An exploration of Family Learning with particular focus on the perspective of the father

Submitted by Julie Passey to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Education (Generic Route)

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Abstract

What is the nature and purpose of Family Learning? The discourses relating to how a strong home-school relationship affects attitudes to Lifelong Learning and the impact of paternal involvement in young children's development have been well researched and document clear links and positive, enduring benefits for families and professionals. In spite, or perhaps because of this focus, the means by which these connections are achieved and maintained remains less well explored. The issues that need addressing now are more tangible challenges, such as: what does good practice look like, who decides which notions are consolidated, when and why?

Coupled with questions such as how do we get more fathers more involved and what will enable these relationships to flourish, this research reports on the initial findings from a small-scale exploratory inquiry, conducted as part of a professional doctorate, which considers a possible approach to these issues. It is an illuminative case study, located within an interpretive research paradigm, based on ontological assumptions of empowerment and emancipation for participants. A sociocultural epistemology informs and frames the work. The study sets out to explore the value and potential of Family Learning as a means of focused intervention in response to the questions raised, whilst also examining and increasing awareness of the issues involved, as seen by participants, to facilitate the expression of paternal agency and voice within the research process.

The data collection, conducted over a period of six months, focuses on an existing Fathers' Group, as they participate in a Family Learning project. It seeks to establish the nature and purpose of this type of provision, by clarifying the processes, outcomes and determinants of involvement through the eyes of the fathers, as they define and ultimately come to terms with their own identity and roles, in relation to their young children's development. The research centres on two workshops supported by several participant-led focus meetings. Two semi-structured staff interviews offer insight into the role that both
professional and personal cultural and historical understandings of Family Learning play in the process, whilst the data analysis illuminates and describes the relationships between parents and practitioners, policy and pedagogy.

The research observations could be used to inform approaches to both the establishment and the development of individual, personalised family frameworks for Lifelong Learning. The findings may also contribute towards a fresh perspective and offer creative approaches for professionals, in which pedagogical practice is not pre-determined but constantly evolving, on an equal and collaborative basis, between professionals and participants. This study offers a critical examination of grassroots Family Learning in practice. It is firmly embedded within and responsive to the needs of its local community. It aims to provide independent evidence to reinforce and extend the current knowledge base and ultimately, to maintain, strengthen and expand the connections between Family and Lifelong Learning.
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