during the antenatal period, with the joys and stresses of a new baby; teach parents how to meet the nutritional needs of their infants and young children, and develop healthy lifestyles; enable parents in the most need to develop parenting skills and confidence and to connect them to further sources of support; monitor and assess the health and wellbeing of all infants and young children, detecting early any issues which require further action; act as the named professional and first point of contact for all health and wellbeing and child protection issues for children under five and work with community groups and social services colleagues to promote health in the early years. Most people in the UK have had their early years development supported by their local health visiting service. (RCN, 2011)

The report goes on to say:

An increasing body of evidence about neurological development of infants highlights the significant impact of poor attachment and negative parenting on a child’s physical, cognitive and socio-emotional development, which has life long effects into adulthood.

What seems missing from this is the educational development based on parental talk of the newborn. This is why I believe teachers trained for the early years have an important contribution to make not just from age three or four but from birth: they have knowledge and skills which could complement the work of the health visitors to the great advantage of many children. But there is a problem, which the RCN has described thus:

The RCN's recent employment survey (RCN, 2009) highlights low morale amongst health visitors, they feel underpaid, undervalued and overworked ... The findings from [this survey] are reinforced by the Health Care Commission 2008 and National NHS Staff Survey, March 2009, in which health visitors have the lowest levels of job satisfaction, highest work pressure and are the staff group least likely to recommend their trust as a place to work. (RCN, 2011)

Clearly, if health visitors are to work closely with teachers and Sure Start workers, as I advocate, these problems need to be resolved at a national level. These people are an essential service for many families and deserve fair salaries, good working conditions and proper recognition of their vital contribution to the common weal.

### **Sure Start: rise and decline**

The rise and decline of Sure Start is a political tale of idealism damaged by ideology, and social ambition weakened by economic depression. Sure Start needs to be given strong support financially and made universal.

In 1998 Gordon Brown, as chancellor of the exchequer in the Labour government, provided funding for the setting up of 250 Sure Start Local Programmes, with the aim of 'giving children the best possible start in life' through improvement of childcare, early education, health and family support, with an emphasis on outreach and community development. Policy and control of each programme was vested in a local committee of parents and local organisations, and 524 such programmes were eventually established in areas of deprivation. Norman Glass was one of the architects and looking back in 2005, he wrote:

The aim was resolutely child-centred and drew on evidence that outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds were to a large extent influenced by early-childhood experiences, and that there were sufficient examples to suggest that the launch of a sizeable programme was a worthwhile risk. The principal focus was the child. (Glass, 2005)

But in 2005 Brown made a switch from Sure Start Local Programmes to Sure Start Children's Centres, which were controlled by local authorities, and would be provided not just in the most disadvantaged areas. The original emphasis on supporting families and child development changed to a focus on getting

mothers into work by providing childcare for their pre-school children. By the time that Labour was voted out of office, in 2010, there were 3500 centres. But Glass was disappointed:

For poor mothers, work was the answer ... Sure Start, originally a child-centred programme, became embroiled in the childcare agenda and the need to roll out as many childcare places as possible to support maternal employment. (Glass, 2005)

*Guardian* columnist Polly Toynbee is a strong advocate of Sure Start. In 2013 she wrote:

So 3500 were set up, rightly starting in the poorest areas, and always intended to be most intensive in places of most need. The best Sure Starts offered childcare, midwives, health visitors, speech and language therapists, family counsellors, parenting classes, drop-in advice services and back-to-work training for parents. Some had cafes, staffed by parents ... The best hope for children from deprived backgrounds is that they catch up at the youngest age. Those who are hardly spoken to or read to fall behind the rest fast. (Toynbee, 2013)

But the Coalition government, pursuing its agenda of austerity and ideologically preferring private rather than public provision of services, had by late 2013 closed 400 of these centres and starved the rest of funds so that important services are limited. As Toynbee says:

Worse still, the government regards childcare as no more than warehousing babies and children while parents work: children's minister Liz Truss presses for a change in the law so one child-minder can care for six toddlers to cut costs. They dare not take away nursery schooling, but forget any idea of quality or improving the life chances of children. This is the end of the great ideals that founded Sure Start. (Toynbee, 2013)

### **Preventing 'The Tail' from Developing**

Government, worried at the numbers of young people leaving school at 16 with poor reading and maths skills, has put pressure on primary schools, with phonics testing in Year 1 (age 6), Key Stage 1 (KS1) tests of literacy and maths at the end of Year 2 (age 7), and demanding KS2 tests at the end of Year 6 (age 11), and now reception children (age 4 or 5) to be assessed within the first six weeks of school to provide 'baseline' data in English and maths. As Kiri Tunks of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) Executive has pointed out, 'The drive to improve results has resulted in almost constant testing of our children with "practice" tests a routine feature of school experience' (Tunks, 2015).

Instead of bullying schools and putting pressure on young children in the form of tests, government should ask why there is a 'tail' of low-achieving

children. The answer is obvious to anyone who has observed the parenting of a range of young children. It doesn't need academic research; it isn't rocket science. Low achievement of children is often the consequence of their parents, for one reason or another, not stimulating their curiosity and language in their earliest years.

The greatest rate of learning occurs from birth to around three or four as children learn to talk – along with much else – without being formally taught how to do it! Most parents talk to their children from birth, play with them, cuddle them, sing to them, and early on begin to share picture books with them, read stories and repeat nursery rhymes. According to their economic circumstances the parents, usually the mothers, spend a lot of time in a one-to-one relationship with their child and share the child's exploration of the home and garden environment, constantly talking about it. This is how children learn to communicate and to use their eyes, ears and hands to make sense of their world. Over the early years these parents provide toys that enable the child to solve simple problems (like putting different shapes into appropriate holes), toys that stimulate creative play (like bricks, dolls, toy cars) and materials for expression (like paint, crayon, play dough). These are the children who stand a good chance, by age 11, of achieving the high standards that their parents (and government ministers) want for them.

Other parents may be able to give less time to doing these things with their child in the early years, and instead may put the child in front of a television set, perhaps with a dummy in the mouth as a comforter, hoping that a few cuddles will be sufficient to tell the child that he or she is loved. Lacking eye contact, shared gurgles, mother's songs, and speech directed at self, the child's development of language is impeded.

I have not found any empirical evidence suggesting that a lack of opportunity for language development during the first couple of years of the child's life results in poor academic performance at GCSE, and so this must be seen as no more than a reasonable hypothesis. But there is plenty of evidence that it affects the child's performance in primary school. UK evidence from a longitudinal enquiry (involving 3000 three-year-olds and carried out in 1997-98) shows that what the researchers called a good 'home learning environment' at age three was important in determining attainment in literacy and numeracy at ages 5, 7 and 11 (and more so than family socio-economic status, parental occupation or family income).[2] The 'home learning environment' measures frequency of parents reading stories, playing with letters and numbers, teaching their children nursery rhymes and songs, and similar language activities.

So, simplistic assumptions about family location and economy affecting development need to be eschewed, as is also shown by the results of a National Literacy Trust's survey in May to July 2014 of 1012 parents of 3-5-year-olds (Formby, 2014). This survey found the following figures for 'children who look at or read stories at home in a typical week': households in social classes AB C1 = 75%; households C2 DE = 61%; graduate parent = 80%; no formal

qualification = 41%. It shows that 25% of children in AB C1 homes and 20% with a graduate parent *do not* 'look at or read stories at home in a typical week'.

Another study of 10,000 children in and around Bristol and born April 1991–December 1992 (cited in Hamer, 2012) found that while there is a strong association between a child's social background and readiness for school, the child's 'communication environment' is a more dominant predictor of language development than social background and predictor of performance on entry to school.

Clearly it is variously an economic and a cultural problem that results in some children struggling with reading, writing and maths as they move through school. The economic aspect cannot be tackled by the education system, but the cultural aspect could.

It is not only children who learn from each other: parents, especially mothers, do. If the other mothers that one meets are of the watch-TV-with-a-mouth-stopper ilk then conformity is likely. Where there is a friendly Sure Start centre with perceptive staff who carefully encourage the idea of regular talk-and-interact-with-your-child-whenever-you-find-the-time, the culture of the attending parents will slowly change. If the centre has a loan library of toys and books this makes a tremendous contribution to the development of the children concerned. When the centre staff from time to time read enjoyable stories to the gathered mothers it encourages them to see the value of this for their own children. And, of course, it is great when the centre staff play with and read to the children brought in with their parent, sing with them and teach them nursery rhymes.

Beyond parents it is also valuable for childminders to learn at the centres. These people are, of course, enormously important to the vast numbers of mothers who are working (often anti-social hours) in order to provide for their families and need the support of good childminders.

The aim of this article is to suggest that the way to eliminate the 'tail' of underperforming children in school is to tackle the issue from birth by major investment in Sure Start centres across the country. I believe this would be most effective if it became a shared responsibility of Sure Start centre staff, the trained nurses of the local health visitor service, and the local primary school.

To what extent are today's Sure Start centres already supporting language development?

### **The Birkbeck Evaluation of Sure Start Local Programmes**

Researchers based at Birkbeck University of London investigated over 7000 five-year-olds and their families in 150 Sure Start Local Programme areas who had also been studied at nine months and three years. Their report (National Evaluation of Sure Start Team, 2010) was published in November 2010 by the Department of Education, but with a disclaimer that the research was commissioned before the new UK government took office on 11 May 2010 and

so the content may not reflect current government policy! The researchers concluded:

The positive effects [of attending a Sure Start Local Programme Centre] discerned apply primarily to the parents in terms of greater life satisfaction, engaging in less harsh discipline, providing a less chaotic home environment and a more cognitively stimulating home learning environment. Only in the case of physical health did children apparently benefit directly. ... No SSLP [Sure Start Local Programme] effects emerged in the case of 'school readiness', defined in terms of children's early language, numeracy and social skills needed to succeed in schools, as measured by the Foundation Stage Profile. (National Evaluation of Sure Start Team, 2010)

The researchers proposed that:

Greater emphasis needs to be given to focusing services on improving child outcomes, particularly language development, if school readiness is to be enhanced for the children served.

What is surprising is that this study does not mention PEEP (Parents Early Education Partnership).

### **Parents Early Education Partnership (PEEP)**

In Oxford in 1995 a 'learning opportunities in the home' initiative was started called PEEP.[3] Its aims are: to help parents in disadvantaged areas improve their children's life chances; to show all parents how to create the best start for their children by using everyday learning opportunities at home – listening, talking, playing, singing and sharing books and stories together; to enable young children to become confident communicators and active learners; and to train practitioners to reflect on and develop their work with parents and young children.

A longitudinal study in Oxfordshire over 1998-2005 looked at 174 families who had participated in PEEP compared to a comparable group who had not. It was established that PEEP had had a significant impact on the quality of parental interaction with their children when they were one and two years of age. Subsequently the PEEP children made significantly better progress in vocabulary, phonological awareness of rhyme and alliteration, letter identification, understanding of books and print and writing when they started schooling.

It is not clear to what extent PEEP has been taken up by Sure Start Centres. In Lincolnshire and Oxfordshire for example, it is offered by many centres, but in most other counties there is little evidence.

This is why I want to see primary schools contributing to the work of Sure Start centres. Health visitors are important for the health of the child and Sure Start centres give invaluable support to many parents, but it is early years



teachers who could play a major part in promoting the early language development of children. They need to work together.

### **Primary Schools Oversight of Education from 0 to 11**

I suggest that primary schools should have responsible oversight for the educational development of children from birth to age 11. So, instead of 3 or 4, or 5 to 11, I want the oversight to be from 0 to 11.

It would mean that every primary school needs a geographically defined catchment area, as was the case before the 1988 Education Reform Act. Every family would be associated with one primary school according to where they live. (It worked from 1872 to 1988, after which government encouraged the view that some schools were better than others and expected market forces in terms of parental choice of schools to raise academic standards.)

This would entail every primary school receiving sufficient funding to take on one or more early-years-trained community teachers. They would have an outreach function based at the local Sure Start centre for all of the children aged from 0 to 3 or 4 living in the catchment area of the school. These teachers would be responsible to the school's head. Exactly how it would be structured might vary from place to place according to local circumstances. The structure of each primary school would thus include:

- Children aged 0 to 3 or 4: outreach work by community teachers with early years training contributing to the existing work of the local Sure Start centre; involvement of parents legally optional but strongly encouraged by the statutory visits of the health visitors. Some Sure Start centres already have strong links with primary schools with nurseries and their early years trained teachers and assistants. This proposal goes further. It looks for specific teachers to be appointed to primary schools with the brief of supporting parents in the early education of their children through talk and play. In-service training for these teachers could be based on the training provided by PEEP.

The rest of the school would be:

- children aged 3 to 5 (or preferably 6) in nursery classes with early years trained teachers and assistants – full-time or part-time; attendance optional and state funded;
- children aged 5 (or preferably 6) to 11 in age-group classes with class teachers and a few shared assistants; attendance required by law.
- head teacher with overall responsibility for all of the educational work of the children of the catchment area from birth to age 11 (with such deputies and support staff as the size of the school and community requires and close links with the health visitor service).

In rural and most suburban areas there should be no problem in defining catchment areas – as in the pre-1988 era. In cities and other urban areas it may be necessary to have shared catchment areas.

### **But the Shackles Must Come Off Primary Schools First!**

It must be stressed, however, that putting these extra commitments onto a school can only happen if they have had the external shackles of recent years removed. I refer to the current demands of the National Curriculum, obsessive lesson planning, unfair floor standards, competitive league tables, gruelling inspections, performance-related pay, and national testing other than at the end of KS2. Primary schools need to be free of these gross strictures and heads cannot take on more responsibility without being relieved of the need to respond to them. That is essential!

### **Envoi**

Taking on teachers for this community work will add to the educational budget, and add to the responsibilities of primary school head teachers. But by reducing (and potentially eliminating) the number of children growing up with poor literacy, oracy and numeracy skills, it will save the expense of later attempts at remedial action for these young people. Above all, it will raise their potential for leading satisfying and worthwhile lives in work and at home, based on an effective education.

### **Notes**

- [1] [www.nhs.uk/Conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/Pages/helping-your-childs-speech.aspx#close](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/Pages/helping-your-childs-speech.aspx#close) (accessed 27 August 2015).
- [2] The Effective Preschool and Primary Education Project (EPPE3-11), cited by Cathy Hamer in a March 2012 National Literacy Trust Review: 'Parent-Child Communication is Important from Birth'.  
[www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0001/3375/Hamer\\_NCT\\_research\\_overview\\_Parent\\_child\\_communication\\_p15-20\\_Mar12.pdf](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0001/3375/Hamer_NCT_research_overview_Parent_child_communication_p15-20_Mar12.pdf) (accessed 29 August 2015).
- [3] [www.peeple.org.uk](http://www.peeple.org.uk) (accessed 1 September 2015).

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