

ace 

advisory centre
for education



1960–2010

Working for
fairness in
education for
50 years

1960s

The Advisory Centre for Education (ACE) was founded in London in 1960 but soon moved premises to a £1 a week ex-bicycle shop in Cambridge. The organisation was set up by the successful voluntary sector entrepreneur Michael Young, later to become Lord Young of Dartington, and the respected and influential sociologist of education, Brian Jackson, who believed that schools and LEAs were 'too stand-offish about parents'. In ACE therefore they wanted to 'create a self aware body of educational consumers and to provide them with the independent information necessary to make better educational choices'.

They had clearly identified a demand for such an organisation as membership grew phenomenally throughout the sixties – from 3,000 in 1961, to 23,000 in 1970. For £1 per year, members could send individual queries by post, and ACE's expert panel of education consultants would do their best to answer them.

Members also received *Where?* magazine (modelled on *Which?*), a judicious mix of advice to parents and students, book reviews, reports of relevant academic research and discussions of topical and controversial issues. There were articles on such subjects as streaming, co-education, the eleven plus and university entry. The magazine was a great success, with an estimated readership of 100,000 by 1969.

ACE ran conferences on subjects such as secret records and comprehensive education, forged alliances with other organisations and established innovative pilot projects, such as its 'education shops'. These were established in Ipswich, Manchester, Wigan, Basildon, Brighton and Huddersfield in order to reach a more socially representative audience, and to persuade LEAs that they should be providing a much wider range of information to parents.





As well as advising parents, ACE saw that there were serious gaps in educational provision and the meeting of particular needs. It demonstrated how some of those gaps could be filled with a variety of projects, some of which evolved into what are now well-established institutions on the educational landscape, such as the Open University.

The scope for educational innovation and reform in the 1960s was so wide-ranging, that the new organisation thought nothing of campaigning on consumer issues, such as better information, greater transparency and more involvement for parents.

ACE also campaigned on public policy and undertook academic research alongside its advice work. A key event of the 1960s was the publication of the Plowden Report: *Children and their Primary Schools* in 1966, in which ACE was very influential. The recommendations in Chapter 4 on home-school relations, choice of school, meetings with parents, school brochures, access to information, regular reports, and schools as part of the community were heavily influenced by ACE.



1970s

As early as 1971, ACE had published a Charter of Children's Rights, which included the right to freedom of expression. *Where* (having now lost its question mark) also focused more on issues affecting disadvantaged groups, and campaigned about exclusions and disruptive units, police in schools and selection.

The Taylor Report: *A New Partnership for Our Schools* (1977) attempted to create a new consensus on school governance and the relationship between school and community. It officially legitimised ACE's ideals regarding parental involvement and school government and resulted in significant legislative change in the 1986 Education Act.

But advice remained central to ACE's purpose. Its Ugandan Refugee Project was an example of ACE responding to a unique and pressing need that was simply being ignored by central government and other agencies. As 1972 Council Minutes record: 'Within hours of the first plane full of Ugandan families being settled in at Stradishall RAF Camp, a team of volunteers from ACE went and talked to children, mothers and fathers.' 56,000 copies of a booklet explaining the British education system were made available to the new arrivals and an advice shop was established on the camp.

The 'parent to parent' service was also set up – an networking service where ACE members completed detailed reports on their children's schools, which were then passed on by ACE to other members.





An ACE holiday camp was set up in Scotland for miners' children during the 1972 strike, and further education shops were also established at two Butlin's holiday camps. These were particularly successful, and were visited by 1,800 families in a ten week period, though as one parent commented to an ACE worker, 'it's a bugger to have to go on holiday to get advice about education!'

The appointment of Peter Newell as director in 1977 marked ACE's turning point as an even more overtly campaigning organisation, opposing corporal punishment in schools and advocating pupil rights. And in this year too, the Cambridge premises were exchanged for a basement in Bethnal Green. Though many have come to see the return to London as symbolic of significant ideological and structural changes, the immediate return was for financial reasons.

In the previous year, ACE had seen serious financial hardship. The advice service was closed for a period, four advice workers 'released' and three part time/casual staff dismissed. The ACE chair at the time questioned whether ACE would 'see another Christmas', but with funding from the Gulbenkian Foundation and some complicated negotiations, the organisation was saved.

Newall changed ACE from a traditionally organised hierarchical structure into a staff-managed collective. He felt that if ACE was advocating more democracy, accountability and participation in schools then it should itself adopt a collective and democratic style of management.



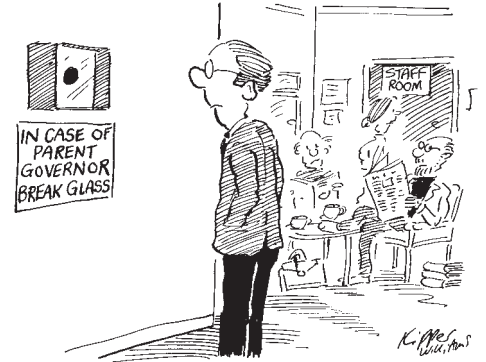
1980s

In the eighties, ACE was at its most overtly political. *Where* magazine (by then renamed as *ACE Bulletin*) described Government policy as 'hell-bent on setting individuals and differing sectors of the community against each other thus destroying local communities and further fragmenting our society'.

As consumerist policies came to the fore, ACE successfully campaigned for governing bodies to include parents, for schools to report annually to parents in their governors' annual report and for access to pupil records. But if ACE was making progress on these fronts during the Thatcher years, it set itself against government policy when it came to school closures and education cuts.

Children with special educational needs became very central to ACE's advice work, which persists as a major focus to this day. Before the Education Act 1981, which introduced the basis for the existing law on SEN, ACE had not given much time to special needs. But parental involvement was such a key part of the Warnock Report, which preceded the new legislation, that it was inevitable that this would become a major issue on ACE's advice lines and the focus of much policy work.

As well as SEN, the organisation became increasingly involved in issues relating to racial equality. Apart from the needs of the Tower Hamlets Bangladeshi community, ACE took a particular interest in the significant over-representation of black children in school exclusions, an issue still uppermost among members of the Afro-Caribbean community to this day.





ACE was also conspicuous in the eighties by its opposition to corporal punishment and its unfashionable support for the National Union of Students. It appointed a development worker to look at pupil democracy, who conducted research and also contributed to reports and projects conducted by other organisations, notably on bullying and parental involvement.

The most important event for ACE in the late eighties and well into the nineties was the Education Reform Act of 1988. The changes that followed had important consequences for ACE's work. New types of schools were set up, such as grant-maintained and city technology colleges; opting out of LEA control was encouraged; a national curriculum set in place and parental 'choice' touted. Parents were told they had a right to hold schools and LEAs to account if they did not receive their consumer entitlements.

In addition, a fundamental shift in the balance of power between the key educational players took place and ACE began to play a role in informing governing bodies of the duties and responsibilities that had been devolved to them.

Though the Thatcherite vision of choice and accountability may have sounded like music to ACE's ears, it was anything but. The system was now so complicated that being a good parent/consumer was almost a full-time occupation, and naturally, some parents were better placed than others to understand and manipulate the system. The reforms had failed to take into account socio-economic, ethnic and linguistic differences in its 'consumers'.

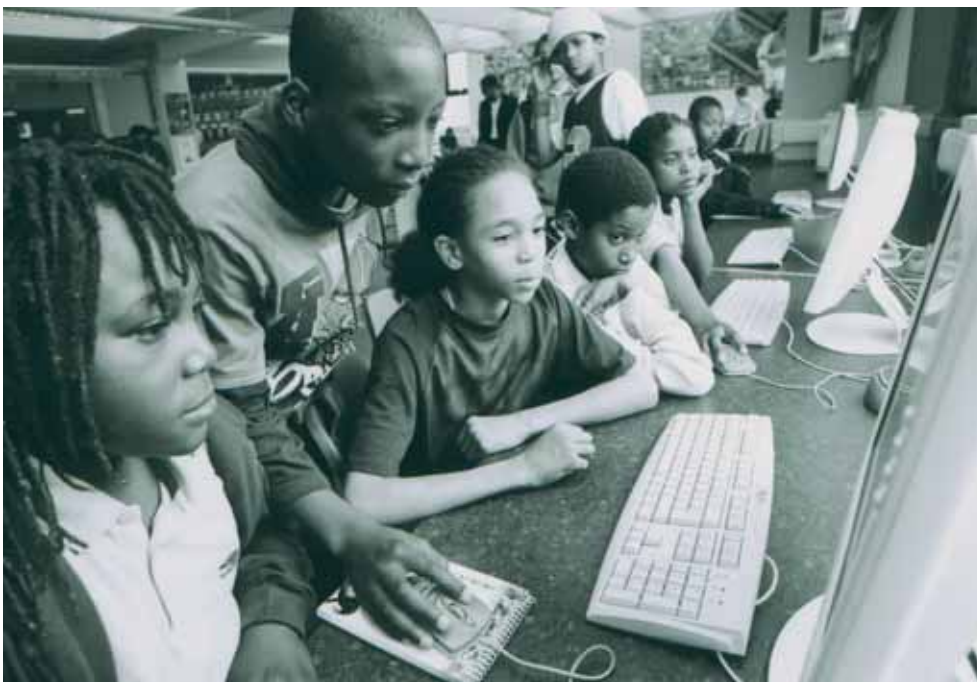


1990s

ACE's finances stabilised in the nineties, which meant an increase on the three staff it had survived with in the mid to late eighties. Though ACE was still a collective, it was not efficient to share some tasks around the office. A book-keeper and a fundraiser were taken on to give advice workers more time to spend on producing publications and developing projects. The Bethnal Green basement was finally abandoned in favour of an open plan space in Highbury in 1991 when the staff roll reached six.

Throughout the nineties, ACE maintained its traditional involvement in specific projects alongside its core advice work. Special projects included the establishment of the Education Law Association (ELAS), new approaches to local advice, the Democracy Project and new support for parents on exclusions.

ACE joined with other SEN organisations to defend parents of children with SEN from a change in the law proposed following a Green Paper in 1997. This could have led to a weakening of the requirement to specify the help children are entitled to on statements of SEN and may even have led to rationing of provision. As well as meeting with ministers and civil servants, the campaign group which ACE helped form – Action on Entitlement – marched on Downing Street with a petition. The government backed down and over the subsequent years the rights of disabled children and their families were improved with new disability discrimination legislation, better information for parents and greater awareness of parents' experiences.





A new activity – training – was developed in response to requests for ACE to share its expertise, and has contributed significantly to income since 1994. The audience was largely professional: LEA officers, governors, teachers and voluntary organisations that support parents. At the start, training focused on aspects of special educational needs, including support for 'named persons' and advocates for parents at the Special Educational Needs Tribunal.

ACE's Local Education Advice Project (LEAP) was an attempt to realise a long-standing ambition to provide local face-to-face advice to a wider audience. Contact with community support groups and voluntary organisations suggested that it might be possible to involve them in the provision of education advice. So, with major funding in 1993 from the Nuffield Foundation, pilot advice forums were established. LEAP was a success and, as one participant put it, different advice groups in the same area had 'bonded' as a result, and more parents were supported.

ACE also started working to support local parents in Islington through face-to-face advice and establishing a forum on the LEAP model. This experience led on to the Education Step-by-Step project that is now a core activity for ACE.

ACE's publication series, 'My Child in School', was produced, focusing on presenting advice to parents in clear, jargon-free language on the main subjects that parents call ACE about: admissions, exclusions, special educational needs and bullying.



2000s

In 2000, a history of ACE was published – *Listening to Parents* by Andy Dorn. Other developments of the noughties included the setting up of ACE’s website, which succeeded in getting advice to many more thousands of parents than the advice lines alone could hope to do, though responding to individual queries remains at the forefront of ACE’s work. In addition, government funding enabled the advice service to expand, and tighter monitoring of calls allowed ACE to report back on the types of concerns that parents were calling with.

ACE gave evidence to the select Education and Skills Select Committee for the retention of Statements of Special Educational Needs, arguing for more accountability over special needs funding, better advice and advocacy for parents, and the end to exclusion of children with behaviour arising from their disabilities or special needs. The Lamb Inquiry, too, in its 2009 report on SEN information, recommended improvements to information for parents, quoting ACE’s 2003 survey of 150 English LEAs which revealed that only a handful were providing the information on SEN on their websites as required by law.

Exclusion from school had become a growing problem in the 1990s. Through its dedicated exclusion help line, which had now become freephone with the hours of the service extended, ACE had unrivalled access to the stories behind those statistics. A collaborative report resulted, *Outside Looking In: Children and Families’ Experience of School Exclusion*, which made some key recommendations on children’s rights and meeting their needs.





In the 2000s ACE also initiated the Exclusion Project to find solutions to the problem and to promote alternatives. Lack of funding meant the ambitions of the project were never fully able to be realised but lobbying and briefing peers during the passage of the Education Bill in 2002 succeeded in getting ACE's views and parents' experiences aired in the House of Lords.

ACE's publications went from strength to strength throughout the 2000s, with the 'My Child In School' series being more popular than ever, and the *SEN Handbook* continuing as a bestseller.

Training for professionals run by ACE was by now widely considered the best available, covering admissions, exclusions, appeals, SEN and disability, bullying, children missing education, engaging parents, engaging and listening to young people and developing a school council. In 2008, 1,500 local authority officers, school staff and governors, appeal panel members, choice advisers, voluntary sector advisers and lawyers were trained by ACE.



As a new government takes the reins in ACE's 50th year it seems inevitable that ACE's advice lines will continue to reflect the impact of new school policies and legislation. Once again ACE will be making the case for parents and children and making sure the politicians hear about any casualties of their policies. Now reaching over 100,000 parents each year, we will continue on our mission to promote fairness and opportunity in education.

ACE advice lines

General Advice Line (freephone): 0808 800 5793

(Monday to Friday, 10am – 5pm)

Calls are free from UK landlines and UK mobile networks

Exclusion Advice Line (freephone): 0808 800 0327

(Monday to Friday, 10am – 5pm)

Calls are free from UK landlines and UK mobile networks.

Exclusion Info Line (24-hour answerphone): 020 7704 9822

Calls are charged at local rates.

Acknowledgement

The content of this document has been taken largely from the book *Listening to Parents: A History of the Advisory Centre for Education* (2000) by Andrew Dorn. With many thanks again to Andy for his research and hard work.

Help support ACE

Though a national voluntary organisation, ACE is a small charity that relies on grants, membership and donations to fund its work. You can get involved or support ACE in various ways – by joining as a member, subscribing to our newsletter, or by making a one-off or regular donation. For more information on how you can support ACE and help to give children the best start in life, please go to our website: www.ace-ed.org.uk, or contact Joanna Westley on 020 7704 3375 or joanna.westley@ace-ed.org.uk

Contacting ACE

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