



Chapter 2.4: Bridging Communities Through Co-learning and Participation in Parenting Programmes: A Case from the Families and Schools Together Project

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Introduction

One in four families in the UK are expected to be in poverty by 2020 and the breadth and depth of the impact of growing up in poverty can have a profound effect on children's wellbeing (MacInnes et al. 2013). The socio-economic status of a child has been identified as a significant predictor of their educational attainment. Breaking the link between deprivation and poor educational outcomes requires more accurate identification and action beyond the mere 'raising of aspirations' (HMG 2011). This is a perhaps flawed premise often cited by policy-makers as the solution to improving

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A. Melling, R. Pilkington (eds.), *Paulo Freire and Transformative Education*,
https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-54250-2_11

educational outcomes. Armstrong (2015) suggests that investing substantially in building effective collaboration with parents/carers, with their families and social networks provide *the* key interventions needed, beyond 'aspirations'. Tapping into the needs and interests of disadvantaged families and creating an inclusive environment in schools may provide a causal model for improving pupil attainment (Gorard et al. 2012). This commitment to exploring how to foster alternative leadership which come from within deprived communities themselves also draws on themes from Paulo Freire's critical ideology. Freire (1973) asserted that the cultivation of individual and community growth was essential to help overcome barriers to wellbeing.

This chapter describes a community based programme that aims to build sustainability, citizenship and participation by bringing families and schools together to learn in equal partnership. We describe the Families and Schools Together (FAST) programme which utilises a systemic model and uses transformative pedagogies to bridge diversity and communities using a model of empowerment and conscientization (Freire 1970). We discuss some of the salient features of the programme which have contributed to its current success and which have been supported by evidence from a multi-method evaluation. We will also be discussing our experience of placing student social workers in FAST teams. By taking up the role of 'community partners' in FAST, social workers at the very beginning of their social work training had the opportunity to work at the grass roots in their local communities and experience the socio-economic and political realities faced by children, young people and their support networks. We reflect on the outcomes of this 'co-learning' – i.e. where social workers, schools and families learned together and consider some of the implications for professional practice in relation to partnership working. According to Freire (1998) understanding that problems are not just personal but significantly influenced by inequality, norms and traditions is essential to the authenticity of such partnerships.

Background to 'Families and Schools Together'

Families and Schools Together (FAST) is an international evidence based parenting programme delivered within a community setting around the school. Its universal approach utilises a systemic whole fam-

ily approach which engages the local community through the team that delivers the programme over an eight week cycle. The initial FAST weekly groups are led by a trained, multi-agency team of professionals from health, education and social care, with parents from the local school as partners. In summary, FAST project partners are comprised of *school partners* (any member of the paid school staff), *parent partners* (parents who have children at the school) and *community partners* (by drawing on professionals such as social work, health, mental health, voluntary sector providers or from local people who work or live in the community).

At the end of the programme the families attend a graduation ceremony. Parents and carers are engaged at every level of the FAST programme – planning, training, and implementation and post-graduation, are supported to set their own agenda over a period of 22 monthly multi-family group meetings, called FASTWORKS. This group then emerges as a parent/carer led network with school support to sustain the relationships that have been developed and to identify its own community development goals. The team aims to be culturally representative of the families being served in the groups. This holistic, multi-systemic, relationship-building approach strives to prevent poor outcomes and enable all children to achieve their potential and support the transition from nursery to primary education (MacDonald et al. 2006; Kratochwill et al. 2009).

FAST has gained status as an evidence-based programme by the United Nations (UN) internationally as a result of rigorous research on the effectiveness of the programme. To date, four large randomised controlled trials with one- or two-year follow-ups have been carried out to demonstrate that FAST helps children and their families (McDonald et al. 2006; Kratochwill et al. 2009), currently a \$15 million RCT is underway in Philadelphia, US and the first UK RCT is due to commence in September 2015. Within the UK, an extensive roll out of FAST has been funded by *Save the Children* through a project team based in Middlesex University. For example between 2009 and 2012, 2786 families took part in the programme and some of the findings from the evaluation identified a 33% increase in parents/carers involvement with the school; a decrease of 20% in children's behavioural problems according to their teachers and

that 76.9% of parents taking part felt more able to support their child in his or her education (Save the Children 2011). These findings and the subsequent feedback from those involved in FAST reflect Freirean dialogical tenets of love, faith, humility, hope, critical thinking, and solidarity from his writings on education (Freire 1998). Ongoing evaluation of FAST continues to confirm the importance of 'dialogue' as a means for transformation through education and social action. The philosophy of FAST enables it to work towards achieving a deeper richer engagement than is common in modern schooling contexts by providing a structure within which participants can be encouraged to allow multiple way communication. Freire (1998) spoke of the importance of being humble and open to listening to the ideas of others, particularly by not being 'overly convinced of one's own certitudes' (1998: 34). This is a well-recognised barrier in many professional contexts and social work in particular is constantly searching for new ways to reconnect with those it has pledged to serve (Hafford-Letchfield et al. 2014).

Developing Partnership Between Social Work and Families

There is a strong commitment to partnership work in social work education, grounded in a philosophy and value base at the core of practice (Cocker and Hafford-Letchfield 2014). Partnership with children, young people and their families is an essential aspect of anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice and has these core principles enshrined in legislation and policy. However, there are a number of tensions between the rhetoric and realities for achieving effective partnerships between families and social work. Pease (2002) has asserted that 'empowerment' is in danger of becoming a form of professional practice in which social workers are encouraged to develop the 'technologies' of empowerment but which in reality continue to perpetuate hierarchical power relations. Taking a co-productive approach (Needham and Carr 2009) is one which regards people who use services as assets with skills and building on people's existing capabilities. It is an approach being adopted by social work to try and

break down the barriers between social work and people who use services. These include reciprocity (where people get something back for having done something for others) and mutuality (people working together to achieve their shared interests). Co-production has been led by the service user movement and advocates for peer and personal support networks alongside professional ones to facilitate services through change as opposed to direct provision (Needham and Carr 2009).

However, there are a number of tensions inherent in professional-service user relationships which may undermine good practice and empowering interventions (Hafford-Letchfield 2009). This is exemplified for example, in the deconstruction of the policies around prevention and child protection, which Featherstone et al. (2014) have called a ‘marriage made in hell’. They suggest that the term ‘intervention’ needs interrogation, as it suggests practices delivered *to* families rather than practices *with* families. They argue that a continuing focus on the assessment of risk to children by family and care-givers; has ‘managerialised’ social work services by giving priority to procedures and risk-averse practice given that referrals to it are “more likely to engage families as they are seen to be at risk rather than being in need” (2014: 1741). Building on the language and practice of family support however opens up more possibilities in terms of thinking about what families need at different times and to explore how social work practice can recognise and support *interdependence* in a relational model of welfare. Social work has certainly been under siege from government constant reform of its policies, education and practice leading in many situations to the direct undermining of its emancipatory objectives (Cocker and Hafford-Letchfield 2014). Finding progressive ways of conceptualising empowerment therefore requires the construction of strategies more relevant to the current context. Thinking through some of these challenges underpinned some of the philosophies and principles underpinning the education initiative that we developed with FAST which aimed to bring social work students closer to communities at an early enough point in their social work education so as to be able to take a more critical perspective on those structures and institutions which do not always support relationship-based practice.

Social Work Students as Community Partners

Social work students following a BA (Hons) Social Work at Middlesex University spend their first year preparing for professional practice. In professional education, ‘learning to learn’ effectively plays an important role in imparting both values and a sense of identity alongside the essential knowledge and skills needed for professional practice. This contributes in both intended and unintended ways to the socialisation of students into the professional culture as well as a high degree of intellectual ability, empathy, resilience and insight. This particular combination is considered to be attributed to a degree of life experience and the ability to articulate and make sense of that experience when entering the profession. Those responsible for social work education need to make the important links between these activities and the quality of support offered to service users and their communities in order to raise the standards of services available (Hafford-Letchfield and Dillon 2015).

Examining how ‘learner’ social workers acquire their professional identity/is suggests changes in the wider context within which this education takes place. Social work is a profession that is committed to understanding that the social environment, including the cultural setting, has an enormous impact on individual experiences. We also need to appreciate how social work scholarship assists us to frame the different roles that social work plays and the nexus between the personal, biographical, political and social knowledge covered. Dunk-West (2013) has referred to the importance of student social workers being able to enter a period of time and space within social work education where they “learn and fashion” their “social work selves” (2013: 9). She further emphasises the active process of how learners interact between older ways of thinking and relate to newer ways which develop alongside their journey to becoming a social worker.

The ‘Community Project’ module encourages students to look outwards towards the communities they serve and to think more holistically about service users. It embraces a learner centred approach, where students can capitalise on their own life and work experiences and develop their potential to build networks and alliances in their everyday

community. Students learning is conceived in the spirit of citizenship and by thinking about 'normal' life away from a conceptualisation of pathology that sometimes exist within welfare paradigms. Given that much of public policy refers to the concept of community participation and user involvement, the Community Project module gets students to look outwards at 'normal everyday community life' before they start to 'pathologise' or 'label' problems and solutions, some of which contributes to discrimination and oppression of different groups in society. Students are required to be assertive, curious and active in liaising with members of a local community and to identify and recognise theoretical concepts in practice. They are introduced to theory, knowledge, skills and practice issues associated with understanding communities. They also take the lead in directing their own learning with support by being out in a local community and getting involved with some of the issues identified including observation and self-directed inquiry supported by guided reading and learning activities.

Students following the Community Module were offered a voluntary placement with a local FAST team. A small grant from the university helped to support them with travel expenses to undertake the FAST training programme. A project co-ordinator was also funded to support the students and to assist with evaluation. Fourteen students took up this opportunity and were placed with programmes in the South East of England. The final section of this chapter briefly reflects on the experience by drawing on just one of the key themes emerging from the evaluation. FAST programmes are all subject to a standard evaluation which is embedded in the FAST methodology and programme design but the evaluation of this pilot project was extended to facilitate further enquiry into the students learning experiences from an educational perspective. We examined those aspects of FAST which added coherence to the Community Project module outcomes and how engagement with FAST has contributed to the students' knowledge and skills in community social work specifically in relation to co-learning and partnership working. Following ethical approval, the main source of data for evaluating the student perspectives and experiences drew on (a) a recorded discussion in a focus group of students conducted towards the end of the project (n = 6) and (b) documentary analysis of the student's written reflective

commentary on volunteering which was integrated into the overall portfolio requirements for assessment for the Community Module (n = 14). Qualitative data was collated and subjected to a broad thematic analysis using inductive methods. Several themes emerged but for the purpose of this short chapter we briefly focus on one of the themes which provided insights into the value of co-learning and participation between social work students and families. The evaluation in full is reported in Hafford-Letchfield and Thomas (2016).

Demographic data and feedback on programme satisfaction was collected from the parents at the end of the formal FAST programme. One of these sources involved asking open-ended perspectives on the experience of parents, teachers and FAST UK team members.

The Value of Co-learning in Communities

Students recognised the value of reciprocal knowledge exchange with parents and of learning to communicate more equally whilst in situ. By adopting a social approach; using humanity and respect, social work students gained an informed understanding from their ‘normal’ week-to-week exchanges with families during FAST which contributed to more empathic problem solving.

I learned something about my own parenting, for example, when he's playing up, trying something different, taking time in reading a book.

Yes it was learning how to speak to the parent and not tell them what to do. I will probably take that into my placement, not belittle them or not make them think they have not done their job properly.

In three reports for the cycle of FAST involving social work students, team member satisfaction was rated as high. There was a strong sense of teamwork, with the FAST team viewing their team members as “dedicated” and “hard-working.” Team members were able to speak freely and voice any comments they had, with general consensus among all team members being that the team worked effectively as a unit. Every team member agreed with the statement – “the team and its individual

members have grown, personally and professionally.” Numerous team members identified how much they enjoyed participating in the programme, with one parent stating – “I thoroughly enjoyed the programme, learned a lot and met some very nice people.” Another school member said – “[FAST was] a thoroughly superb programme and it was well worth the effort to see the families grow. I’m glad I was a part of it.”

Freire’s depiction of ‘dialogue’ as a means for transformation through education and social action was considered an important value in this relatively simple project. Social workers often refer to the ‘interdisciplinary’ team, or ‘team around the child’ yet working towards achieving a deeper richer engagement than is common in modern schooling contexts is no easy feat given the complexity of structures and institutions that impact on social work practice. True partnership requires multiple way communication that enters the world of families and communities, particularly those experiencing challenges and hardships with humility, openness and a willingness to listen. One student said:

As a would-be social worker, I now know that it will be my job in the future to be an advocate of change to my service-users; whether I speak up for them in person or empower them to do so themselves, I will hopefully be helping them realise they hold the power to shape their own futures.

Freirian dialogical tenets of love, faith, humility, hope, critical thinking, and solidarity require purposeful action within social work so that they are not only accused ‘overly convinced of one’s own certitudes’ (Freire 1998: 34). Meaningful structures are required within education to foster these ideals. Working directly with parents and their children through opportunities in FAST provided a rich source of experience to inform students of the reality of parents and children’s lives. Students gave concrete examples where they put themselves in the families’ shoes to explore new ways of thinking. Freire reiterated:

the importance of a social worker (in the broadest sense) who “supposes that s/he is “the agent of change”, it is with difficulty that s/he will see the obvious fact that, if the task is to be really educational and liberating, those with whom s/he works cannot be the objects of her actions. Rather they too will be the agents of

change. If social workers cannot perceive this, they will only succeed in manipulating, steering and 'domesticating'. If on the other hand they recognize others, as well as themselves, as agents of change, they will cease to have the exclusive title of 'the agent of change'; (1973: 116)

Freire's conscientization (1970) involves bringing to the surface the critical consciousness of the people so that they might be more fully aware of the systems and structures that have affected their lives. Social work students in this project articulated their understanding of how dependence is often created and sustained when systems and institutions do not engage with emergent community capacities. For example one student commented:

it is paramount to understand the community you live in or work in, educating oneself will open up a better understanding of the individuals that you may come in contact with; for example the issues effecting that community such as the impact of bedroom tax and cap in benefits.

Students were able to recognise the contribution of different relationships such as those between families and between families and the team as well as those with neighbours and wider communities. Freire asserted that entering into dialogue presupposes equality among participants with mutual respect and that through dialogue, there is change and resultant new knowledge; i.e. co-production. Students made clear links from their observations and involvement in FAST on how these could be harnessed better when working in challenging circumstances, particularly with time and resource constraints.

There are a number of thematic domains in Freire's work which may provide a terrain for debate in relation to the potential impact of FAST and the merit of including professionals in wider networks as exemplified here. These include the preoccupation with bureaucracy and managerialism in social work services that have eroded the ability of individual workers to meaningfully engage with children and their families (Miller et al. 2011). Obviously this one small approach is not a panacea and there were a number of limitations (see Hafford-Letchfield and Thomas 2016). This initiative demonstrates more generally however, that the

likelihood of those working in statutory services need to find ways of resisting neo-liberal inflected ‘transformations’. This depends on the ability of social workers, their educators and advocates to make links with other parts of the sector, such as education, and most importantly with the users of services, without whom, there would be no social work.

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