

CLIF Impact Project

Community Learning and Families

Mandy Thomas

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promoting adult learning

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1 Overview

This report presents the findings of work to identify the impact of community learning on families, undertaken as part of the Community Learning Innovation Fund (CLIF). It is one of a series of six thematic reports demonstrating the contribution of community learning to key policy areas that have been produced by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) as part of its management of CLIF.¹ The evidence shows how modest amounts of investment can produce significant outcomes for learners, families and communities. The report will be of particular interest to national and local policy makers, commissioners of public services, community and family learning providers in local authorities, colleges and third-sector organisations, and managers of organisations and initiatives which work with families.

NIACE is an independent charity which promotes adult learning across England and Wales. Through its research, development, publications, events, outreach and advocacy, NIACE works to improve the quality and breadth of lifelong learning opportunities available to all adults. As part of its commitment to strengthening the role of learning in communities, NIACE has contributed to the development of a wide range of work on learning and families, including the recent Inquiry into Family Learning in England and Wales.

1.1 Key messages

Evidence from the CLIF projects confirms that effective community learning has outcomes which reach beyond the individual learner and have an impact on the whole family in a number of ways:

¹ See also the thematic reports on *Digital inclusion, Employability, Health, Socially vulnerable groups* and *Volunteering*.

- **Community and family learning improves family relationships and strengthens bonds within the family** through families learning together and/or sharing their learning, and through improved levels of communication and trust.
- **Community and family learning enables parents and carers to support their children's learning** through learning new skills themselves and through becoming more involved with their children's school or nursery.
- **Community and family learning has a powerful impact on parenting practices.** Giving parents the opportunity to think about their parenting practices in a non-judgemental environment and to discuss family and other issues with other parents, as well as learning new skills alongside specific parenting skills, all contribute to increased confidence and competence.
- **Community and family learning contributes to improved mental and physical health for learners and their families.** Learning health-related activities together as a family improves health, increased confidence in dealing with family matters reduces anxiety, and learners become role models to their families for healthy behaviours.

1.2 Actions

The project findings suggest the following actions for practitioners and policymakers.

1.2.1 Practice

- Outcomes for families should be included in the planning of community learning programmes, in order to ensure a wider family impact.



- Providers need support in developing tools to collect evidence of the impact on the wider family.

1.2.2 Policy

- The recommendations of the Family Learning Inquiry should be addressed, in particular that:
 - > family learning should be integral to school strategies to raise children's attainment;
 - > public bodies should target support to help the most disadvantaged families learn to support their children's learning;
 - > key government departments should include family learning in their policies and strategies in order to achieve cross-departmental outcomes.



2 Introduction

This report presents the findings of work to explore the impact of community learning on families, undertaken as part of the Community Learning Innovation Fund (CLIF). It is one of a series of six thematic reports demonstrating the contribution of community learning to key policy areas, as evidenced by CLIF.²

CLIF provided grant funding from the Skills Funding Agency for 96 community projects across England to run from September 2012 to July 2013. One of the primary objectives of CLIF was to generate robust evidence on the impact of community learning in order to help strengthen the case at both national and local levels for sustainable and diverse funding for the sector in challenging economic times. NIACE was commissioned to manage the funding. As part of that role, it supported projects in the collecting, analysing and reporting of evidence on the difference that their work made for learners, families, localities and delivery partners.

The evidence in this report comes from two main sources: the final evaluation reports submitted by CLIF projects in August 2013, and the data returned by the 31 projects that opted to take part in an additional exercise to collect quantitative evidence from a sample of learners at the beginning and end of their episode of learning to show 'distance travelled'. NIACE did not stipulate what methods and tools individual projects should use to collect data. Instead, it assisted in identifying and applying the approaches that were most appropriate for the projects' context, learners and learning activities.

Projects were, however, required to apply a consistent framework to their evaluation. The *Wider Outcomes Planning and Capture Tool* is an innovative model for identifying the wider social outcomes of community learning.³ It was developed by NIACE to address the need for resources to support the community learning sector to engage with the growing public

2 See also the thematic reports on *Digital inclusion, Employability, Health, Socially vulnerable groups* and *Volunteering*.

3 www.niace.org.uk/communitylearning



policy agenda around wider social outcomes. The tool supports all stages of evidence collection, analysis and reporting, and encourages a clear focus on capturing outcomes in the key areas of mental and physical health, family and social relationships, volunteering, employability, progression and personal agency. This approach has enabled data from multiple projects to be collated to build up a picture of the focus, scope and scale of the outcomes achieved with CLIF funding.

A technical annex, including a detailed description of the additional evidence collection exercise and data charts and tables is available to download.



3 Policy and research: learning and families

3.1 Why this work is important

Over the last 20 years, family policy has moved to the forefront of government social policy, with a growing consensus on the need to encourage and support 'hard-working families', as well as on the importance of good parenting to future social, educational and economic outcomes. The focus is on families with children, with policy interventions that seek to influence outcomes for children and enable their future development into healthy, resilient and economically active citizens. Current government policy sees 'strong and stable families as the foundation of a strong and stable society and key to ensuring children develop into healthy, happy and successful adults'.⁴

Government strategies on child poverty, social mobility and 'troubled' families all see learning as a route to improved life chances. However, too often the emphasis is on learning at school for children, and on parenting classes for parents. As NIACE's *Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning* pointed out, there is a very close link between parents' education levels and the performance of children in school.⁵ Schools do their best to counter the disadvantage which may arise from this. However, if the parents or carers have a poor experience of education themselves, the children are very likely to receive less support in their schooling, and are 'effectively running a race with one shoe off'. This is not to demonise parents with low educational levels; indeed as NIACE's *Inquiry into Family Learning* highlights, 'it is obvious to anyone who has ever worked with struggling families that most want the best for their child and want their child to do better than they did – they just may not know how to achieve this'.⁶

4 www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/families

5 Schuller, T. and Watson, D. (2009) *Learning through Life: Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning*. Leicester: NIACE.

6 NIACE (2013) *Family Learning Works: The Inquiry into Family Learning in England and Wales*. Leicester: NIACE.

The most effective way of changing this basic inequality is to involve parents and carers in learning. This may be with or about their children, but it may also be other forms of learning, for pleasure or advancement. The Inquiry into Family Learning illustrated the different ways in which adult and family learning could contribute to developing cultures of learning within the family, and a 'learning family' environment.



Figure 1: Developing cultures of learning in the family

The Inquiry noted that a lack of strategic join-up at government level is leading to an increasing number of lost opportunities for recognising and harnessing the impact of adult and family learning on the range of policy areas that affect families, leading to a significant reduction in participation. It concluded that key government departments should include family learning in their policies and strategies in order to achieve cross-departmental outcomes. In addition, it recommended that family learning should be integral to school strategies to raise children's attainment, and to adult learning and skills strategies to engage those furthest from the labour market. Furthermore, every child should have the right to be part of a learning family.

3.2 Research evidence

Overall, 12.5 per cent of respondents to NIACE's 2013 Participation in Learning Survey reported that being involved in learning of various kinds had resulted in **positive differences to their family relationships**. Evidence gathered over a number of years has identified impacts for parents/carers as well as for children:

- Sheffield City Council estimate that **for every £1 spent on family learning, there is a return on investment of £7.58**.⁷ It also found that family learning can **increase the overall level of children's development by up to 15 percentage points** for those from disadvantaged groups.⁸
- Family learning can **improve children's reading age by the equivalent of six months**.⁹
- Parental involvement in school is **more than four times as important as socio-economic class in influencing the**

7 Sheffield City Council Adult and Family Learning, calculations towards an SROI analysis

8 Sheffield City Council, analysis of foundation stage pupil data, 2011-12

9 NRDC (2012) *Family Learning: a review of the research literature*. Leicester: NIACE.



academic performance of young people aged 16.¹⁰ Family learning results in **increased involvement of parents with their children's schools**.¹¹

- Parents who take part in family learning **improve their parenting practices**, offer **more and better support to their children**, take **greater interest in and improve their understanding of their children's learning** and develop more **positive attitudes to learning**.¹²
- In more than **50 per cent of cases, parents progress to further education or further training, or a better job**.¹³
- For young parents in particular, taking on responsibility for a child can provide a powerful **incentive to re-engage with education**.¹⁴
- Family learning supports parents to develop of a range of competencies which better enable them to **support their children's cognitive and non-cognitive development**.¹⁵
- Family learning **improves parents' confidence** in several aspects of their lives, particularly with regard to learning new things. It gives parents the skills and confidence they need to engage in practices (such as talking with teachers or calculating their own bills) that, in turn, help them to further develop their competences and confidence.¹⁶

10 Nunn, A. *et al.* (2007) *Factors influencing social mobility*, Research Report No. 450. London, Department for Work and Pensions.

11 Ofsted (2009) *Family learning: an evaluation of the benefits of family learning for participants, their families and the wider community*.

12 Ofsted (2000) *Family learning: a survey of current practice*.

13 *Ibid.*

14 NRDC (2012) *Family Learning: a review of the research literature*. Leicester: NIACE.

15 *Ibid.*

16 *Ibid.*



4 What does CLIF tell us?

4.1 Capturing the evidence

CLIF projects worked with families and collected evidence of this work in a variety of ways. Projects were asked to identify their primary areas of activity and, of the 96 projects, ten claimed work with families as one of their key themes. Projects were asked to capture data on a range of outcome domains, including family relationships. They were also asked to collect evidence within other outcomes domains of the impact on learners' families.

As outlined in the Introduction, 31 projects opted to take part in the additional 'distance travelled' data collection exercise. Of these, nine projects collected data on changes in family relationships, with complete returns received for a total of 121 learners.

While projects identified and evidenced a broad range of outcomes for learners, including impacts on their family relationships, they were less confident in evidencing the impact on other family members who had not participated in the learning. Much of the evidence, therefore, focuses on learner identification of outcomes and provides a good indication of the outcomes for other family members.

The quantitative data, combined with qualitative data from evaluation reports, gives a good indication that the key areas of family-related impact on learners are those of improved family relationships, enhanced parenting practices and increased ability to support children's learning. The most significant impact that projects identified for learners' families was that of improved health.

4.2 Family-related impacts for learners

4.2.1 Improved family relationships

Almost a fifth of projects (16) evidenced changes for learners in the family relationships domain. Almost all of these (13) found that their learners had



What does CLIF tell us?

experienced improved family relationships and half (eight) found that the bonds between learners' family members had strengthened (see Figure 2). In particular, projects where family members were learning together noted increased family interactions, skill sharing, improved understanding between family members, and families doing more things together.

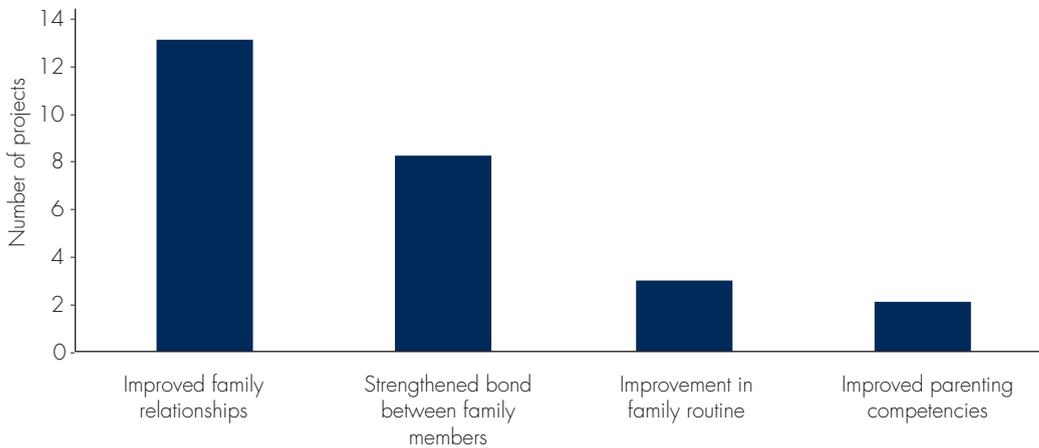


Figure 2: Number of projects which captured family relationships outcomes for learners

Base: all projects = 92

Some projects which sought to increase social and digital inclusion reported learners rebuilding relationships with their families. For example, 'Recovery Rises – from drugs to digital inclusion' found that learners regained the trust of their families, as family members could see the efforts and progress learners were making to tackle their substance misuse, thereby resulting in increased support from family members. 'Creative Directions', which worked with adults with long-term health conditions and mental health issues, found that learners were able to communicate more with their families and, in some cases, re-connected with them:

When I've gone home I've been able to talk things through with my partner and we've made changes in the things we do at home as a result. (Learner A)

I went up to my mum's for the first time in ages to invite her to see the mosaics I had made. (Learner B)

4.2.2 Enhanced parenting practices

Figure 2 shows that only two projects identified improved parenting competences as an outcome. Both of these projects included specific components focused on parenting. However, the 'distance travelled' data collected from 121 learners, showed that the number of adults who felt able to manage their children's behaviour increased by 15 percentage points during the life of the CLIF projects (see Figure 3). This perhaps indicates that while projects were more reticent to claim improved parenting competences, the learners themselves identified the difference that had been made.

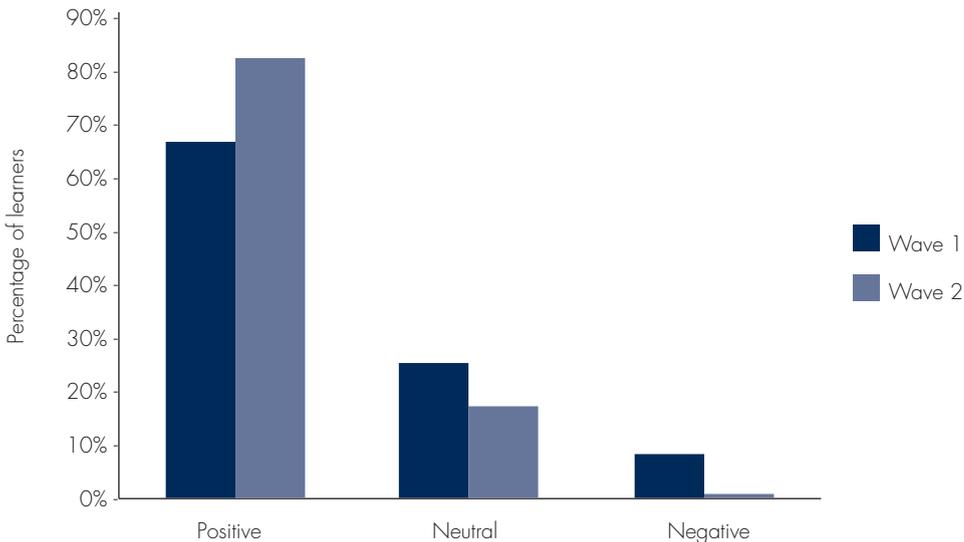


Figure 3: Learners' responses to the statement 'I am able to manage my children's behaviour'

Base: all learners = 121



'Northern Lines', a Bradford-based theatre and community arts project, ran a variety of activities with socially isolated individuals, including a group of South Asian women. The project enabled the women to compare their own childhoods with their children's, and to reflect on how they communicated in the family. The activity resulted in the women having a new awareness of the pressures and conflicts their children faced, particularly through the contradiction between expectations at home and in the outside world, as well as a willingness to spend more time with their children and to reduce the pressures created by these contradictions.

'Empowering families – creating stronger communities' (see Case study 1) showed how focused learning and support for parents, through parent peer mentoring, enabled 70 parents to increase their awareness and knowledge of good parenting. For example, one parent was having problems with her child's behaviour, which included the child swearing a lot and getting into trouble. As she became more involved with her child's development needs and applied the techniques she was learning, her child's behaviour improved. Another parent learned to communicate negative commands in a more positive way, and found that his children were responding better and his relationship with them was improving.

4.2.3 Increased ability to support children's learning

The number of adults reporting that they knew how to support their children to achieve at school increased by 12 percentage points during the life of the CLIF projects, as evidenced through the 'distance travelled' data collection exercise (see Figure 4). This was the effect of parents and carers learning new skills, such as information technology or English, and being able to use these newly acquired skills to support their children's learning. It also resulted from parents and carers becoming more involved with their children's school or nursery.

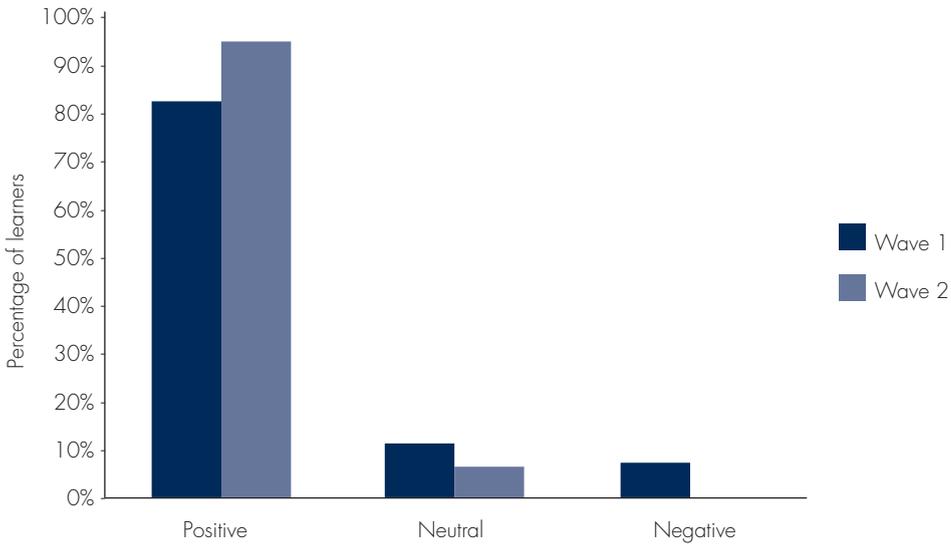


Figure 4: Learners’ responses to the statement ‘I know how to support my children to achieve at school’

Base: all learners = 121

‘Unlock the Box’, a project working with disadvantaged adults and aiming to enhance community cohesion, found that over 50 per cent of the learners increased their contact with their children’s school and became more involved with their children’s homework.

One primary school’s Ethnic Minority New Arrivals Attendance Officer reported that ‘two of our parents... are helping the children with homework now. One little girl has started writing and the teaching assistant believes that it is because her mum attended the course 100 per cent’.

The course tutor remarked of one learner, ‘K has confirmed herself that she is gaining better understanding of her children’s education and even spending time on the internet at home with them. They are showing each other how things work on the computer’. The daughter of another learner ‘is getting on much better with her reading because her mother now reads with her every night as a result of attending our classes’.

4.3 Impacts for learners' families

4.3.1 Health

Only ten projects captured outcomes for families in their wider outcomes tools. The majority (seven) of these reported improved family relationships as the key outcome (223 families). However, some interesting additional outcomes were identified, particularly in the health domain, as shown in Figure 5.

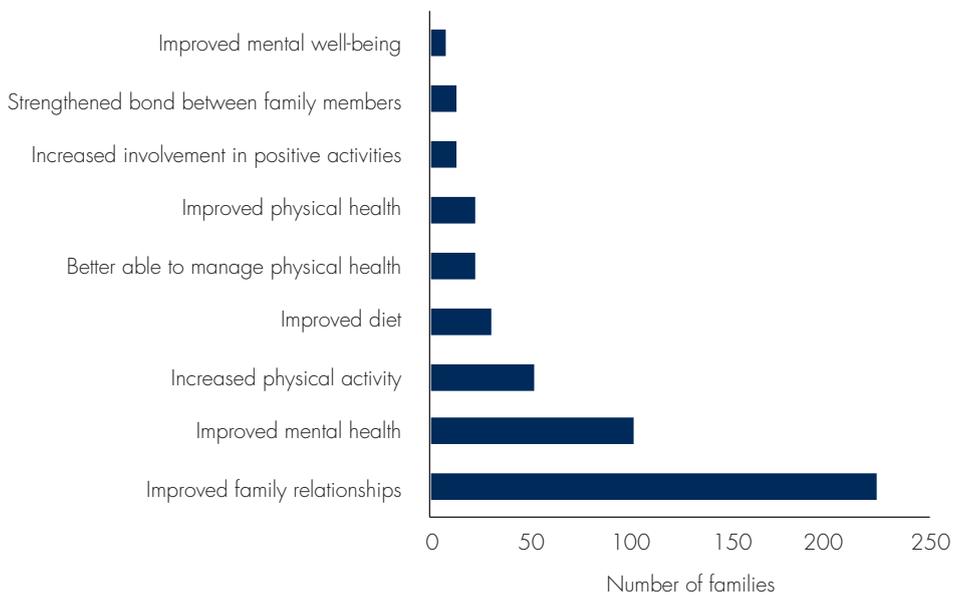


Figure 5: Outcomes experienced by families

'Money Matters in Kensington', a Liverpool-based project, worked with disadvantaged families on financial capability, digital skills and community research. It was found that learners experienced a reduction in anxiety and stress through feeling more confident in managing their family finances. Learners reported being better able to manage their physical health and increasing their level of physical activity, through having better access to health information and becoming involved in children's centre health activities.



'Back from the Brink', a project working with people in recovery from substance addiction, found that the impact of positive changes in health behaviours was felt by both learners and their families. For example, learners shared new skills, such as cooking with their families, and acted as role models within their families for taking up physical activity or giving up smoking.

4.4 Effective approaches

Evidence from the CLIF projects suggests that the most effective approach to making a difference to families is to build learning into the project planning as an intended outcome. CLIF projects demonstrate a number of ways that this can be achieved:

- Design a course where family members learn together.
- Encourage learners to share their learning with their families and discuss how they are doing so.
- Develop projects in partnership with – and held at – venues such as schools and nurseries/children's centres.
- Make communication skills a key element of the project, including digital communication.
- Listen to learners, help them identify what they and their families need and want, and adapt courses to meet those needs.
- Enable families to support each other either formally through peer mentoring, or informally through discussion and support groups.
- Use community volunteers or learning champions to engage families.

In addition, as mentioned previously, projects struggled to identify how to capture evidence of the impact on family members not involved in learning. This suggests that further support would be helpful in developing tools for capturing impact on the whole family. Getting direct evidence of impact on families would put projects in a stronger position to:



What does CLIF tell us?

- design, plan and develop their programmes to maximise the impact on families
- make the case to potential funders and policymakers for the contribution of community learning to family agendas
- enhance the scope and impact of the learner voice.



5 Case studies

Case study 1

Empowering families – creating stronger communities

Summary of the project

Based in West Oldham, this project was led by Oak Community Development, a non-profit organisation whose remit is to improve the capacity and skills of black and minority ethnic (BME) and faith communities in the area. The project used a 'peer parenting mentoring' model to support disadvantaged families of BME heritage whose children were involved with or at risk of being involved with gangs, drug misuse or anti-social behaviour. The project aimed to empower and build the capacity of hard-to-reach families through enabling them to gain skills and knowledge to turn their lives around for themselves and their children.

Seventeen locally based volunteers were trained to become peer parent mentors through an intensive eight-week programme. They worked together with families to devise a plan of learning activities. Families accessed group family learning sessions and received one-to-one support from the peer parent mentors.

Impact on families

Because the project was rooted in the Asian community, it worked with the grain of cultural norms within the community and was able to address the culturally sensitive issues at the heart of the project.

Through the project, around a hundred people participated in learning, including the peer parent mentors. A range of positive outcomes was



identified for families, including improved parenting competencies, increased support for children's learning, and increased parent-child interactions. Parents felt more able to cope with difficult situations, such as managing problem behaviours with their children or helping them to overcome personal issues such as smoking, drugs, alcohol or anti-social behaviour. They also reported doing more activities as a family, resulting in strengthened family bonds.

I was finding it difficult to be involved with my child's learning. I didn't know how and didn't have the confidence. After attending the raising achievement seminar with my child, I began to use the information and techniques... I now feel my child is learning better and is happier, as I am too. Recently the teacher told me how my child is more focused in class and is doing better than before. I'm sure he is going to get good grades at school.

One family was referred to the project through social services. There were issues around domestic violence and the children getting into trouble. The mother was unable to cope and felt lonely and disconnected from family and community. A peer parent mentor helped the mother to come out of her shell and to positively confront the challenges: 'It was great to see her laugh and smile again after a number of weeks.'

The impacts on families were also pertinent for the peer parent mentors, whose learning enabled them to improve their own parenting skills and family relationships. In addition, impacts on their willingness to engage with learning, volunteering and employment were identified for the mentors, which would have a long-term effect on their families. One learner used her new knowledge to improve relationships with her two teenage sons, including resolving a drugs issue with one of her children. The course gave her the confidence to keep engaged with learning and she also became a volunteer parent mentor.

Case study 2

Celebrate South Grove

Summary of the project

This project was based in a primary school in East London, focusing on the Markhouse ward which is in the top five per cent in England in the index of multiple deprivation. The school's aim is to improve standards of numeracy and literacy for children in the ward and the CLIF funding was used to create a family learning project which would improve the educational attainment and aspirations of whole families. The most vulnerable families were targeted, using community volunteers for outreach.

The project involved a varied programme of family learning, including juggling, African dance and drumming, art, trips to museums, yoga, tai chi, creative writing and ICT, with opportunities for ESOL, literacy and numeracy. A structured parenting class was also held. The variety of activities meant that families could engage in an activity that interested them, and move on to other activities. For example, the family juggling and African dance and drumming activities attracted some of the most challenging children, together with their parents. These activities saw the adults gradually becoming more involved with their children, learning skills and being willing to take risks.

Impact on families

In total, 157 adults took part in learning with their children. Many were involved in a range of provision through the project and went on to further learning activity and/or volunteering after the life of the project. For example, 36 learners went on to study teaching assistant or childcare courses, and the school has supported this by increasing the number of in-school volunteer placements. Learners have also gone



on to organise a parent/school group – ‘Friends of South Grove’. This progression reflects an increased interest in learning and raised aspirations which will have an impact on the whole family.

The parents’ increased involvement in learning with their children resulted in improvements to their children’s learning. Ten children who had been involved in the project received Headteacher’s awards for progress. Children reported being proud of their parents’ learning. In addition, a significant reduction in fixed-term exclusions was recorded during the life of the project. Those who had taken part in the parenting class, in particular, felt they had learned more effective strategies to support their management of their children.

The project enabled families to spend time together, as well as opening up access to local activities and services. Trips to museums were organised and planned by the families, enabling them to develop organisational skills which they could use to plan further activities for themselves. Families had increased access to physical activities which they could do together, with a potential impact on physical health. The bringing together of different communities in shared activities created new bonds in the community and reduced isolation for many families.

I loved it all. I feel so much better now, the change in my life is so big. I have confidence now, I want to learn to drive and to get a job...This happened in my school, my daughter’s school. We do homework together, she is happy because I am happy. I want to do so many things now, I have made new friends and I like to talk with them. Some of them talk to me about their problems, we are all the same.

For the school, a culture of learning together was established, which will be taken forward. It was recognised that the increase in parental involvement in the school had a significant impact on the children’s learning, and the development of new partnerships with adult learning providers and other agencies offered a new sphere of opportunities for the children and families in the community.

Case study 3

Read Write Retell

Summary of the project

This Derbyshire-based project worked with men with children aged four to seven. Led by Derbyshire County Council Cultural and Community Services, the project targeted low-income families for intergenerational programmes based around art and creative activities. The project sought to enable men at risk of social isolation to develop new skills and play a more active part in family and community life. Local infant schools and children's centres worked together to identify and encourage participants.

The project used an iterative and responsive approach to developing activities with the families. Each session took the learners a bit further in developing their confidence in spending time with their children and using cheap resources and free cultural venues as a way to do this. The artists who led the sessions were guided by the principles of creative social pedagogy.¹⁷ They used their imagination and creativity to develop sessions that would move the learners further, often at the edge of their comfort zones, but always in response to learners' interests and ideas, as well as their fears and anxieties. The artists listened hard to what the learners wanted to do and thought of ways of weaving these suggestions into the sessions. Activities included making dolls, making cardboard cars, using film and photography.

Impact on families

Thirty-nine male family members took part in the project. These could be dads, granddads or adult brothers. Those that took part were

¹⁷ For further information, see www.thempra.org.uk/practice.htm and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_pedagogy



identified as hard-to-engage families by the schools, which were themselves finding it difficult to interest fathers in their children's learning. While some learners were unemployed, others juggled work and family commitments to give support to the programme. The group included men who had been in prison, drug users, immigrants and several who were living in very difficult family circumstances.

The project increased the bond between the male family members and the children, particularly through spending more time in positive activities with the children. Most of the learners talked about the value of having time with their child. Many had large and blended families and found it difficult to make any time for the children, and almost impossible to spend time with the children individually. Many learners said that they had learned how to play with their children, rather than leaving them alone with the TV or computer games to keep them safe and quiet indoors. They found that they were more patient with their children, and reported that they enjoyed watching their children work things out and seeing them change. Many learners talked about bonding and discovering that the activities had enabled them to get closer to their children. Two learners with open CAF (Common Assessment Framework) cases made positive changes during the course.

During the course, it became clear that a substantial number of the learners had had no personal role model of fatherhood that they wished to emulate and that the course was showing them what fathers could do. Importantly, it also showed what they could do for little or no cost.

... like mowing the lawn, the mower's got two bars so the grandkid can stand on one, so you don't have to be constructing something you can be mowing the lawn and you're still being with the children. (Learner C)

... X-box is an ideal way to 'manage' the kids... (and make sure they are safe) because they're sat in front room... But no, that's



not how a kid learns... it's give them a pair of scissors and some tape... let them express themselves because unless they're expressing themselves you've no idea what ticks your kid's boxes, what their thought patterns are... It's nice to see that he has got an imagination which he can use. (Learner D)

I have found that now he's now asking me to do things with him, which he wasn't before, it was, dad's here, let's get out the way... you need time to do... that bonding... I've missed this with my older daughter, she has more of a relationship with her mother, she's spent about 99 per cent of her time with her mum, not me. Whereas these two are going to be with me... dad can make things, dad can do this, dad's not always shouting and putting me in a corner so yes, there is advantages to coming here. I've gained quite a bit out of this. (Learner E)

The project built trust and cooperation between the schools or children's centres and the fathers. In one school in particular, the fathers have become much more comfortable in the school environment – for example, talking to teachers – and have even negotiated a continuation of the project which will be extended to other men in the community.

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(England and Wales)
21 De Montfort Street
Leicester LE1 7GE

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