

Learning Outcome 5: Working in partnership with pupils, families and other professionals-a case study/a living educational theory

Kate Kemp, April 2011 – Bath Spa University.

This piece of reflective writing is a case study of the ‘embodied knowledge’ I use when I am working in partnership with the parents of pupils with Special Educational Needs. It is presented in the form of a letter to my tutor for the Masters Strand of the National Award in SEN Coordination. In the letter I explain what I mean by ‘embodied knowledge’ and then go on to describe the different kinds of knowledge I have and which I draw from when I am working in partnership with the parents of the pupils in the school where I am SENCO. As a knowledge-creator I am seeking to advance the ideas put forward by Jones (2009) on using narrative to communicate the meanings of explanatory principles in improving practice.

I conclude by reflecting on what I have learned through carrying out this case study and how my learning, to my surprise, has developed into a living educational theory. Finally I give some thought to validating what I claim to have learned and how this learning might improve my practice as a SENCO.

(NB. When I say parents in this assignment I mean parents and carers throughout).

Bath,
April 2011

Dear Tony,

You may remember that I wrote to you last July on completion of my portfolio for the National Award in SEN Coordination to express some of my concerns and frustrations about the portfolio process. I said in that letter:

'...I think my frustration lies in that what is being assessed in the portfolio is my knowledge of 'stuff' (information, legislation, categorisation, procedures, assessment, strategies etc etc). What is not being assessed is my 'embodied knowledge' - by this I mean *how and why* I do what I do'. (letter from Kate Kemp to Tony Caston, 20.7.10). You replied to me in an email on to say:

'I just had a quick look at your letter and understand what you are driving at. The LO's are clearly a competence-based set of standards, resembling a detailed job description and, as you rightly point out, do not get to the heart of being a SENCO. I am sure that you will be able to demonstrate this more in your case study'

(email from Tony Caston to Kate Kemp, 27.8.10)

Therefore in this further (rather longer!) letter I want to 'get to the heart of being a SENCO' or rather more specifically the heart of me being a SENCO. In order to do this I want to find a way of explaining to you my 'embodied knowledge' concerning working in partnership with the parents of pupils with behavioural, emotional and social, difficulties (BESD). Having described my 'embodied knowledge' I will then see what conclusions I can draw from my description which relate to the stated aim of the National Award which is to support SENCOs through:

.....developing their professional attributes, knowledge, understanding and skills in order to increase the participation and raise the achievement of pupils with SEN and/or disabilities in relation to the Every Child Matter outcomes',
(National Award for SEN Coordination handbook, 2009, p4)

In my first letter to you I mentioned that some of the evidence I had used to support Learning Outcome 5 (Working in partnership with pupils, families and other professionals) was the notes of an annual review I had run for a year11 pupil. In the letter I wrote:

'I felt that the closest I got to being able to show how I do my job was in section 5 where I included the notes of an annual review and showed that, because the parent didn't attend the review, I went to see her at home after work (I'm sure lots of other SENCOs would do the same).....The notes of the annual review which I included as evidence for these learning outcomes (5Ai and 5Bii) mention my visit (with our Connexions PA) and record the parents' views. They don't include an explanation of the values which underpinned the visit nor any description of how I went about 'communicating effectively' with this particular parent.'

You might well ask why it is so important to me that I am able to explain my ‘embodied knowledge’ to you. I think that it is because I found the process of finding evidence for the portfolio so frustrating. It felt a bit like a fiendish treasure hunt and that I was being tested on my ability to find appropriate bits of information rather than my ability to be an effective SENCO.

I hope to be able to provide for you now a more meaningful presentation of ‘how I do my job’ which will include an account of my values in relation to working with parents.

The idea of ‘embodied knowledge’ comes from the work of Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Varela (1991) both of whom explored the integration of the physical or biological body with the phenomenal or experiential body. I use the term to mean the accumulation of thoughts, skills and beliefs that I have developed over the years as a professional working with young people and their parents. These thoughts, skills and beliefs are in a dynamic relationship to one another. This is the knowledge that I carry with me and informs how I do my work and how I relate to the people I work with.

I have tried to find an appropriate analogy to describe what I mean but have not yet found one I am entirely happy with. The closest I have got is to think of the start of making a snowman when you roll the smallest of snowballs along the ground.

Gradually as you go along the snowball picks up more and more snow and thus grows in size and presence. When I think about my embodied knowledge (and I’m going to stop using speech marks now) I think of it as being within all of me - not just in my head – and that all the different bits and kinds of knowledge I have interplay with one another. (Whenever I try to describe to someone what I mean I find myself moving my hands around as if I were holding a crystal ball that I was looking into from many directions)

My knowledge about working with parents takes several different forms:

- There is firstly the knowledge which I have gained over time about what motivates me to do this work and the values I hold which determine the way that I work.
- There is also the knowledge I have gained from reading research or other writings about the kind of work that I do.
- A third kind of knowledge is what I have learned from my own experience of working with parents and pupils which I can use to judge whether or not I agree with the research.
- A further kind of knowledge comes from reflecting on my professional practice and noticing what skills and qualities I bring to my work and how effective these skills and qualities are.
- Leading on from this is the knowledge I have gained from feedback I have received from those I work with.

My intention is to lay out examples, or evidence, of these different kinds of knowledge which together form a whole so that both I and you, as my audience, can understand what I mean by them. One of the difficulties with doing this is that, because this is the written word, which ever way I put together the various examples one will inevitably follow another in the appearance of a sequence whereas in fact they are all present at the same time and influence one another.

There is also inevitably an overlap between the different kinds of knowledge because, of course, they are all part of me-my embodied knowledge. For ease of reading I have

tried to separate them but even so we may not find that there are neat divisions between them.

Before I get started however I'm sure you will be keen to know about my method and methodology!

Method and methodology

In my previous Masters assignment ‘‘All you need is love’-or is it? How can I contribute to creating an educational environment’ I discussed my understanding of the difference between method and methodology:

‘In order to distinguish between method and methodology I remind myself of when I am following a recipe. Recipes usually have a part called method, which follows the list of ingredients and tells you what to do and how to do it. The methodology, however, is the rationale behind why you need to make the recipe in this particular order in order to get the result you want (you can’t make an omelette without breaking the eggs first)’ (Kemp, 2010a, p1)

I go on to say:

‘Similarly in order to get the result I want, ie an improvement in my practice, I need to choose an appropriate method. If I am to account for myself to myself-and others-my methodology must take into account the fact that I am at the centre of my enquiry’.

I have called this current piece of writing a ‘case study’ because, as described in the National Award handbook (2009) it is a ‘piece of reflective writing’ exploring ‘an aspect of Professional Contexts (LO 1) and Partnerships (LO 5) within the school’ (p22). However I believe it could equally be described as an ‘action research project’ as I am following ‘a process of systematic reflection, enquiry and action carried out by individuals about their own professional practice.’(p 28)

Whether it is a case study or an action research project what is important is that, as I am studying and taking action on my knowledge, I must be at the centre of whichever one it is, therefore I have chosen to use a living theory methodology as developed by Whitehead (2008).

‘A living theory is an explanation produced by an individual for their educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formation in which they live and work’.

Whitehead (2011) also points out the difference between a living theory and a case study:

A living theory may sometimes be mistaken as a case study. The main difference between a case study and a living theory is that a case study is a study within a bounded system, while the explanatory principles of living theories are not constrained by a bounded system. Living theories articulate explanatory principles in terms of flows of life—affirming energy, values and understandings that are transformatory and not contained within a bounded system’ (p1)

The living theory approach to research is distinctive in that it is:

‘Explicitly grounded in the values that provide the foundation for how the researcher lives and works in the world.....the process of creating a living theory involves the

individual considering what really matters to them and how they want to make a difference in the world' (Walton, 2011, p6)

Through describing my 'embodied knowledge' about working in partnership with parents of pupils with special educational needs my intention is to clarify 'what really matters to me and how I want to make a difference in the world'.

My method for describing my knowledge is to use the form of a letter which is itself a kind of narrative. The use of narrative to explore the knowledge of teachers was developed by Connolly and Clandenin (1988) and forms the basis of a number of Master Educator writings, for example that of Christine Jones who describes how she has made use of their work to tell her own story of being an Inclusion Officer.

'Connolly and Clandenin (1988) have coined the term, 'personal practical knowledge' which refers to teachers, through their experience of the past, the present and their projections for the future, as being knowledgeable and knowing persons. They are knowers of teaching, learning and their subject matter, and knowers of their situation, their children and themselves. This connects very much with Snow's (2001) idea of teachers, in that they possess a wealth of knowledge about teaching, based on their personal knowledge and personal experience, as expressed previously.'

In telling my story, I focus on my personal knowledge and experience as an Inclusion Officer. I describe what I have done and how this has led to the furthering of my learning. I describe how reflecting on my learning leads to new learning and action. I describe and explain my practice. I tell my story and reflect on my learning as I work with other educators in a Children's Service and schools.' (Jones, 2009)

I have struggled with finding a structure for this assignment and this is about the third or fourth attempt to find something that works for me. I think however that writing in the form of a letter to someone gives me a focus. I am both explaining things to myself and also making them public to an audience. It also gives me the liberty to be less formal which in turn means I think you have a greater sense of me as a person doing the job that I do. If I am to make what I know public I feel that it is essential to make what I write engaging and interesting.

It was only after I had decided on this method of presentation that I was pointed to the MA thesis of Hilary Shobbrook (1997) in which she argues that communication through correspondence should be seen as educational method worthy of presentation.

The methodological approach I am using does not entirely fit within the traditional action research cycle. I appear to be researching what I already know rather than taking action (or at least the action I am taking is to research what I know). I am comforted by the liberating notion of methodological inventiveness as expounded by Dadds and Hart in their book 'Doing Practitioner Research Differently' (2001):

'If our aim is to create conditions that facilitate methodological inventiveness, we need to ensure as far as possible that our pedagogical approaches match the message we seek to communicate. More important than adhering to any specific methodological approach, be that of traditional social science or traditional action research, may be the willingness and courage of practitioners-and those who support them-to create enquiry approaches that enable new, valid understandings to develop; understandings that empower practitioners to improve their work for the beneficiaries'

in their care. Practitioner research methodologies are with us to serve professional practices' (p 169)

I understand this to mean I should be able to invent a methodology that works for me as a practitioner researching into my own practice.

I am anticipating that once I have laid out 'what I know so far about working in partnerships with the parents of BESD pupils' I will then be in a position to say what I can do to improve my practice as a SENCO. However until I have gone through the process of getting it all onto the paper I am not able to see it as a whole.

As Paul Graham, referring to the work of the great essayist Montaigne, says in 'The Age of the Essay':

'An essay is something you write to try to figure something out. Figure out what? You don't know yet. And so you can't begin with a thesis, because you don't have one, and may never have one. An essay doesn't begin with a statement, but with a question. In a real essay, you don't take a position and defend it. You notice a door that's ajar, and you open it and walk in to see what's inside.'

If all you want to do is figure things out, why do you need to write anything, though? Why not just sit and think? Well, there precisely is Montaigne's great discovery. Expressing ideas helps to form them. Indeed, helps is far too weak a word. Most of what ends up in my essays I only thought of when I sat down to write them. That's why I write them'.

(Graham, 2004)

Just before I start to tell you 'what I know so far about working in partnership with the parents of BESD pupils' I would just like to put the notion of embodied knowledge into the context of thinking about professional research.

Catherine Snow in her presidential Address to the American Educational Research Association highlights the importance of making public the embodied knowledge of educators:

'The knowledge resources of excellent teachers constitutes a rich resource, but one that is largely untapped because we have no procedures for systematizing it. Systematizing would require procedures for accumulating such knowledge and making it public, for connecting it to bodies of knowledge established through other methods and for vetting it for correctness and consistency.' (Snow, 2001, p9)

I understand this to mean that we need to have some standards by which what I claim to be my knowledge can be judged.

My system for 'vetting' my work for 'correctness and consistency' is the Conversation Cafe-a weekly meeting of professionals working in B&NES Childrens Services and beyond who are all engaged in examining and improving their own practice. Our main method of scrutiny is Habermas's criteria for validating claims to knowledge (1987). These criteria are described as follows by McNiff and Whitehead, (2006).

'All participants, practitioners and judges alike must speak in ways that are:

- Comprehensible, in that a form of language is used that is commonly understood by all;
- Truthful, in that all recognize these true accounts and not fabrications;

- Sincere, so that all parties can trust what the other says;
- Appropriate for the context, while recognizing the unspoken cultural norms in which their discourses are embedded' (p 102)

I will return to these criteria at the end of my letter.

So here we go then..... I'm going to start by giving you a bit of context to how I've ended up doing the work that I do and what my current role as a SENCO in a Special School involves. I'm then going to present the various pieces of 'evidence' to illustrate what I 'know'. I will give these headings so that you can tell which is what.

Initial experiences of working with parents

I trained as an art teacher in 1979. I can't remember ever discussing the role of parents during my teacher training. I did my teaching practice in a girls school in London and never set eyes on a parent in the two terms I was there (the daughter of an eminent art critic was in one of my classes so I was rather glad I never met him!).

Later, when I was running a youth centre in Central London, the young people I worked with had all left home –and their parents. Consequently when I moved to Bath and started working for the Local Authority as an Education Welfare Officer I found myself working with parents without any training or experience other than being a parent myself. Not that that was a great deal of help-my older son was 3 at the time and the majority of the pupils whose parents were referred to me were teenagers.

From almost my first day in the job I was out on my own, knocking on doors, meeting people of my age but whose lives were very different from mine. Some parents were angry, some were violent, many were despairing and seemed at a loss to know how to get their children to go to school. For quite some time I felt completely out of my depth. But gradually I learned, mostly from studying my older and more experienced colleagues, how to be conciliatory and get alongside parents so that we could work together to ensure their children got an education. I learned to be patient and to listen. To be sympathetic but solution focussed. I learned the importance of doing what you said you were going to do.

In the meantime I had my younger son and in due course both of my boys went through the education system themselves. Though I haven't experienced the difficulties many of the parents I've met I do know that being a parent is a tough and often thankless job! I think the vast majority of parents love their children and want what's best for them even when, at times, the parent's own needs seem to take precedence over their children's.

When my children were growing up I read a lot of books about parenting. I was very unconfident about my own abilities as a parent and gleaned what I could from books, friends and other professionals. I reckoned I had a better idea of what I was doing with my second son than my first. By then I had encountered a social worker who said in a case conference, 'never let them get their own way!' This was in relation to an 8 year old who seemed to be in complete charge of his family but it stuck with me. I have met many families where the children rule the roost and I always try to help the parents get back in control.

My current role

I now work as a SENCO at the Link School which is a special school for pupils with BESD. My growing understanding of what this role entails was one of the major benefits of working with my mentor for the National Award.

The role of a SENCO in a special school is not the same as that in a mainstream school. In a mainstream school the prime responsibility of the SENCO is for ‘co-ordination of provision made for individual children with SEN’ (DfES 2001, p50). This presupposes that not all pupils will have SEN and part of the role of the SENCO will be to coordinate assessments to determine which pupils will need provision which is ‘additional to and different from’ the differentiated curriculum which all pupils access.

In a special school all the pupils have special educational needs and the provision made for them by the school is individualised to a greater degree. At the Link all the pupils have special educational needs in the area of behaviour, emotional and/or social difficulties. Currently about a third of the pupils in the school have a Statement of SEN and are on the roll of the school itself. The other two thirds are dual registered with their home mainstream school and are on School Action Plus of the SEN Code of Practice. The school is structured into 3 discrete Centres-Primary, KS3 and KS4. Each centre has its own manager and team and it is the job of the team to assess pupils on entry, establish baseline data and put in place an intervention which will meet the needs of each student as identified in their initial assessments. Assessments are carried out in the following 4 areas:

Access to Learning (e.g. reading, attendance)

Well Being

Behaviour

Academic

The aim of the assessments is to gain a rich and holistic picture of the student in order to determine goals for each of the 4 areas. The Centre team will deliver provision and monitor progress supported by the deputy head responsible for the school. So what’s the point of a SENCO when all staff are, in a sense, coordinating provision for pupils with SEN?

This was a question I tussled with whilst completing my portfolio for the National Award for SEN Coordination in 2010. Some of the sessions –particularly those to do with finance and assessments -were not relevant to me (not uninteresting but just not applicable to my job). In conversation with my mentor for the award we came to the conclusion that the main functions of a SENCO in a special school were as follows:

- Coordination of Statutory processes –e.g. annual reviews of Statements of SEN, contributions to Statutory Assessment requests,
- Support, advice and training to staff regarding SEN processes
- Quality control of Individual Education Plans, Intervention Agreements etc
- Identifying and coordinating provision to meet pupils’ additional needs

It is in the last of these areas of work that my responsibility for working in partnership with pupils, families and other professionals lies.

As with any job I find myself, during the working day, switching between these functions. However whatever task I am undertaking, whether it is checking Intervention Agreements or liaising with other professionals, I try to carry out the task whilst remaining true to my values.

Having told you something about my previous experience and my current role as SENCO I'm now ready to start describing the different kinds of knowledge as outlined on page 3 and I begin with an explanation of these values.

Knowledge which I have gained over time about what motivates me to do this work and the values I hold which determine the way that I work.

I've just mentioned the experienced SENCO who was my mentor for the portfolio part of the National Award. In addition to the invaluable advice and expertise he was able to impart to me we had a number of really interesting conversations about why we had become SENCOs. We agreed that our values- the things we held to be of greatest importance- included:

- Seeing the whole pupil not just their difficulties
- Believing the best of everyone
- Sticking up for the 'underdog'
- Ensuring all pupils had access to what they needed

Because of my previous experience as an EWO I came to the post of SENCO with a particular appreciation of the role of parents in their children's education and I think this, coupled with my values, goes some way to explaining why I am concerned to improve the support I provide to parents.

I have spent some time trying to clarify for myself what the word 'values' in this context means. I use it as shorthand for 'what is most important for me in living my life' and 'what I will stand up for'

The particular point I would like to make about values which is relevant to working in partnership with parents is to do with the *quality* of the relationship that we have with other people. It's all very well to 'believe the best of everyone' but it doesn't mean anything if you are rude and dismissive toward them. It's perfectly possible to say one thing and behave in a contradictory way. This is when we experience ourselves as a 'living contradiction' (Whitehead, 1989, p6) which is what happens when we do not live our values in practice.

In my previous writings I have drawn attention to a quote from the book 'Blood from a stone' by Donna Leon (2006). The quote describes a priest who plays a small but significant part in this brilliantly written detective story set in Venice. When I first read the book-some years ago now- I immediately recognised this as a description of people who I have occasionally met in the past and who I have always admired for their warmth and wisdom. It is also a description of some great leaders like Nelson Mandela, who comes across on television and in his own words and actions as a man such as Don Alvise in Blood from a Stone.

' He was a man who gazed on everything with approval and affection and who started each interchange with a deep and abiding regard for the person in front of him' (p96)

In my essay 'All you need is love'-or is it? How can I contribute to creating an educational learning environment' I explore what I understand by the expression 'deep and abiding regard' and put forward the notion of 'unconditional warmth' to describe my approach to people which I hope is both respectful and affectionate (Kemp, 2010a, p8).

It is important to me that my values –such as believing the best of everyone-are lived, not just spoken. The way I hope that I live them is with ‘unconditional warmth’.

I recently had a conversation with my colleague Jack Whitehead in which he described a friend of his feeling that they had ‘a responsibility for the well-being of others’. This prompted me to say, without really thinking, that I felt I had ‘a responsibility for the happiness of everyone’. As soon as I’d said this I both realised it was true and wondered what I meant by it. ‘Happiness’ can sound like a very superficial thing-we could all take ecstasy and be very ‘happy’ but there would, of course, be dire consequences! When I say happiness I use it to describe a deep, abiding joy and delight at being alive and being able to make a contribution to the world. Daisaku Ikeda, in his essay ‘On happiness’ (2004), distinguishes between ‘relative’ and ‘absolute’ happiness:

‘Relative happiness is happiness that depends on things outside ourselves: friends and family, surroundings, the size of our home or family income. This is what we feel when a desire is fulfilled, or something we have longed for is obtained. While the happiness such things bring is certainly real, the fact is that none of this lasts forever. Things change. People change.....

Absolute happiness, on the other hand, is something we must find within. It means establishing a state of life in which we are never defeated by trials and where just being alive is a source of great joy. This persists no matter what we might be lacking, or what might happen around us’ (p36)

How does this connect to my work as a SENCO? I realise that the values I describe above (seeing the whole pupil not just their difficulties etc) are my way of influencing, or making more likely, the possibility that the pupils I work with will find the ‘happiness’ which I have described.

Equally the way that I approach pupils, staff and parents with ‘unconditional warmth’ is I believe a contributory factor.

I believe that in order to work ‘in partnership’ with parents I must engage with them and establish a relationship. I don’t think it is possible to be in a partnership with someone without having a true appreciation of them as a person and wanting them to be happy- in the sense that I describe above.

What knowledge have I gained from research and other writings about engaging and working in partnership with parents of BESD pupils?

To return briefly to the portfolio I do, of course, realise that much can be gained by discovering knowledge which is ‘out there’. Much of the knowledge asked for to meet the Learning Outcomes was what we might call ‘propositional knowledge’ or ‘procedural knowledge’. When looking at this kind of knowledge I do my best to link what is ‘out there’ to what is ‘in here’. By this I mean I look for information, particularly research, which will help to make sense of what I know from my own experience. It is also always helpful to find someone who has put into words what one believes to be true but find difficult to explain.

In examining what other people have written about working in partnership with parents of children with BESD I went through the process of firstly looking to see what the DfES SEN Code of Practice (2001) has to say on the subject. I regard the

Code of Practice as the SENCO's 'bible' and always a first port of call for guidance on SEN issues.

It is clear from the Code of Practice that engagement with parents is paramount if pupils with SEN are to make progress.

'Partnership with parents plays a key role in promoting a culture of co-operation between parents, schools, LEAs and others. This is important in enabling children and young people with SEN to achieve their potential' (p16)

'Parents hold key information and have a critical role to play in their children's education. They have unique strengths, knowledge and experience to contribute to the shared view of a child's needs and the best ways of supporting them. It is therefore essential that all professionals (schools, LEAs and other agencies) actively seek to work with parents and value the contribution they make.....All parents of children with special educational needs should be treated as partners (p16)

The Code of Practice also recognises that some of these partnerships may be quite difficult and that parents of children with SEN may themselves need additional help and support:

'These partnerships can be challenging, requiring positive attitudes by all, and in some circumstances additional support and encouragement for parents' (p16).

The recently published Green Paper on Special Educational Needs (2011) reiterates the crucial role of parents in the chapter 'Giving Parents Control'. The authors recognise that parents 'problems may also be compounded by disadvantage, and some parents might have poor health, live in poverty, or have difficult family circumstances on top of juggling a range of support for their child'(p8).

One of the stated aims of the Green Paper is to give parents more control over support for their children and the authors say that they intend to 'extend parents' influence' by giving them greater control over personalised funding and choice of schools. They suggest the possibility of 'trained key workers' to help parents navigate the system but do not discuss who these key workers might be or how they will go about carrying out this task.

I have also consulted 'the Key' which is an online resource bank for teachers and other education professionals and has a myriad of articles, case studies, examples of policies and so on. Through the Key I came across 'Engaging parents in raising achievement- do parents know they matter? a research project funded by the DfES (2007) which focused on parental engagement and pupil achievement. All the schools in the project were involved in the 'Engaging Parents in Raising Achievement' (EPRA) programme supported by the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust whose main aim was to encourage schools to trial new ways of engaging parents in schools particularly those parents seen as 'hard to reach'. The project reviewed literature and also carried out in depth case studies with 30 schools over a 12 month period. Its aim was to explore the impact of different forms of parental engagement upon pupil achievement.

The research pointed to there being a consistent relationship between increasing parental engagement and improved attendance, behaviour and student achievement. Another interesting finding was that parents have the greatest influence on the achievement of pupils through supporting their children with their learning at home rather than through supporting activities at school. The view of the researchers was

that ‘it is the support of learning within the home environment that makes the maximum difference to achievement’ (p1).

The title of the research prompted me to remember that engagement and partnership with parents is not an end in itself but has a purpose of improving outcomes for their children. I may argue that ‘raising achievement’ is not the only outcome I would be wanting (as might be obvious from my discussion on happiness earlier). However ‘raising achievement’ is the core business of schools from an Ofsted point of view.

The key findings of the research are listed below. I have included after each point my thoughts about them and how they relate to what I already know.

- Parental engagement is a powerful lever for raising student achievement in schools. Where parents and teachers work together to improve learning, the gains in achievement are significant.

It is certainly my experience that when there is close and effective communication between parents and school and agreed targets are supported by actions at home school attendance improves.

- Parents have the greatest influence on the achievement of pupils through supporting their learning at home rather than supporting activities in school

I was interested in this but have no direct evidence to support it one way or another as the parents of the children at the school are rarely involved in supporting activities in school. We do encourage them to support their children’s learning at home.

- Many schools involve parents in school-based or school related activities. This constitutes parental involvement rather than parental engagement....where these activities are not directly connected to learning they have little impact on pupil achievement

I was very interested to read about their distinction between parental *engagement* and parental *involvement*. Because of the nature of the pupils who attend the Link and their parents (which again I will come on to) we do not have a PTA or parent helpers

- Parental engagement is heavily linked to socio-economic status, as well as parental experience of education. Parents of certain ethnic and social groups are less likely to engage with the school. Schools that offer bespoke forms of support to these parents (ie literacy classes, parenting skill support) are more likely to engage them in their children’s learning

In my experience this is definitely true and I will go on to discuss this in greater detail shortly. I also used this finding to inform the parent questionnaire.

In 2008-9 the majority of the staff at the Link, including myself, undertook the National Programme for Specialist Leaders in Behaviour and Attendance (NPSLBA). I remembered from the programme that one of the topics we had studied was about working with parents and carers in an BESD context. I unearthed my folder and found a wealth of information which relates specifically to the kinds of parents we have at the Link.

Study topic 8c ‘Developing approaches to parents and carers in the context of settings that include children with BESD’ highlights both the challenges and benefits of working with our parents.

In terms of benefits it says:

‘...staff in these settings have many skills in working with parents within multi-agency contexts.....the smaller numbers of children and young people within BESD settings means more personal and individualised contact with parents is possible. In many cases parents are keen to work with the setting particularly when they have seen their child excluded or transferred to a range of settings that have failed to meet their needs’

However the study materials also discuss the specific difficulties faced by BESD settings which can be summarised under the following headings:

- Pupils often live some distance from the school and therefore parents do not know one another and do not easily form a school community in the way that mainstream schools can take for granted.
- Parents are highly likely to have had negative experiences of the school system both themselves and in relation to their own children
- Many parents of pupils in BESD settings are likely to have high levels of socio-economic, emotional and educational needs. Poverty, unemployment and poor health are factors associated with parenting difficulties (National Statistics Office, 2001)
- The experience of caring for a child with complex learning and/or behaviour difficulties is wearing and stressful. This combined with the other factors above can make it less, rather than more, likely that ‘parental partnership’ with the school will be a priority.

To illustrate the first point the study materials go on to say:

‘....the opportunities of forging social links between parents, through local community activities and getting to know the parents of their children’s friends locally, are denied to parents of children attending BESD settings, which are perhaps quite far away from the home locality. Involvement of any sort with school or setting activities, which many mainstream settings take for granted, is much more likely when parents have established social networks, giving them support in attending school events’

This is certainly true of the Link pupils whose parents often live some distance from the school (or even in another LA) and have few opportunities to meet one another or form any sort of school community.

I have demonstrated in this section that I know how to find information relating to a particular subject (in this case engaging hard to reach parents/parents of pupils with BESD) and make use of it to inform my practice.

Knowledge I have gained from my own experience

Right at the beginning of this letter I talked about different kinds of knowledge and I’m now going to attach the knowledge I refer to above (which I have gained from reading and other people’s research) to the knowledge I have gained from my own experience.

To illustrate the second point in the NPSLBA about the influence of parents’ negative experiences I will mention some research I carried out whilst working as an EWO.

I had a short secondment in 1996 to carry out some research into why pupils in B&NES did not attend school and what we could do to improve the situation.

I conducted interviews with the parents of 50 long term non-attenders and also with the majority of the pupils themselves. I particularly wanted to find out about the parents' experience of education and see if there was some link between this and their children's experience. I was not surprised to find out that two thirds of the parents described their experience of school in very negative terms and had either been long term non-attenders themselves or had been excluded. What was surprising was that most of these parents had never explicitly discussed their difficulties at school with their children. In fact they recognised the importance of education and wanted their children to attend school and gain qualifications and felt that they had done their best to encourage their children to go to school and behave well. Nevertheless the pupils, when questioned, were aware of the difference between what their parents said and what they actually thought about school. One young person said to me that 'I don't know why she (his mother) is always going on to me about how important school is when she never went herself'.

To illustrate the third and fourth NPSLBA challenges I have included in the Appendix a 'snapshot' of last year's Key Stage 3 cohort which I produced for the Link School's recent Ofsted inspection. This was to show the inspectors the complex range of issues we are presented with at the school and the turnover of pupils during the course of a year. In the KS3 centre, during 2009/10, we had 9 pupils aged between 12 and 15 for most of the year and another 4 pupils for part of the year. I included information about their backgrounds/family situations as well as their Special Educational Needs in the 'snapshot'. (A fuller picture would have included their strengths as well as their difficulties.)

It is obvious to me now, looking back on this cohort, why it was that pupils B and C were the two who made successful returns to mainstream school, having the most stable and supportive home backgrounds of all of the pupils in the KS3 centre during the course of the year.

Knowledge I have gained about myself through the work that I have done with parents, part 1: running a parenting course

Over the years I have worked for B&NES there have been a number of initiatives set up to provide support to parents both individually, in groups and on courses. I had not been involved in running any structured support for parents until quite recently but took the opportunity to attend training and information sharing sessions on parenting, when they arose.

B&NES currently supports and resources 4 parenting programmes. They range from 'Mellow Parenting' which is a programme run by health visitors for the parents of any 0-4 year old to the 'Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities' programme which is a more targeted programme for parents of 4-16 year olds.

The 'Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities' (SFSC) programme was developed by Marilyn Steele and colleagues in the USA, as a response to gang violence. In this country it is supported and resourced by the Race Equality Foundation. The programme runs for 13 weeks with each session lasting about 4 hours including a meal which the participants share. The programme has five components:

- Cultural/spiritual-encourages participants to think about their values and beliefs and help them to reconnect to positive aspects of their past

- Rites of passage-information and activities for parents to help with their children's development
- Enhancing relationships-a variety of positive communication strategies for parents to improve child/parent relationships
- Positive discipline-helping children develop high self-esteem, self-discipline and respectful behaviour
- Community involvement-sharing community resources and empowering parents to become more involved in their communities

The programme is clearly rooted in the belief, which I hold, that parents are the experts in their children. It also promotes the involvement of parents in their communities and the value of making a contribution-again something I believe in very strongly.

As Marilyn Steele says in her 'Welcome' to the SFSC parent's manual (2000):

'The future of our families and communities lies within our hands. We hope that this journey is just a beginning. With an appreciation of who we are and where we come from, with mutual respect and admiration for others, and with an understanding that we are responsible for how our communities raise our children, we will be able to strengthen our families and communities and provide our children with the values and tools they need to live healthy lifestyles' (p i)

In 2009 I attended an introductory event in the Guildhall Bath to launch the 'Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities' parenting programme. A number of parents who had completed the programme stood up and talked about their experience and what they had learned. I was really impressed with their evident confidence and enthusiasm. A colleague and I said we would be interested in training as facilitators and in 2010 I attended a 5 day training course.

I didn't really grasp the breadth and depth of the programme however until I started running one in Keynsham in March 2010 with two other novice facilitators. I think none of us really had a clear idea how the various parts of the programme fitted together. Fortunately all three of us were experienced at running training courses and I think this helped enormously. As we got to know the programme we realised that we didn't need to deliver it word for word as in the manual but could adapt and change bits to suit our group.

We started off with 12 participants in the first week which fairly quickly reduced to a hard core of 8 women and men who came regularly. Of them 6 completed the whole programme and received certificates at their 'graduation ceremony' in September 2010.

In discussion with those who completed the course it is apparent that they gained a great deal from attending. They said that they had learned techniques to use with their children and felt more confident about their parenting. Without exception however the greatest thing they said they had gained was the experience of being in the group and the trust and support they had experienced from each other. None of them knew one another before joining the programme and they certainly had some disagreements along the way however at the end of the 13 weeks a bond had developed between them as a group and also with us as facilitators that is still evident when we have seen one another on occasions since.

We had divided the group up between us and I conscientiously phoned my designated parents every week between sessions for a catch-up and to see if they had any questions or concerns about what we had been discussing. We started running the course in early March and because of holidays and so on we didn't finish until the end of the summer term in mid-July. When we held the 'graduation' ceremony in September, which all the women who had completed the course came to, they brought their families with them-children, parents, grandparents. We had a lovely evening and I felt so proud to hear them all talk about how much they had gained from the course and how they intended to go on meeting with one another.

So what did I learn from my facilitation of the programme about my own skills and practice which is relevant to my desire to improve my work with the parents of pupils at the Link?

I think what I was able to do as a facilitator was to offer a space in which the participants could become safe enough to talk about their difficulties without feeling judged. Where they could share their experiences and have others listen and empathise. Where they felt valued for who they were and what they had achieved. As facilitators we stuck to the programme because there was a lot of it to get through but I was always sensitive to what else was going on in the parents' lives and one of us was always available to spend time with individuals if they were upset.

As I've just mentioned I phoned 'my' parents every week without fail. I felt that the consistency was important and for them to know that I was thinking about them and was available to listen to them or give advice if appropriate.

Knowledge I have gained about myself through feedback from those I work with

I overheard one of 'my' parents saying to one of the other facilitators' parents 'Oh doesn't J phone you every week? Kate phones me every week without fail and I really appreciate her phone calls even if we have nothing to say to one another'! I have always been a great believer in consistency and doing what you've said you were going to do as one of the foundation stones of working with parents (well in fact anyone) and it was great to hear this bit of feedback.

We also, at the end of the course, bought cards for everyone to sign and say what they had appreciated about each other. Mind included the comments:

'Your knowledge, your insightfulness and all your support'

'Thank you for all the help and phone calls, please keep in touch'

'Kate, big thanks for your help and support'

'Thanks for having me on the course it has been a big help'

'I've really appreciated your knowledge, your skills and your sensitivity, thank you for your support'

'Thank you so very much for all your support and kindness over the last twelve weeks. It's been an eye-opener but fun!'

'Thank you Kate, you have made a real difference'

'Support' is a big theme here and I have reflected on what it means in this context. In my previous writing 'How can I reconcile the tension I feel between living my values at the same time as exercising professional judgements and, in doing so, improve my practice' (Kemp 2010b) I discussed the work of Robyn Pound, a health visitor in

Bath, and her concept of ‘alongsidedness’. Robyn talks about her relationship with the parents she works with and how, by getting alongside with them, she is able to promote and, if need be, stand up for the needs of the children in the family. For me ‘support’ is not about agreeing with everything a parent says or does but means developing a warm and respectful relationship through which it is then possible to examine the parents’ thinking or actions without them feeling overly criticised or undermined.

In the course of sharing some earlier drafts of this assignment I received the following comments from my colleague Jack Whitehead. I have included these here as he has put into words what I think I do but have difficulty expressing myself because it sounds so big-headed!

‘What inspires me about Kate is what I understand as her sustained expression of loving kindness towards the young people in her care. I believe that Kate recognises the importance of enhancing parental engagement for the well-being of young people and that Kate works with young people to enhance a love of learning about the world and themselves. I also believe that responding to Kate in making public her embodied knowledge as a SENCO and educator is a worth-while thing to do as others could learn from this knowledge as they contribute to making the world a better place to be’ (personal email from Jack Whitehead 25.3.11)

Knowledge I have gained about myself through the work that I have done with parents, part 2: experiencing myself as a living contradiction

In case you were beginning to think everything was lovey-dovey in my world of working with parents I’m now going to include a brief rant about one of the parents I work with. My reason for including this bit of evidence is to illustrate what I told you about earlier (in the part about values) when I was talking about being ‘a living contradiction’. Whitehead (1989) says that we can experience ourselves as ‘living contradictions’ when we find that we are not living our values in practice. His view is that by noticing when this is happening we can begin to understand what we need to do to improve our practice.

Here’s the rant. I’ve written it as a narrative in the present tense a) in order to provide a bit of variety as you may well be flagging by now and b) in order for it to sound more rant-like! What I want to convey is, despite the difficulties I have had in engaging this particular parent I have not given up on her nor on her son.

R’s mother!!

R’s mother drives me mad! Mind you, R drives me mad as well. They have a bit of a love/hate relationship going on. R’s mum complains bitterly about him until somebody slights him and then she jumps to his defence. She can talk the hind legs of a pack of donkeys so it’s often quite hard to get a word in edgeways. She is generally pretty rude about the school and given to phoning up to complain whenever she thinks that we’ve done something wrong.

Anyway I called round last week to do some work with R as arranged and got no answer from the house. I phoned her mobile and she said ‘didn’t you get my message?’

I phoned this morning to say that R isn't feeling well and can't see you'. Well I hadn't got the message but never mind I had plenty of other things to do. Next day in school I happen to see R in the corridor and I say to him 'sorry you weren't feeling well enough yesterday to get up and open the door'. R ignores me (pretty usual). About 5 minutes later our receptionist tells me that she's just taken a call from R's mum who doesn't want to speak to me because she's 'so flaming livid' but that if I've got a problem with R I'm to speak to her not him. I assume that he must have rung her as soon as I'd walked away.

I am completely taken aback! I hadn't said anything in the least bit critical I thought. Why has she suddenly started ranting and raving about me (receptionist's words)? I've always been polite and interested in what she had to say and complementary of R and not particularly challenging. What have I done to deserve this abuse? A couple of days later another phone conversation is reported to me in which she has referred to me as 'that bloody woman'.

I don't know whether the break-down in our relationship has bothered her but it has certainly bothered me. I can't stop thinking about what I might have done to upset her and how to put things right. I might complain about her but, like many of our parents, I can see her life is pretty tough and I genuinely would like to help her and also make sure that R does manage to leave school with some qualifications.

He was supposed to be having his annual review next week so I got his key worker to phone and find out if she was planning to come into the school for it. It turns out that she can come any day apart from Tuesday, the day we had booked about a month ago. I am now having to use the key worker as a go-between to fix another date.

But I'm not giving up on my relationship. I really do want to know if I've upset her and what I can do to put things right so I think I'll probably call round there next time I'm in the area and hope to find her in and somehow persuade her to tell me what I've done wrong.

I realise that I do complain about some of the parents of our pupils. But I also realise that every time I do I feel that it's a violation of my value of 'respecting the other' and it makes me feel very uncomfortable.

As I read these last words that I have written I realise that a lot of what I have been telling you so far has been to do with tensions and contradictions. I suspect that where I'm getting to in improving my practice is recognising, reconciling or resolving these tensions.

What do I know now that I didn't know before I started writing to you and how might this new knowledge help to improve my practice?

I wonder, Tony, if you think I've got any closer to 'the heart of being a SENCO'? I've mentioned already a previous piece of writing in which I attempted to resolve the tension I felt between living my value of non-possessive warmth toward parents whilst making judgements about keeping their children safe (Kemp, 2010b).

It occurs to me now, reading what I've written concerning working in partnership with parents, that perhaps the heart of being a SENCO is all about resolving, or at least being reconciled, to tensions. It's a complex job in which one's values are often

challenged by the realities of situations. This is particularly true when trying, for example, to balance the needs of the few SEN pupils in a class with the needs of all the other pupils. It is a dilemma at the heart of the debate about Inclusion and it is interesting to see in the recent Green Paper (2011) that there appears to be a move away from Inclusion.

I'm digressing and the reason is that, although I'm quite interested in exploring this idea of resolving or reconciling tensions, it's not holding my attention. It still doesn't feel like a satisfactory explanation as to why I should be so keen to tell you about my embodied knowledge so I'm going to have another read of what I've written and see if anything else occurs to me.....

Another attempt to reflect on what I know now that I didn't know before I started writing to you and how might this new knowledge help to improve my practice?

Well Tony, I've reached the end of my description of my embodied knowledge about working with parents of pupils with BESD. When I started out I thought that by putting all my knowledge, or at least examples of my knowledge, in one place I would then look at it and think 'ah-hah, that's what I need to do next'

Frankly I'm disappointed! There hasn't been an ah-hah moment. I've read back over what I've written and thought 'well yes I do know quite a lot about working with parents' but no revelations about a different way of doing things, for example.

I did however have a revelation in the time that I have been working on this essay and I wondered if you've spotted it? It appears on page 10 and concerns a conversation I had with Jack Whitehead when I realised what motivates my life and gave me much greater clarity about why I do the work I do. (Just to remind you) I said to Jack that I felt I had a responsibility for the happiness of others.

I can picture that moment, where we were both standing and how easily, had timings or personnel had been different, it would never have happened. Such is the stuff of stories!

But how does my feeling of responsibility of the happiness of others connect to my wish to explain to you my embodied knowledge about working with parents?

Maybe it is that my feeling of responsibility for the happiness of others is the centre of the snowball-the very beginning bit to which all the other snowflakes stick? In other words this feeling of responsibility is at the heart of my embodied knowledge-not just about work with parents but all the work I do and indeed the rest of my life outside work- running through everything I do like the lettering in a stick of rock.

I can now see that 'feeling responsible for the happiness of others' is the explanatory principle for why I do what I do. By this I mean that I use it as a standard of judgement to determine whether I am living my life in accordance with my value of 'feeling responsible for the happiness of others'

Of course this then prompts a whole series of questions about how to put this explanatory principle into practice such as:

- What does 'feeling responsible' mean?
- Do 'others' share my definition of happiness? If they have a different definition of happiness from mine can I still be responsible for it?

- Coming back to my previous reflection on tensions, will there be tensions between one person's happiness at the expense of another's?
- And where does my happiness come into all of this as I am, presumably, responsible for my own happiness as well?

These are all questions which I will need to spend some time with. And I am not alone in asking questions about 'what is happiness?' Coincidentally, as I arrive at the conclusion to this letter in April 2011, 'happiness' and what it means, has become news! A movement has been started –Action for Happiness- and the Office of National Statistics, on behalf of the coalition government, have been surveying 200,000 households to try and determine the state of 'the nation's well-being'.

The Action for Happiness website lists 10 keys to happier living which, they say, are drawn from the latest research into what makes people happy. The 10 keys to happier living are:

- Giving-do things for others
- Relating-connect with people
- Exercising-take care of your body
- Appreciating-notice the world around you
- Trying out-keeping learning new things
- Direction-have goals to look forward to
- Resilience-find ways to bounce back
- Emotion-take a positive approach
- Acceptance-be comfortable with who you are
- Meaning-be part of something bigger

From my own experience they accord with what I have found that makes me happy and connect with Ikeda's description of happiness which I gave earlier.

Putting my explanatory principle into practice

The thorny questions I have posed myself above remain but I am now going to speculate how I think using my embodied knowledge, as I have described it to you, to might promote the happiness of the parents with whom I work in partnership.

I would not want to minimise or downplay some of the difficulties and hardships parents I know face. I can think of many parents who would ask, 'how can I be happy when I don't have enough money to pay the rent?' or 'how can I be happy when my son is out of my control and always in trouble with the police?'

However when I am working with a parent (or pupil or colleague for that matter) I hope to use my embodied knowledge to promote their happiness by helping to build on their resilience, help them be comfortable with who they (and their children) are, connect with people, be positive, learn new things and so on.

When I talk about embodied knowledge I wonder now if what I mean is wisdom? Aristotle used the word *phronesis* to mean practical wisdom, that is the wisdom

developed through experience which enables a person to take action to enhance the quality of life.

I separated out for you the strands of my embodied knowledge but of course, as I've said before, they are not separate from one another but connect and interplay so that when meeting a new parent at school for the first time, or visiting one facing great challenges with their child or even who is haranguing me, I bring all of my bits of knowledge together to act in a way that I hope will bring about their happiness. It might be that they need someone to listen to them, or to give practical advice, it might be that they would benefit from meeting other parents and talking about their parenting challenges. Whatever their situation my hope is that I will engage, support and involve them in the education of their children as befits my role as a SENCO and that, in partnership, we will help their children make progress toward the Every Child Matters outcomes.

Feeling responsible for the happiness of others seems like a pretty tall order however I can see the possibilities in using this as a living standard of judgement to determine whether I am improving my practice as a SENCO. As Jean McNiff says in her book on Action Research (2010):

'If each one of us were to accept the responsibility of offering explanations for who we are, how we think and what we do, the world would be a better place overnight'(p180)

I began this letter by saying that I wanted to get to 'the heart of being a SENCO' or rather more specifically me being a SENCO. Referring you back to Habermas's criteria of social validation, can I now ask you whether my account has been

- Comprehensible, in that a form of language is used that is commonly understood by all;
- Truthful, in that all recognize these true accounts and not fabrications;
- Sincere, so that all parties can trust what the other says;
- Appropriate for the context, while recognizing the unspoken cultural norms in which their discourses are embedded?

Very best wishes,

Kate

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Appendix

Pupil A	Diagnosis of ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) and MLD (moderate
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	learning difficulties) plus talipes (club foot). Children on child protection register for neglect. Mother did not come to the school once in 18 months. Rarely answered the phone. Eventually the pupil went into foster care. Successful Statutory Assessment request. Left at the end of the year to go to a special school nearer the foster placement.
Pupil B	Made a successful managed move to a mainstream school following several months of part-time attendance at both schools and with support of a reintegration officer. Supportive and responsive mother but lived 10 miles from the school and had no transport so visited the Link rarely
Pupil C	Made a successful return to mainstream school following several months of part-time attendance at both schools and with support of a reintegration officer. Supportive and responsive parents but lived 10 miles from the Link and both worked full-time
Pupil D	Considerable social services involvement and on the Child Protection register. Successful Statutory Assessment request made on the basis of MLD and moved to another special school for pupils with learning difficulties
Pupil E	Was in voluntary foster care for part of the year. Given a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder following domestic violence in the home. Prone to outbursts of extreme anger and moved to a more individualised programme at the end of the year. Social service involvement
Pupil F	Moved from living with mother (after attacking her) to living with father and then back to his to mother. Considerable social services involvement. Prone to outbursts of extreme anger and moved to a more individualised programme at the end of the year
Pupil G	Received a diagnosis of ADHD and then ASD (autism spectrum disorder) during the course of the year. Previously PEX'd (permanently excluded) from a mainstream school whilst in foster care. Parents made a Statutory Assessment request and the pupil subsequently moved to a special school for pupils with ASD
Pupil H	Statement for speech and language difficulties and placed at the Link following a PEX. Moved to live with father during the course of the year but then returned to live with mother because the father became homeless
Pupil I	Statement for BESD with severe ADHD. Very large family and mother with mental health problems. Considerable external agency involvement Moved to a more individualised programme at the end of the year
Pupil a	Came part way through the year to avoid a PEX from mainstream school. Received a diagnosis of ADHD. Successful Statutory Assessment request made and now at a special School for pupils with ASD
Pupil b	Came part way through the year to avoid a PEX from mainstream school. Huge child protection concerns. Left to live with father in Wales
Pupil c	Statement of SEN with a significant attachment disorder. Living with grandparents Came from a mainstream school to avoid a PEX. Stayed for a term before social services health and education all agreed the pupil's difficulties were so severe that they should be moved to a residential special school
Pupil d	Temporarily at the Link because of a criminal/child protection issue at mainstream school