

The impact of learning as a family: a model for the 21st century

IFLL Sector Paper 9



promoting adult learning

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NIACE has a broad remit to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training, particularly for those who do not have easy access because of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties or disabilities, or insufficient financial resources.

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Summary

Learning together as a family has a powerful contribution to make to a future vision for lifelong learning: it crosses policy areas and provides many of the critical building blocks for long-term changes in aspirations and learning practices at the fundamental level of family and community. However, a gap exists between the 'qualitative knowing' by practitioners and others working closest to the families and the policy-makers and regulators. The recognition of the outcomes of learning are not always fully recognised and celebrated. Much synergy is lost with the overload in initiatives and the disjointed approach between government departments. The current curriculum is not designed to support an integrated policy agenda or learning for resilience in the 21st century.

This paper examines the *gaps* between strategy and practice, and argues for a new systematic approach to *think learning in families* and for recognition of the impact of learning across policy boundaries. The paper draws on the evidence base collected from NIACE's current research and advocacy in this field. It concludes with a number of recommendations to ensure a greater coherence across government departments: the introduction of new national indicators for this area; a wider introduction of the system for capturing the generic outcomes of learning; reforms to workforce development; a system of local lead learning practitioners to advocate on behalf of learning in families; and the introduction of a new *curriculum for social justice*.

Foreword

This is the ninth of the Sector Papers published by the Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning (IFLL). The Sector Papers discuss the implications of lifelong learning for each of the sectors involved in providing learning opportunities: early childhood, schools, family learning, further education, higher education, private training providers, voluntary and community organisations, local authorities, learning cities, cultural organisations, and local learning ecologies. The goal here is to encourage innovative thinking on how these parts do or do not fit together, as part of a systemic approach to lifelong learning.

The Inquiry was established in September 2007 and produced its main report, *Learning Through Life*, in September 2009. It is sponsored by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), with an independent Board of Commissioners under the chairmanship of Sir David Watson. Full details of the Inquiry can be found at www.lifelonglearninginquiry.org.uk

The overall goal of the Inquiry is to offer an authoritative and coherent strategic framework for lifelong learning in the UK. This involves:

- articulating a broad rationale for public and private investment in lifelong learning;
- a re-appraisal of the social and cultural value attached to it by policy-makers and the public; and
- developing new perspectives on policy and practice.

IFLL: supplementary papers

The Sector Papers are complemented by several other strands of IFLL work:

- *Thematic Papers*. These relate to nine broad themes, such as demography, technology or migration, to lifelong learning. Each one reviews evidence submitted to the Inquiry, and then draws together strands from the debate into a synthesis of the issues, with key messages.
(See www.lifelonglearninginquiry.org.uk/Thematic-Papers.htm)
- *Context Papers*. These will provide a broad overall picture of expenditure on all forms of lifelong learning: by government, across all departments; by employers, public and private; by the third sector; and by individuals and households. The goal is to provide a benchmark for mapping future trends.
(See www.lifelonglearninginquiry.org.uk/Further-Work-Papers.htm)
- *Public Value Papers*. These will look, from different angles and using a variety of techniques, at the 'social productivity' of lifelong learning, i.e. what effects it has on areas such as health, civic activity or crime. The goal is both to provide

evidence on these effects, and to stimulate a broader debate on how such effects can be measured and analysed.

(See www.lifelonglearninginquiry.org.uk/Public-Value-Papers.htm)

- *Learning Infrastructures*. Unlike the others, this strand consists not of a series of papers but a set of scenarios, designed to promote debate and imagination on what the infrastructure for learning might look like in the future. This challenges us to integrate the physical environments of learning, the virtual environments or learning technologies, and people's competences and behaviour.

(See www.lifelonglearninginquiry.org.uk/Further-Work-Papers.htm)

Published papers are available from the IFLL website:

www.lifelonglearninginquiry.org.uk



Professor Tom Schuller
Director, IFLL



Sir David Watson
Chair, IFLL Commissioners

Introduction

“Through introducing family learning, we have promoted our school as a building of learning for everybody who comes into it. It creates better parent/children/teacher relationships and we can see the impact with the children.”

Primary teacher and governor, Bournemouth.

Learning together as a family or between generations impacts on all family members. It is seen as a cost-effective method of providing learning opportunities that are more than the sum of either learning as an adult or learning as a child. The history of family learning in England is well documented elsewhere¹ and draws on a number of traditions, including adult literacy, community development, early learning, parenting, parental involvement, school improvement and supporting children’s learning.

The pedagogical approach can be summarised as one that promotes the family as a learning environment, builds on home culture and experience, encourages participatory learning, promotes family relationships as supporting well-being and readiness to learn, promotes a culture of aspirations in adults and children, and provides opportunities to build confidence, try out new skills and ideas.

Family learning programmes are generally divided into a categorisation dictated by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) funding streams: those that concentrate mainly on family literacy, language and numeracy; or those that follow a wider curriculum, known as wider family learning. Programmes involve parents² and children learning together, with both improving their own skills, and parents learning how to support their children’s learning.

Intergenerational learning programmes are currently rising up the policy agenda and have a wider brief. These can be defined as follows:

“Intergenerational learning arises from activities which purposely involve two or more generations with the aim of generating additional or different benefits to those arising from single generation activities. It generates learning outcomes, but these may or may not be the primary focus of the activity. It involves different generations learning from each other and/or learning together with a tutor. Depending on the aims of the activity, it may or may not involve members of the same family.”³

A well-documented body of research exists on the impact of parental involvement in children’s learning.⁴ Much has been written on the methods of involving parents

¹ See NIACE Briefing Sheet 74 (www.niace.org.uk/sites/default/files/74-Family-Learning.pdf)

² Throughout this paper, ‘parents’ is used as short-hand to mean mothers, fathers, grandparents, carers, older siblings and those in a corporate parenting role.

³ Thomas (2009).

⁴ Desforges and Abouchar (2003); Nutbrown et al (2005); Feinstein et al (2004).

in learning.⁵ Research exists through the evaluation of a variety of different types of programmes involving learning as a family; for example, family literacy,⁶ the Peers Early Education Partnership (PEEP),⁷ SHARE.⁸ The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) is funding separate research programmes on family literacy and the links between learning at school and learning at home.⁹ However, as with existing research, these tend to be related to specific programmes or approaches.

Brooks *et al* (2008) highlights this issue and states that no studies exist, either qualitative or quantitative, in which different approaches to family literacy or language or numeracy have been compared. However, it is concluded that whichever method is used, the quantitative research evidence shows fairly convincingly that parents benefit in their ability to help their children and in wider ways, and that children's skills benefit.

This provides both an opportunity and a challenge: without a comparative research base there is a space for the development of an imaginative and exciting curriculum using a range of delivery methods. However, the interplay of funding and operational requirements often limits this development in the field.

The challenges of policy into practice: systemic issues

In a complementary paper produced for this Inquiry, Lochrie (2009)¹⁰ examines in detail the early years perspective since 1997 and proposes a new vision for learning in children's centres. This policy overview below highlights the complexity of the policy interactions for families learning together across the early years and post-19 learning sectors.

It has been jokingly commented that the Government has only just discovered parents, and the plethora of initiatives and activities certainly support this statement, many growing from the *Every Child Matters* agenda. New initiatives to provide parenting support include: *Every Parent Matters*; *Think Family*; *Think Fathers*; the introduction of the National Academy for Parenting Practitioners; Parent Early Intervention projects; Parenting Commissioners; child poverty pilots; and parental involvement initiatives.

Equally, in the learning for children agenda, a number of initiatives abound, for example: *Narrowing the Gap*; *Every Child's Future Matters*; the Play Strategy; *Healthy Schools*; *21st Century Schools*; *Find Your Talent*; *Change4Life*; and *Bikeability*.

The Social Exclusion Taskforce highlights that the quickest route out of child poverty is through improving the employment chances of the parents.¹¹ The starting point of engagement for learning journeys into economic activity is often focused through

⁵ Evangelou et al (2008); Peters et al (2007); Harris and Goodall (2007).

⁶ Brooks et al (1996 and 1997).

⁷ Evangelou et al (2005).

⁸ Bastiani (1999).

⁹ *Learning at Home, Learning at School* is a current research project funded by DCSF, and managed by ECOTEC, NIACE and J.B Bastiani (www.learning-hs.org.uk).

¹⁰ Lochrie (2009).

¹¹ Naomi Eisenstadt: conference speech (2009).

community and family learning activities, although the skills gained and the impact of these initial learning activities are not always recognised as contributing to the economic agenda. One strand of the new Child Poverty pilots link Jobcentre Plus advisors into children's centres.¹² The *Think Family* initiative started in the Social Exclusion Taskforce and, now transferred to the DCSF, is designed to work between the gaps in adult and children's services to ensure a cohesive approach for all activities for families at risk.

However, in the multiplicity of these activities, the contribution of learning is often marginalised in the translation from policy into practice. Family learning is included as part of the core offer for Extended Services in Children's Centres. It features in a variety of other activities, including family friendly approaches in museums, libraries and archives. To supplement the LSC programmes, new funding has been introduced through the Children's Plan to attract new learners in the categories of families at risk, fathers and those in disadvantaged areas. Intergenerational learning operates in a variety of settings and draws together communities and groups to explore knowledge, heritage and enhance community cohesion.

A disjointed approach exists in many localities, and this has become increasingly the case with the split between adult and children's services with the *Every Child Matters* reforms.¹³ It is a true irony of the system that in some locations, the new *Think Family* allocations from the DCSF are being implemented in a disjointed manner and do not include learning as part of the remit. In some locations, children's centres and extended services are recreating a family learning curriculum instead of building on existing structures and expertise. Whilst models of best practice exist, providing coherence across services and plans in a number of local authorities, it is not a consistent picture.

Research evidence highlights the impact on families of the intergenerational transfer of disadvantage from parents with poor literacy, language and numeracy skills to their children.¹⁴ Whilst Sammons *et al* (2007) argues that the intergenerational transfer of low aspirations is particularly pertinent given the quality of the early years home learning environment (HLE) and parents' (especially mothers) qualification levels are the most important background factors relating to a child's attainment in reading at Year 5. Desforges (2003) points to parental involvement as being the critical factor in improving children's achievement above all other issues.

Despite this body of research, there is a gap between the evidence base and the knowledge levels of some of the key players. Family learning programmes have now been taking place in England, at least since the Basic Skills Agency demonstration projects in 1994, and whilst there are many outstanding examples of provision, the message from the research about the critical impact has not fully reached all of

¹² www.childrens-centres.org/Lists/News/NewDispForm.aspx?List=716e01df%2D5d2b%2D48eb%2Db411%2D182621f5e9f7&ID=522

¹³ Lamb, Spacey and Casey (2007).

¹⁴ De Coulon (2008).

the appropriate audiences. Research is in progress by the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) and NIACE,¹⁵ reviewing the literacy gains of both children and adults highlights some concerning traits in a few of the schools visited. Some examples include classes taking place in corners of the staff room with constant interruptions; inappropriate furniture to meet the needs of adults; and courses cancelled because schools require children to be involved in an activity that is seen as a greater priority. Other practitioners report increasing difficulty in gaining release of the children to take part in joint learning activities with their parents.

Measuring what's important or making important that which is measured?

Some of the issues relating to this disjointed approach arise from the lack of clarity around the real impact of learning as a family and the collection of the relevant data. For family learning programmes funded through the LSC, the data collected relates to the completion of courses, the achievement of individual and group learning goals and, where appropriate, the successful completion of a literacy, numeracy or language qualification. Information on the number of children attending programmes is collected manually.

NIACE research for the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS)¹⁶ highlights the limitations of relying on the central individual learner records to measure the impact of family learning programmes. Analysis and interviews record many other achievements beyond the learning programme for both the child and the adult. Interviews with parents and practitioners¹⁷ highlight a broad range of generic outcomes, including gains in confidence, development of new skills, improved communication, changed behaviours and changed relationships with the family and community. A mapping of these generic skills highlights the contribution they make to a number of priority policy agendas and contribute to a variety of types of progression: education, economic, personal and social. These categorisations of progression have been adopted by the Learning and Skills Council in the sample tracking of outcomes for learners on the new Family Learning Impact Funding.

The analysis from these research projects highlights the contribution that learning as a family can make to a range of Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets and departmental priorities through contributing to a range of national indicators. Practitioners and tutors know the impact of the programmes; however, the impact is not framed in a narrative to contribute to the indicators, and the contribution to the local, regional and national agendas is not captured. At its most limited form of national

¹⁵ NRDC and NIACE. Analysis of the Family Literacy Programme 2008/09 (see http://skillsforfamilies.excellencegateway.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=31&Itemid=55 for more information).

¹⁶ Lamb, Fairfax-Cholmeley and Evans (2009).

¹⁷ Lamb, Fairfax-Cholmeley and Thomas (2008).

reporting, the outcomes are sometimes highlighted as anecdotal evidence in Ofsted inspections.

The wider benefits of learning are well recognised and reported elsewhere in papers for this Inquiry.¹⁸ However, there is further debate to be explored around the generic outcomes and the negative and positive positions of developing social capital through learning in families, particularly in relation to the role of women¹⁹ and those in excluded communities.

To summarise the above debates: there is growing acknowledgement of the benefits and contributions that learning as a family can have/make in breaking cycles of deprivation, changing the long-term aspirations in families and helping people start new learning journeys, gain skills, knowledge and experience to move into employment, contribute to more cohesive localities and support a change in the culture of learning in many families, although this evidence is not always heard. The multiplicity of policy imperatives and initiatives involving parents and families often demonstrate a disjointed approach in and between government departments, in the roles of support agencies and in the implementation at a local level. The current systems in use to capture the outcomes of learning as a family do not provide a coherent picture to identify the impact of the programmes, and the opportunities to develop an imaginative curriculum are hampered by operational restrictions.

Towards a new system for lifelong learning in families

The implications of addressing these issues are structural rather than financial: the following vision is based on the assumption that many of the components already exist, but the connecting links are not in place. To make the argument for cost-effective investment in learning as a family, three things need to happen: parents improve their own skills, children improve their skills, and parents learn to support their children to learn. Many initiatives do not pass this 'three test' rule.

At government department level

At a governmental level, greater understanding is needed both within and between departments around the differences between parenting support and learning as a family. There is a need to ensure that there are overlaps, but also a clear distinction between the two agendas, with each playing an interdependent part and highlighting the need to *think learning in every family*. This message needs to be conveyed to the supporting funded agencies, such as the National Academy for Parenting Practitioners. The recent government interest in this field must be capitalised upon to ensure that all parenting support initiatives consider the interaction with learning for both children and their parents.

¹⁸ Sabates (2009); Schuller and Watson (2009).

¹⁹ Edwards et al (2003).

This new approach to joint working would benefit by being supported with structural policy changes to ensure implementation at a local level. Each top-tier and unitary local authority has a current requirement to produce a parenting support strategy for the area. It should be a requirement that learning as a family is integrated into these plans as currently happens in some of the best practice local authorities. Government offices in the regions could take the responsibility for ensuring an effective approach alongside their current responsibility for the parenting support strategies.

National indicators

The Learning Revolution has opened up the debate on the relevant national indicators for post-19 learning. Without these, lifelong learning activities will never gain the effective place in local strategic planning or the recognition of the value of learning in contributing to multiple policy areas. The debate needs to include an indicator for family learning and the wider intergenerational activities. To make this a meaningful and measurable indicator it would need to be based on the completion of a learning activity or programme, and it would be enhanced by a subset collection of the locations at which the learning is taking place. This would give effective indications if in a school, children's centre, community centre or care home. This would not supersede the data collection responsibility of the funding agencies but provide both an overview of wider participation and secure learning's place in the local strategic planning frameworks.

Capturing the wider benefits of family learning: collecting meaningful data

The sampling framework designed for the LSC for the Family Learning Impact Funding programmes enables providers to track the social, personal, economic and educational outcomes of a small number of families over a three-year period. It has been well received, with the recognition that the transient nature of some families at risk means that the whole sample may not be followed for three years. It will provide a sample national data set of the wider benefits of family learning captured in small chunks of learning and activity for the target families gathered at six-monthly intervals. At the moment, this system is only being used for a small number of programmes. However, many families join a number of programmes and colleagues working in prisons, children's centres and family pathfinders have highlighted the benefits of being able to use this system to track the wider impact of learning and the generic outcomes. Equally important, the system enables the family to develop an ongoing self-awareness and reflection of the changes and impact that learning has, a critical component of a true vision of lifelong learning.

Workforce development

A new national qualification framework for family learning practitioners, managers and support staff designed by NIACE on behalf of the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) and LLUK has recently become available. It ranges from Level 2 to Level 5 and puts in place the building blocks of professionalising the family learning workforce and ensuring effective understanding of working across the children's and adults' agenda. Units of the qualifications are available separately for continuing professional development and will support the understanding of the role of learning in multi-agency teams. Adequate funding will be needed to ensure that it is adopted widely.

However, this is only part of the picture. In order to gain long-term buy-in and change the culture in some school settings, the unit on principles and practice of family learning needs to be built into initial teacher training programmes.

At a local level: structures

The reorganisation of local authorities and the move to multi-agency teams in localities should lead to a much more holistic approach to meeting the needs of the whole family and the proposals above to integrate learning into local parenting strategies. Introducing relevant national indicators will raise the profile of learning within these agendas and support the commissioning of learning activities. However, this will not be sufficient without a local commitment and staff resources committed to ensuring effective integration. The introduction of a lead learning practitioner role at a local level to advocate on behalf of learning in families for both parents and children, and to ensure suitable and sufficient provision, would effectively link strategy with practice. This will echo the model developed to support the care agenda for families at risk and will provide a credible high profile for learning. This role could be met from existing LSC and extended services resources.

A new curriculum

The research highlighted above shows that effective family learning provision links to multiple policy outcomes in addition to improving the skills of the families; for example, civic engagement, community cohesion, sustainability, improving well-being, supporting people from different backgrounds to get on well together. Some programmes integrate literacy, numeracy and language into these activities. There are many examples of excellent practice across England. However, these are not shared effectively and provision is not consistent. Some practitioners are unsupported in negotiating and introducing new learning programmes to meet the new agendas, such as sustainability. The sector needs a new curriculum framework to support learning as a family in the 21st century; this will need to be introduced nationally and adopted by the future funding agency. The *curriculum for social justice* will provide practitioners

with a framework and the tools to support learning in families to meet the new world order and build resilience and skills. It will enhance the integration of learning opportunities into the range of PSA policy priorities and strengthen civil society. It is envisaged that this will lead the way in building on the existing best practice and produce a range of learning outcomes for families in community cohesion, sustainable development, democratic principles and community engagement.

Conclusions

Learning as a family has a powerful contribution to make in a future vision for lifelong learning: it crosses policy areas and provides many of the critical building blocks for long-term changes in aspirations and learning practices at the fundamental level of family and community. However, the potential is currently hampered by structural and policy issues. This paper argues for a future system that unblocks some of these systemic issues by adopting the following recommendations:

- a recognition across government departments and the related Non-Departmental Public Bodies of the critical interaction between parenting support and learning as a family;
- the integration of family learning into parenting support strategies;
- the introduction of a national indicator for completion of family and intergenerational learning programmes captured by location;
- the wider introduction of the sampling system to track the wider benefits of family learning and types of progression;
- support for the introduction of the new family learning practitioner qualifications;
- the introduction of the units on the principles and practice of family learning into initial teacher training and training of other relevant practitioners;
- the introduction of a lead learning practitioner at a local level to advocate on behalf of learning in families for both parents and children and ensure suitable and sufficient provision; and
- the introduction of a new curriculum for family learning: a *curriculum for social justice*.

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