

0314

From Red House to Children's Centres: The case for 'intermediate' educational institutions

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Background

The low educational achievements of children living in England's poorest communities have stubbornly resisted the attempts of policymakers to provide a greater degree of equity in educational outcomes. The development of 3,500 Children's Centres represents the most recent attempt by government to challenge this problem. It is also a significant addition to state educational provision and an opportunity for educationists committed to social justice and a more equal society, to work towards better outcomes for children living in poor communities. Children's Centres are a new form of educational institution. Based in every community in England, with those poorest targeted first, their remit is to develop multi-agency strategies to work with the families of preschool children in order to improve long-term educational outcomes within their locality. However, as this paper will demonstrate, this is not the first time such an approach has been taken.

During the 1960s, sociologists began to argue that as an educative influence, the immediate home environment carried a far greater weighting than the school in determining a child's likely educational attainment.[1] A. H. Halsey and others argued that the school formed a focal point for the community and, if the structure of home-school relations could be altered, so could the educational trajectories of children. Hence this paper will focus on the early years of the Red House Education Centre in the West Riding of Yorkshire village of Denaby Main.

Red House was the most significant development arising from the West Riding Educational Priority Area (EPA) Project 1968-71, and was an example of an area-based policy approach to the persistent problem of educational underachievement. It was also an example of an 'intermediate' educational institution in the sense that it sat outside statutory provision and was a physical space accessible to, but not the responsibility of, teachers, children or families.[2]

Red House sought to move teachers towards a community-focused approach to education. It recognised that replicating the physical model and rationale of the Cambridgeshire Village colleges of the 1930s, was not likely to achieve this objective. A more radical approach to educational relationships and curriculum content was required.

[1] See for example, Floud, J. and A. Halsey (1961). "Homes and schools: social determinants and educability." *Educational Research* 2(2), Douglas, J. (1964). *The Home and the School*. London, McGibbon and Kee.

[2] This term is borrowed from George and Teresa Smith's analysis of Red House, Smith, G. and T. Smith (1977). *The Community school - a base for community development? Schooling in the City*. J. Raynor and E. Harris. London, Ward Lock in association with the Open University.

Research Questions

In this paper, the rationale for Red House and the discussions it emerged from are discussed, and the potential of a new, nationally developed intermediary between home and school considered. The extent to which contemporary Children's Centres might offer an opportunity to fulfil this remit is considered. The paper will also reflect on the accusation that efforts made in this direction are wasted due to the dangers of stigmatising families as inadequate and requiring something above and beyond the local primary school used by others.

Will the undoubted potential of the Children's Centre be lost in a normalisation process, as professionals deliver health messages top down rather than respond to community demands, or work

to generate community demand, bottom up? Are the community educationists in this new intermediate space applying a veneer of democracy to a relationship, between educators and families, which ostensibly remains unchanged?

The potential and limitations of a policy designed to engage families and schools in a neutral space are discussed and the idea of creating 'intermediate institutions' to generate a more dialogical educational process is critically examined.

Methods

The paper will present a historical analysis of Red House using a combination of in-depth interviews with the original Red House team and scrutiny of papers arising from their work. The passing of time does limit the potential of historical comparison; nevertheless the persistent nature of underachievement means it is still a worthwhile pursuit. Analysis of Red House may illuminate the limitations and potential of current policy, hence recent research and official guidance is interpreted in light of the findings drawn from the historical data.

Frame

A direct comparison of Red House and Children's Centres would be unproductive given the contextual differences and the fact that Children's Centres are a nationwide development. However, both represent policy initiatives that targeted deprived communities through the use of multi agency practice in new institutional forms. The question on which both should be evaluated is whether they approach communities from a deficit perspective, stigmatising the poor as inadequate, and providing additional resources to those who do not require them. It is also important to consider whether either demonstrates that intermediate institutions can contribute significantly to improved educational outcomes. New and innovative practices did emerge from Red House and these are examined. For example, an educational home visiting scheme, cross age-phase collaboration and eventually parental commitment from an initial pre-school playgroup.

Research findings

It is argued that Red House was an example of community education as community development and if replicated across all social services could generate participatory momentum amongst disadvantaged communities. Thus, citizens become active and optimistic rather than passive and pessimistic. By 'standing outside the normal school situation, Red House was able to organise courses that cut across the normal boundaries set by other institutions'.^[1] If preschool developed in 'imaginative ways' it was possible that it could lever the school system into one which was 'responsive to both individual and community needs'.^[2]

The WREPA team had a great deal of autonomy from the National EPA steering committee and therefore had the flexibility to tailor actions to the needs of its setting. This freedom, combined with the physical location of the centre allowed the team to take advantage of their links with schools, while at the same time preventing it from becoming a mere satellite.^[3] However, Red House was not a template for a national policy precisely because this level of responsiveness was required. These are important issues for Children's Centres and their staff.

[1] Smith and Smith op cit. 243

[2] Ibid 243

[3] Ibid 58