

The role of family centres in encouraging learning and understanding within families

Family centres are community resources providing local support to parents and children. They represent a key resource for a number of government policies that target families in deprived areas. This study examined how family centres can encourage learning and understanding within the family. The researchers, Stewart Ranson and Heather Rutledge, focused in particular on three centres located in different parts of the country. They found:

- While the centres would like to be working with families, typically they worked with an individual family member, usually the mother.
- The three centres differed in the forms of provision. However, they had a common aim of improving communication and reflective dialogue between parents/carers and children, between partners, and between families and public services.
- The centres were also seeking to expand the capabilities of family members through counselling, guidance and experience of volunteering. This helped family members develop the confidence and qualities to participate in and change their families and the direction of their own lives.
- Centres also played a key role in transforming people who had been dependent upon the community into the emerging leaders of the community. A number of parents were looking to pursue public service careers to help generate more socially just communities.
- Mothers were learning to foster different kinds of family values from the traditions in which they themselves had been brought up. These included basing relationships on respect and dialogue. This was sometimes a struggle. The centres supported mothers by exposing them to different forms of learning: how to talk, to persuade and negotiate with their children and partners. Mothers were not only working with professional counsellors but also acted as mentors for each other.
- Centres provided care and respite for 'crisis management'. The centre became a place of stability and support, valuing the families; respecting what they had to say; working to strengthen their self-esteem; and mediating where necessary.
- The researchers conclude that centres have not transformed every family, but they have influenced significant change for a number.



Background

For many Education Action Zones (EAZs), establishing family learning and working with family centres has been an important part of their strategy to develop the 'social capital' of support in disadvantaged communities. This study focused on family centres located in EAZs and on the work they do to encourage learning in the family as well as in the wider community.

Following a survey of family policy development in EAZs nationally, the researchers selected three family centres as case studies. These were located in very different communities: a southern rural town (Meadowbrook), a Midlands multi-ethnic inner city (Norton), and a northern former mining community (Breezefield). The centres also came under the control of different local government departments. Nevertheless, each was working in an area with a long history of disadvantage and each was oriented to work more widely with their communities.

The centres' approaches

While the centres would like to be working with families, typically they worked with an individual family member, usually the mother. Some activities focused upon the mother and child, whether in the early years as in Meadowbrook or with children and teenagers in relation to school at Norton. Few fathers attended the centres, often because they did not perceive it as their role to become involved in such family centre activity, preferring to leave it to the mothers.

The family centres were set up by different local government departments or reflected different partnerships led by a particular service. Their origins shaped the purposes of the centres, their programmes of activity and the ways in which they encouraged families to develop through learning.

- **The social services approach** modelled good practice in forming and improving family relationships. Meadowbrook focuses principally upon supporting families in caring for children. Settings are constructed around play, reading or counselling for young people, in addition to activities which provide informal and outreach support for families. These include therapy activities (art, cooking and health classes) as well as counselling on all the concerns faced in their daily family lives.
- **The education service approach** encouraged inquiry and reflective deliberation. The Norton centre focuses upon supporting the family in its relationships with schools, helping parents to understand the complex school system as well as learning how to interact with

it. But their workshops lead inexorably to discussion and advice about childrearing and family relationships.

- **The training approach** aimed to improve parents' ability to flourish in the face of economic and occupational change. The Breezefield centre has changed from being a community centre led by the women's movement into a social-services-led family centre with an emphasis upon parents referred by social services, on assessments and skills training.

Despite these different approaches, the centres share some common aims. In Meadowbrook, the purpose is to improve both the individual communication skills of mother and child and their ability to communicate with each other, whether the activity is reading or play. In Norton, discussion about school or about the children also aims to enhance communication, for example between parents and teachers:

"They have to learn to talk to them ... I think one of the difficulties ... is the families don't do a lot of the talking bit, they haven't got a history together about talking through things. There is this perception that if there's a problem, either you sort of cloud it a little, or you turn your back on it and ignore it; or you believe it to be somebody else's problem and you fight it... ." (Centre worker)

Similarly in Breezefield, the referrals and assessments identify the need to improve capacity for conversation and communication.

Whatever the reason for attending the centre, family support aims to help families communicate better so as to improve their understanding of and ability to cope with the pressures of social and economic change.

Families learning to care differently

The case studies showed that parents, mostly mothers, were striving to move their families away from the tradition of ascribed roles and set authority figures in which they themselves had been brought up. One mother remembered her own strict upbringing:

"You did as you were told and you didn't question it, and there'd be repercussions if you did. ... There was always restrictions. Children did not have conversations with their mothers or fathers: parents addressed children. They were figures of authority rather than friends." (Mother, Norton)

A mother in Meadowbrook described the continuing tradition of men seeking to exert control over marriage and family:

“The men think they are the absolute lords, they expect their authority to be obeyed without question. If the family has a teenage boy the fathers routinely end up in a ‘battle of rams’ struggling for male dominance.” (Mother, Meadowbrook)

Another agreed with this view:

“You have got the so-called head of the household, the father, and the up-and-coming young male, it’s like two lions warring for their pride almost.” (Mother, Meadowbrook)

These mothers believed that this tradition of ascribed roles weighs unfairly upon women, restricts expression of affection and inadequately prepares children for a world in which they have to be responsible for their own decisions.

Through their work at the centres, the mothers were learning to foster different kinds of family values. These included relationships which expressed respect and care for others and reasoned dialogue to achieve shared understanding rather than the imposition of inflexible rules. This was sometimes a struggle. Mothers were self-conscious about their principal responsibility as carers to lead their youngsters towards reflective independence in which they learn to choose responsible courses of action. A Norton mother wanted her son to reflect on his aggressive behaviour:

“... because I want him to think about the consequences ... if you do that, this is what will happen. I have to equip him with the skills to be able to make decisions when I am not there.” (Mother, Norton)

The family worker elaborates:

“It’s going back to saying: ‘Being a parent isn’t just about being controlling. Being a parent is about negotiating within the family.’ And for many parents they have to revisit how they were parented. ... I am saying constantly to people ‘look, its okay, you can choose differently’. ... So for a parent and child to talk together, the parent is learning from the child about their perception of things ... because it’s not just the talking, it is the listening. And the child is learning about themselves, the child is learning to make the choices.” (Family worker, Norton)

Though these mothers were typically taking the lead in changing their families, they nevertheless believed that caring should be shared with fathers, where they were present. This required partners to set time aside to talk together about their day-to-day practice of childcare.

The centres supported mothers in these struggles by exposing them to different forms of learning: how to talk, to persuade and negotiate with their children and partners. Mothers were not only working with professional counsellors but acted as mentors for each other as they shared their experiences.

Wider community benefits

The families’ lives had been disrupted by a range of events, such as illness, divorce, isolation and depression. Mothers, and some fathers, were determined to rebuild their families along very different lines from those they grew up in or had married into. They were also striving to discover an identity and vocation that would give a sense of direction to their own lives. Typically they had failed at and were failed by school, leaving their self-esteem and confidence diminished. Taking up low-skilled, low-paid jobs after school or college had left them dissatisfied and searching for activities that fulfilled a sense of themselves, their interests and talents:

“I didn’t know what I wanted when I left school. I did a secretarial course but I left still not knowing what I wanted. I went into admin work, typing and a lot of administration work (but) then I worked with a play-scheme and worked with kids and it really gave me an eye-opener into what I really wanted to do ... what I felt was my sense of direction, what I want in life.” (Mother)

For mothers, giving birth to and being able to care for a child was often the trigger to enhanced self-belief and confidence. This engendered a sense of capability, responsibility and the aspiration for something more than instrumental lives and work.

Their development unfolded over time and through distinctive stages of experience and support. The centres played a significant role by providing respite, counselling and care to begin with. They then also opened up chances for new development through opportunities for informal learning and more formal courses. This could lead to parents gaining skills and qualifications, as well as improving their self-esteem. A common pattern was for those attending family centres to progress through activities, becoming first a volunteer, and then a sessional or part-time worker. Such experiences could lead to quasi-professional training and occupational opportunities.

Family members also developed a greater understanding of the importance of the wider community and its well-being to how they and their families could themselves flourish. A number were looking to pursue public service careers to help generate more socially just communities. In this the centres have played a key role in transforming people who have been dependent upon the community into the emerging leaders of the community.

“I’d like to be responsible for citizenship across the city. I’d like to be involved in supporting that and mentoring as well. Because it is all about this confidence and building relationships.” (Mother)

Conclusion

The researchers conclude that centres have not transformed every family, but they have influenced significant change in three key areas:

Changing individuals

A number of family members have learned to:

- pursue ends which are valuable because internal to their own developing needs rather than driven by external and practical factors;
- develop the capacity for acting reflectively and responsibly rather than complying passively;
- grow from being dependent on the community, disabled by their experience, to emerging as participants in, and potential leaders of the community;
- become lifelong learners.

Changing families

A number of mothers have begun to challenge tradition and form very different types of family:

- where authority is achieved rather than ascribed,
- where roles are shared rather than divided; and where identity is attached to the person rather than their place in a hierarchy;
- where individuals (particularly children and mothers) are accorded rights rather than being passive subjects;
- in which family members are expected to discuss wishes and choices with each other.

Changing communities

The centres have mediated between families and services such as schools, helping both to challenge tradition and transform the culture and social justice of public services:

- from professional power/ public deference to partnership;
- from knowledge transmission to knowledge exchange;
- from distance to communicative and collective action.

About the project

The research was in two phases. From questionnaire, visits and interview work, the researchers developed a preliminary understanding of the different styles undertaken by family centres. Phase two selected three diverse family centres. The researchers interviewed centre managers and professional workers, volunteers and family members (both individually and in groups). In all 27 professionals and 27 family members or volunteers were involved at this stage.

For further information

The full report, **Including families in the learning community: Family centres and the expansion of learning** by Stewart Ranson and Heather Rutledge, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (ISBN 1 85935 301 0, price £15.95). You can also download this report free from www.jrf.org.uk (ISBN 1 85935 302 9).

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