

Including families in the learning community



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Including families in the learning community

Family centres and the expansion of learning

Stewart Ranson and Heather Rutledge



**JOSEPH ROWNTREE
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Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
PART I THE FAMILY IN THE LEARNING AGE	1
1 Change and continuity	3
Work in the home	4
2 Policies for family learning	6
Home Office supporting families	6
Education policy and family learning	7
Funding family learning	8
Early years	9
Health and social policy: early years and childhood	9
Other family policies	10
Achievements and omissions	11
3 Studying family centre learning	12
The lineage of family centres	12
Aims	14
The study	14
Developing the tools of analysis	16
PART II FAMILY CENTRES	19
4 Centres, communities and family traditions	21
Breezefield centre	21
Meadowbrook centre	24
Norton centre	27
5 Settings and activities for family learning	30
Support for parenting in Breezefield	30
Childcare and family support in Meadowbrook	32
Parents as partners in Norton	35
Identity and variety in settings for family learning	37
6 Practices of encouraging learning	38
Skill formation: the trainers' approach	38
Modelling good practice: the social services' approach	39
Enabling reflective learning: the educators' approach	40
Difference and unity of purpose	44

PART III TOWARDS THE LEARNING FAMILY	45
7 Families learning to care differently	47
Respect and achieved authority	47
Transitions to independent choosing and taking responsibility	48
The emerging deliberative family	53
8 Parents discovering direction	55
Ann and John	55
Fran and Maxine	58
Serena	60
Manjit	61
Betty and Beverley	62
Expanded horizons and emergent community leaders	63
PART IV CONCLUSION	65
9 Mothers, family centres and the remaking of civil society	67
Studying family centres in contexts of disadvantage and tradition	67
Practices of learning: care, communication, capability, citizenship	67
The layers of family learning and outcome: remaking lives and families	68
Mothers as the mediators of cultural change	70
Towards a learning community	70
Dilemmas of inclusion facing the centres	71
Notes	74
References	75
Appendix 1: Interview schedule with managers and professional workers	79
Appendix 2: Interview schedule with family member	83

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PART I
THE FAMILY IN THE LEARNING AGE

1 Change and continuity

Family life has been changing at an accelerating rate in recent years, while there remains much that is familiar, with a majority of households consisting of married, childbearing couples and with mothers taking primary responsibility for childcare and domestic work. Clarifying the relationship between change and tradition continues to be an important task for public policy on the family. This chapter will review the changing demography of the family but also its continuing significance, before considering the extent to which public policy is providing support for family learning.

Many of the changes relate to the transformation in women's lives over the last half-century: easier access to contraception, educational opportunities and the labour market (the total female workforce grew to more than 12 million by the late 1990s). There have been changes in divorce laws and in social attitudes towards – and individual expectations of – personal relationships. An increasing tendency to delay motherhood, not seen for two hundred years, means that more women are now having children in their thirties than in their twenties (Haskey, 1998). Families are smaller and there are more children born outside of the institution of marriage with a growth in divorce and cohabitation. One-third to one-half of children will spend some time in a lone-parent family. The growth of divorce does not, however, mean the decline of marriage. Nearly two-thirds of births within marriage occur to women who have remarried. Cohabitation co-exists with divorce and remarriage. This means, as David (1999) points out, that 'lone motherhood is more of a snapshot than a moving picture throughout a child's period of dependency': as a result, children may acquire an extended nuclear family of parents and step-parents throughout their childhood.

Cultural diversity is also a feature of change and continuity in family life, with certain groups (notably Pakistanis and Bangladeshis) tending more towards the 'traditional' family model. Here, around three-quarters of women are in partnerships by age 25. Single (never married) parenthood, however, is an experience shared by around one in ten white women in Britain and half of mothers with Caribbean family backgrounds, a trend here more evident among British-born generations than among their parents (Berthoud, 2000). Culture and poverty are combining to reinforce social exclusion (Gillborn and Mirza, 2000). Over half of lone parents live in poverty and, where there are cultural barriers to women working, family income will also be badly affected.

Structural change in employment impacts on the family: for example, 140,000 children were affected by parental divorce in 2001 but divorce rates for unskilled manual workers were double the rate compared with the average. The effects of economic uncertainty on the family, however, are more widespread. We can no longer rely on a job for life and neither apparently can a partnership or a family guarantee future security (Bauman, cited in Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 3).

The decision about whether to parent *at all* is also part of the choice about risk and relationship. Within the economics of the family there are changing 'opportunity costs' for women considering marriage and childbirth. 'Risk management' is now being passed on to individuals and families (personal pension plans, responsibility for caring for the elderly) with emphasis on the role of the individual citizen and on individual motivation to learn. How we deal with 'risk' may also undermine some traditional family-based practices or structures (Silva and Smart, 2000).

The concept of 'individualisation' (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) has been used to describe the decline of traditional family forms and the changing experience of class and social status, gender roles, family and neighbourhood. These may point to the possibility of 'new modes of life' offering new opportunities for individual learning and growth. At the same time, it is acknowledged that it is premature to claim the end of 'the family' or of the 'traditional' family. Change, however, 'does not mean that the traditional family is disappearing, though it is losing the monopoly it had for so long' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 98). Different aspects of tradition may be changing at different rates: change in family formation (for example, cohabitation and delayed childbearing) is accelerating while gender relations and practices within the family are changing more slowly.

Work in the home

The practices of family life continue to be gendered. The amount of time fathers are available to their children has not changed very much in the last four decades. In part, this is due to traditions of working: fathers in Britain work the longest hours in the European Union (average is 48 hours per week for those with children under 11). But some practices are changing. More men now use the time they spend with their children to get actively involved in such things as playing, changing nappies and putting them to bed (Lewis and Warin, 2001). Men, moreover, are the main carers for children while mothers are working and, in 36 per cent of dual-earner families, it is the father more than any other individual who cares for the children.

Reports have found that the majority of parents welcome the idea of a mixed gender workforce looking after their children, with 85 per cent supporting male childcare workers (Cameron et al., 1999).

Despite such change, women remain primarily responsible for care of children and for domestic work in the home: doing more than 18 hours a week housework compared with six hours for a man.¹ Only 28 per cent of mothers with partners work full time, though a further 37 per cent work part time. Women are still far more likely

to engage with the range of public provision targeted at families, from health, through childcare, to education and care of the elderly. Change is taking place, however, especially in families whose practices emphasise negotiation and renegotiation of relationships and routines.

2 Policies for family learning

New Labour policy has emphasised the significance of the family and the need for more support services. The upbringing of children is regarded as vital to both care and achievement, while support for mothers is essential for addressing poverty and social inclusion. Because family learning straddles so many policy objectives and government departments (including Education, Social Security, Health, the Treasury and the Home Office), family policy presents a test for joined-up public policy making (David, 1999).

There is now a Minister for Children, Young People and Families at the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). The *Every Child Matters* Green Paper (DfES, 2003) argues for greater co-ordination across services, including through the co-location of services such as Extended Schools. It acknowledges the significance of parenting for family learning and the failure to prioritise it in the past:

Parenting has a strong impact on a child's educational development, behaviour and mental health. In the past, public policy has paid insufficient attention to supporting parents and helping families find solutions for themselves.

(DfES, 2003, p. 39)

There is also recognition that schools must do more to engage with families and their communities, potentially through the Extended Schools initiative.

The Green Paper also puts parents and carers at the centre of its approach and includes a new £25-million Parenting Fund over three years, with a longer-term review of how the wider responsibilities of parents and families can receive improved support through:

- *universal services* such as schools, health and social services, and childcare, providing information and advice and engaging parents to support their child's development
- *targeted and specialist support* to parents of children requiring additional support
- *compulsory action* through Parenting Orders as a last resort where parents are condoning a child's truancy, anti-social behaviour or offending.

Home Office supporting families

Believing that the family is the foundation on which community and society are built, the Government created a Ministerial group on the family chaired by the Home

Secretary. A consultation document on the family was published for the first time seeking to create a new approach to supporting the family, an institution now believed to be under stress (Home Office, 1998). These principles identified the interests and needs of the child as paramount together with the priority of providing improved support for parents to bring up their children including: information, a parenting helpline and an enhanced role for health visitors. Parents would be provided with support for their children in their early years together with family literacy and mentoring schemes; the importance of better financial support was recognised.

Education policy and family learning

Excellence in Schools (DfEE, 1997) and *The Learning Age* (DfEE, 1998a) emphasised the wider potential of family learning not only to raise standards in schools but also to create a culture of learning and participation in localities while strengthening both family and community. Education, it is said, offers the most disadvantaged families a way out of the 'poverty trap' and for education to succeed, family support is crucial. A number of policy initiatives sought to engage families and communities in supporting children's learning. *Education Action Zones* (EAZs) (DfEE, 1998b) and *Schools Plus* (DfEE, 2000) have emphasised not only the importance of parental participation (Brassett-Grundy, 2002) for improving pupil achievement but also the need to create a wider community of learning, which can improve the skills of adults and enhance educational aspirations in the locality. These initiatives recognise the significance of the African saying 'that it takes a whole village to raise a child'.

An Ofsted (2000) report, however, concluded that family learning was satisfactory in only a small number of local authorities. Typically, there was an absence of clear policy, the failure to recognise its potential contribution to the agenda for raising achievement and the fragmentation of provision across a number of departments or agencies. A later Ofsted (2001) report praised the Zones for improving parental participation, especially in the primary sector, though noted the tendency to refer to families as problems to be solved.

In July 2001, the Education and Skills Secretary announced changes to the law on exclusions and the extension of Parenting Orders under a package of measures to tackle disruptive behaviour in schools. Parents are now faced with possible imprisonment for failing to stop their children truanting. Some 7,500 parents are prosecuted each year for failing to stop children playing truant. Evidence indicates that few parents condone truancy and that the overwhelming majority of children who truant believe that their parents or carers would be angry if they knew about truancy (Malcolm *et al.*, 2003).

More recently, the announcement of the Extended Schools programme has renewed interest in how schools can provide broader services and engage with their communities, with health and social care, adult and family learning, parenting support, childcare provision, study support and sport and the arts. By 2005–06, it is hoped that at least 240 full-service extended schools will have been developed, with activities linked to the school's core role in improving pupil achievement. There are some questions on available funding, insufficient at present to pay for the range of services to be provided and with clarification needed on how wider sources can be accessed.

Funding family learning

Family Learning programmes, which 'bring family members together to work and learn on a planned activity' and which 'focus on engaging parents in their children's development and offer opportunities to increase involvement in learning, to break down barriers between school and parents, and act as a link to targeted help and support' (DfES, 2003, p. 41), are listed as one of the universal services under consideration in the Green Paper.

At present, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) funds the majority of Family Learning programmes, although other areas of national and local government focus on family learning and outcomes for children. The LSC's interest is development of adult skills, particularly in the light of the National Skills Strategy and its related Level 2 target, although the LSC recognises that Family Learning can also support its broader Widening Participation Strategy.

In 2003/04 the LSC has provided almost £20 million for Family Literacy, Language and Numeracy (FLLN) programmes, which focus on raising the basic skill levels of children and parents as part of the wider Skills for Life initiative. The programme offers separate and joint sessions for parents and children to develop their literacy and numeracy skills, and has been developed centrally by the Basic Skills Agency (BSA) working with local schools. Phase 2 was launched in May 2004 and involves a number of Local Education Authority (LEA) pilots. The LSC commissioned the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) to evaluate both FLLN and wider Family Learning provision in 2002/03. Recommendations include the development of a National Framework for family programmes, the development and extension of family learning networks at local, regional and national level, and the development of a national staff development strategy for practitioners. These recommendations have been discussed extensively with practitioners and some are now being taken forward by the LSC and its partners. In addition to the LSC's Family Learning programmes, the DfES also supports a number of programmes for adults.

For example, the Offenders Learning and Skills Unit (OLSU) is working with partners across government and in particular in the voluntary sector – including Fathers Direct, the Parenting Education and Support Forum and Safe Ground – to develop parenting and family learning in prisons.

Early years

The National Childcare Strategy and the subsequent report from an interdepartmental review of the Strategy (*Delivering for Children and Families*, Strategy Unit, 2002) have sought to increase affordable childcare and education as a way of reducing child poverty by helping parents take up work. The intention is to create at least 250,000 new childcare places and establish a ‘children’s centre’ in each of the 20 per cent most deprived neighbourhoods in the country by 2006. These centres will provide integrated childcare, parenting support and information about children’s and family services, child and family health services, and various kinds of practical support, including job-search advice and technology access for parents of young children. Overall, the Strategy is aiming to create 1,150,000 new childcare places by 2006 and a free nursery place for every three year old whose parents want one.

Health and social policy: early years and childhood

Two major cross-departmental initiatives target particular ages of childhood: *Sure Start* focusing on the under fives and *the Children’s Fund* on five to 13 year olds. *Sure Start* (HM Treasury, 1998) is the result of a cross-departmental review of services for young children, which emphasised that: early years are the most important for child development; the quality of service provision for young children and their families varies enormously across localities; and provision of a comprehensive community-based programme of early intervention and family support could have long-term benefits on child and family development and social inclusion.

Sure Start began in 2000 under the departmental supervision of the Minister for Public Health, although attempting to put into practice ‘joined-up thinking’. *Sure Start* is available to local partnerships to deliver support services, including family support, childcare, primary health care, early learning and play. Each family receives a visit from an outreach worker within three months of the baby’s birth in addition to support currently provided through midwives and health visitors. The new visitors seek to assess the needs of the child and give advice to parents. This support for parents includes training for work, help with literacy and numeracy, and advice on discipline and parenting problems, together with more specific support for families of children with learning difficulties and emotional and behavioural problems.

The Children's Fund emphasises prevention, participation and partnership for families with children aged five to 13, a traditionally neglected group. The development of large-scale cross-cutting initiatives has been a specific feature of recent children and family policy developments. Yet, despite the introduction of legal frameworks to support co-ordination, the development of these services has been limited. The distinctive feature of the Fund emphasises that children's life chances would be enhanced if local needs were reflected in partnership plans and if service users were involved in planning and implementation.

Local Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships (EYCDPs) are charged with co-ordinating the expansion of provision in each local authority area through an annual Early Years Development and Childcare Plan. EYCDPs have been criticised for being too bureaucratic and questions remain about how they relate to schools and other learning providers. The Green Paper's response is to propose a flexible, locally determined approach to co-locating multidisciplinary teams that serve the differing needs of at-risk children in schools, Sure Start children's centres and other community-based settings.

Other family policies

- *Department of Trade and Industry*: the Right to Parental Leave and Flexible Working enables fathers to take two weeks' paternity leave on the birth of their children and gives parents the right to request, and employers a duty to consider, flexible working arrangements so that they can more easily manage the demands of work and families. Parents are also entitled to 13 weeks' unpaid leave for each child, which can be taken before the child's fifth birthday.
- *Family and community – neighbourhood renewal*: whole-community regeneration is increasingly recognised as the key to breaking the cycle of disadvantage. The Neighbourhood Renewal programme pursues this aim, seeking not only greater collaboration between services than hitherto but also a sea change in public participation. Communities need to be listened to and involved in the design and delivery of change. Local Strategic Partnerships (a coalition of public, private, voluntary and community sector organisations) can provide the way for local areas to take ownership of planning for neighbourhood regeneration. Community-based neighbourhood learning centres have been set up to address the childcare and skill gap in deprived areas. It was recognised that Government needed to invest much more in developing the skills and knowledge of those involved in neighbourhood renewal. The document, *The Learning Curve: Developing Skills and Knowledge for Neighbourhood Renewal*, Summary (ODPM, 2002) identifies the range of skills necessary for renewal.

Achievements and omissions

Public policy is striving to address the challenge of achieving a collaborative approach to supporting the family in a period of change. Much has been achieved in encouraging such an infrastructure of support to begin to emerge: administrative arrangements have been put in place, resources have been generated, and opportunities for education and training have been opened up. As David (1999) comments, however, significant limitations may remain in this infrastructure, in the continuing fragmentation of services and the inadequacy of resource provision and targeting. The focus of training provision, moreover, appears directed to limited instrumental, vocational goals of preparation for employment.

The different policy documents typically focus on the support that families need for self-sufficiency – the services, the resources and benefits, and the skills to sustain employment opportunities. Yet, while the strength of the reports lies in their shared valuing of and commitment to the well-being of the key triadic relationship – of individual, family and community – they nevertheless lack an account of the family and its central functions of care that lie at the centre of child rearing. Focus on the external frameworks without recognition of the internal goods to which they should be directed is incomplete. A learning family depends on recognition of a certain style of reason in communication and mutuality in relationship, of authority based on participation, and principally of attentive and reflective care. Furthermore, as Alexander (1997) emphasises, the learning family will ‘learn how to understand, take responsibility and make decisions in relation to wider society, in which the family is the foundation for citizenship’.

There also remains ‘a disturbing absence of men involved in family learning [which] is more than a reflection of either the lower proportion of men among adult learners generally or of the number of absent fathers in society at large’ (Ofsted, 2000). The importance of fathers’ involvement in family learning is increasingly recognised by practitioners and policy makers. The DfES has convened a Fathers Advisory Group of practitioners and considerable work has been done to identify the barriers that prevent more men getting involved in family learning and into ways to overcome these barriers.

This lack of involvement reflects the fact that society has given too little recognition to the importance of the intellectual as well as emotional work of care provided by the family in bringing up children and in supporting us throughout our lives (Nussbaum, 2001). This is a key area for development in public policy initiatives for the future (Duncan and Edwards, 1997; David, 1999).

3 Studying family centre learning

This study has focused on family centres and the work they do to encourage learning in the family as well as in the wider community. The study was located in Education Action Zones (EAZs), a policy initiative designed to support the creation of such learning communities in contexts of disadvantage, seeking to generate the social capital of collaborative networks and strengthened public services and institutions to foster regeneration and social inclusion (cf. Putnam, 1993, 2000; Levitas, 1998; Askonas and Stewart, 2000). Establishing family learning and working with family centres was, for many EAZs, an important part of their strategy to develop the social capital of support in these disadvantaged communities. In this chapter, we review the origins of family centres before clarifying the framework of analysis that we will use to study them. We conclude by setting out how we have designed our study of learning in family centres.

The lineage of family centres

Family centres were first set up in Britain during the 1970s (cf. Cannan, 1992; Pithouse *et al.*, 1998; Stones, 1998) and evolved from previous forms of local authority provision such as Family Advice Services (a response to the Children and Young Persons Act 1963). There was no single model and there were some partnerships with voluntary sector agencies. The voluntary sector has a long history of work in this field, including the early University Settlements and later Family Service Units. Stones (1998) comments on the emergence of the 1970s' centres as:

... associated with a further emphasis on prevention [*of child abuse*] influenced by growing recognition of the damage caused by separating children from families, by alarm at the increasing numbers of children in care and by a belief that preventative services would help reduce expenditure. (Stones, 1998, p. 22)

There was rapid growth of centres to around 500 nationally by the late 1980s.

The 1989 *Children Act* endorsed family centres but encouraged a shift in practice, stressing the sharing of responsibility and partnership with parents, and supporting rather than stigmatising parents who used support services. The Act required local authorities to 'provide such family centres as they consider appropriate in relation to children in their area'.

The continuing development of family centres has been characterised by a variety of practice during the 1990s (Cannan, 1992; Stones, 1998), reflecting the different values and social welfare traditions that have informed their policies and practices as well as the relations of power between professionals, clients and the community. Different models of family centre developed over time.

- *Client-focused family centres* : targeting children who have been neglected, abused or who are at risk as well as families under stress. These clients are typically referred by social workers and the centres, focusing on therapy and treatment to 'problem families', are under the control of specialist social service professionals.
- *Service-support family centres* : eschew stigmatising perspectives, recognising the support that families need to strengthen their care and development of children. *Supporting Families* (Home Office, 1998), for example, emphasises that, if the health, education and welfare of families are to develop, there is a need for better co-ordination of support services, which family centres can facilitate.
- *Family and community centres* : in these centres, there is an emphasis on families and local residents participating in the running of the centre, identifying local needs, and developing the facilities and activities that support families and their communities. These centres also encourage self-help networks to grow (Bentley, 2000).
- *The networked centre* : the important research of Jane Tunstall *et al.* (2004) reveals the growing complexity of national policy development and the pressures placed on family centres to create networks of support with other agencies.

Policy makers are now acknowledging that, if these centres are to succeed in their objectives – whether of treatment, or provision, or participation – they have to become crucibles for learning. Family learning centres would offer a base for local family services and a source of advice, education, support and community activities (Alexander, 1997). They would provide facilities for family learning and informal learning all year round: supporting summer schools, interactive libraries, adventure playgrounds, urban farms, youth clubs, multimedia and electronic village halls – stimulating enthusiasm for learning among parents as much as among children. Local learning action plans would enable these developments while strengthening family support networks:

- actively reaching out to people with children, particularly first-time parents
- funding community-based support groups (Pithouse *et al.*, 1998)
- ensuring that every family has easy access to a family centre of some kind
- targeted support for parents under stress or in difficulty.

What kind of family centres have been created in the Education Action Zones, what practices have they developed and have they lived up to these emergent ideals? We set out below the aims of the study, how we designed the research, and the analytical tools we developed to investigate the family centres and the learning they generated.

Aims

The purpose of the study was to examine the work of family centres in encouraging learning in the family and the wider community. A number of questions provided focus for the research.

- What are the practices of family centres and what contribution do they make to family learning and the creation of learning communities?
- What different kinds of learning were promoted in the family centres?
- What practices enable families to become reflective learning communities, supporting all their members to develop their capabilities, identities and sense of agency?
- Have centres achieved their wider purpose of social inclusion?

The idea to be explored in the study was the extent to which the capabilities that citizens require to flourish in the twenty-first century depend on creating learning communities that encompass school, family and community (cf. Nussbaum and Sen, 1993; Sen, 1993).

The study

The research was constructed in two phases to focus progressively on the questions at the heart of the study. *Phase one* began by mapping the broad purpose, organisation and governance of family centres. A short questionnaire was mailed in June 2000 to 102 Education Action Zones, including those already started, small EAZs and new EAZs. Fifty-two completed questionnaires were returned. The questionnaire asked whether EAZs prioritised family learning and, if there was a family centre in the EAZ area, which department was responsible for its management and whether other agencies were involved in partnership. Whether family members participated in the centre management and decision making was also a subject of inquiry.

The information allowed EAZ family centres to be classified in terms of function ('early years'; 'school centred'; 'community oriented' and 'virtual ICT network'), principal departmental control (for example, social services, education, community and leisure) and geographical location. Visits and telephone interviews were arranged with ten EAZs to develop preliminary understanding of the different styles revealed by this matrix of practice and governance.

Phase two selected three geographically diverse family centres reflecting different departmental control to allow investigation of the significance of varied professional influences on their practice of family learning and community development. Visits were made to other centres in each locality to further comparative understanding of practice. In all, four centres were visited in addition to the three selected case studies.

Our study addressed three overlapping circles of fieldwork interest – looking outwards towards the context of community and tradition, as well as more intensively at the accounts of family life and development. Yet, the unit of analysis for our study remained the centres, their activities and the relationship they developed with the families attending.

This focus determined the design of our case study work. The three case study centres involved two layers of fieldwork, which analysed first the profiles of activities and practices of learning, leading to a second phase of study of family learners and learning. Interviews¹ were conducted with centre managers and professional workers, volunteers and family members.² Learning activities within the centres were observed and a number of community meetings, forums and learning activities were observed. With centre professionals, the interviews explored the histories and community contexts of the centre, their approach to learning and management, the involvement of families and the connections with the wider community. The interviews with family members often began in group discussions and were followed up at a later date with individual interviews, inviting narratives about learning in the centre, in the family and community, as well as accounts of learning in formal settings such as school or college.

This methodology provided us with an opportunity to develop rich and detailed narratives from the diverse actors about the background social, cultural and economic forces at work in the lives of the families and their communities, before exploring the activities of the centres and the influence they were perceived to have on the participating families. We were able to 'triangulate' many of these accounts to check the similarity of their details and interpretations.

Developing the tools of analysis

Family centres are analysed in terms of their *practices* of learning, the organisational and management *structures* they develop to support learning, and the cultural *codes* that inform the working of the centre in its practices and management style. The work of the centres needs to be located in the *context* of particular communities and their histories, which shape the way they understand their purposes and tasks. Finally, the framework of analysis clarifies the nature of the *outcomes of learning* achieved by the centres in terms of not only skills and capabilities but also the sense of identity and confidence that families develop to address the concerns facing their lives.

What *practices of learning* are developed within the centres?³ The case studies investigate the values and purposes of learning, and explore a number of interrelated dimensions of learning.

- The *spheres and settings* are created to provide opportunities for learning. The spheres of learning relate to the 'object' of learning, whether it be the needs of an individual, or the activities of a family as a whole in the home or at the centre, or whether the sphere of learning focuses on activities or relationships in the community as such. The settings of learning are the different kinds of activity: for example, a playgroup, the visit of a nursery nurse, or a counselling session. Spheres and settings are discussed in Chapter 5.
- The *modes of learning* can be informal as well as formal, collaborative as well as individual, and can describe the different approaches to supporting learning and developing capability. For example, some centres may emphasise training and instruction, while others may emphasise providing guidance and support. The extent to which the centres encourage the processes of reflective dialogue and transaction with family members as the means of transforming the family is of particular interest. The modes of learning are discussed in Chapter 6.

How are the centres organised and *structured* to support the settings and practices of learning? Which professional service and local authority department provides the principal support for the centre? Is there a wider framework of interagency partnership and support? What are the processes of strategic planning and management in the centre; and is the organisational form of the centre one that emphasises rules and division of labour or collaborative understanding? What are the *cultural codes* that shape the centre practices and modes of working? What are the dominant ideas, values and beliefs that define and interpret what counts as learning and achievement? What are the cultural codes of inclusion and exclusion?

What are the formations of community and tradition that provide *the context* of the family centre? What histories of struggle have shaped the life-worlds of the communities? What demographic patterns of class and ethnicity characterise the profiles of social and economic disadvantage? What are the traditions that shape assumptions and belief about family and childrearing, as well as about the relations between mothers and fathers?

The layers of *learning outcome* can vary from seeking to transmit specific childrearing skills or pieces of information, to striving to develop understanding of concerns that arise in families and the capabilities to address them. A longer-term outcome that centres may aim for is to enable families to develop the confidence and capability to change the form relationships take within the family. The layers of learning outcome are discussed in Part III.

Part II describes the three family centres that form the focus of the research. In each case, we set out the communities they serve and the traditions of family formation that prevail in those communities. The programmes and settings of family learning are described as well as their distinctive approach to encouraging learning (modes of learning). Part III describes the layers of learning that families have gained from participation in the centres.

PART II
FAMILY CENTRES

4 Centres, communities and family traditions

The family centres that form the focus of this study are located in very different cultural and social contexts, yet each has experienced the pressures of economic restructuring and its corrosive effects including poverty, unemployment, isolation and discrimination. Such pressures often bring tensions between the families and communities that suffer change and the public services that seek to serve them and ameliorate its impact. Three communities we describe are Breezefield, in the North East, Norton in the Midlands and Meadowbrook in the South West (see Table 1).

Table 1 The family centres

Family centre	Sponsoring department	Principal functions
Breezefield	Community development (National Children's Homes); Social Services	Continuing education; childcare; parent skills
Meadowbrook	National Children's Homes; Social Services	Childcare; family support
Norton	Education	Home-school relations; family support

The discussion of the centres will explore their work in three stages:

- the community context of each centre and the traditions of family formation and relationships in those communities (in this chapter)
- the settings and activities of family learning (in Chapter 5)
- the practices and perspectives of encouraging learning (in Chapter 6).

Before exploring the practices of the centres and the activities that they provide to support family learning, it is important to develop understanding of the traditions of family formation and ethos that the centres have had to engage with.

Breezefield centre

This centre serves a white working-class community in the North East, where traditional employment involved men working down the pit or in the steel furnaces, while women worked in the sewing and glass factories. Closure of traditional industries in the 1980s – of manufacturing, steel and coal – precipitated strikes in mining communities. Women played a leading role in the strike movement running soup kitchens and parcel services to keep the community going. Their experience

Including families in the learning community

transformed the view they had of themselves, their education and their futures, as described when a sponsored educational visit to Russia involved 50 women and 100 children from the mining communities:

We used to sit up into the night ... and that's when we would talk about what I would love to do, or I wish I had, or what ambitions you had for your children ... And it's all this about learning. 'Oh I wish I had not left school at 15. I wished I had gone to college'. Not 'I wish I had gone to university'. They never got that far with wishing, but they did want to learn about anything and everything.

The Breezefield centre, which was opened with an Urban Aid grant, was one of several that were founded in the area during the 1980s. Newspaper clippings from the early days show the range of activities:

In the five years since it has been open, the centre has grown from strength to strength, becoming the focal point of Breezefield life. As many as 800 people a week use the centre, ranging from toddlers to pensioners to the mentally handicapped ... *[alongside a permanent staff of five]*volunteers help organise group meetings, provide transport, set up equipment, tidy the centre after meetings ... Unemployed teenagers and adults also play an essential part, working hard decorating, painting, moving furniture and acting as general handymen.

Activities included Physically Handicapped and Able Bodied group, Gateway group for mentally handicapped people, elderly and youth groups, Mother and Toddler group, unemployed teenagers' groups, youth clubs, women's groups, arts print workshop, social evenings, day trips, festival organising fundraising, promotions. Women's groups regarded it as their centre, volunteering to support its activities and developing confidence and skills in the process.

The role of the centre also underlines the lack of other social space available to women at the time:

... when I first came there were parents at home all the time ... instead of looking at the same four walls, you can sit and discuss other things other than children. You can have a life again ... They were quite strong, independent women within the group who wanted, who were ready for more for themselves than could have been at home.

The history of the centre, and the wider social networks it is part of, have influenced the learning opportunities offered to individuals. In the centre's early days, these included self-help and discussion groups, which sought to help the participants make sense of the changes they were experiencing in their lives and in their communities (cf. Cullen *et al.*, 1999):

A lot of women wanted to get back to normal, but a lot of women couldn't go back to what normal might have been ... back to the kitchen sink. There had been so much awakening or awareness of what was going on out there and what was coming through your television that just wasn't as it was and wasn't real. They wanted to know a lot more.

There is a history of a particular type of adult education that has worked with these transformative moments and in this instance:

... the Workers' Educational Association used to put classes on for us in Locket Community Centre, just over the bridge, just there. And it was sort of bringing into it, not politically the type of politics that you were following but how the politics and economics of everything determined what the outcome is.

Family ethos and traditions

In *Breezefield*, leaving school early, starting a family and returning to work, once children were beyond primary school age, was considered the normal pattern for women in the area. The culture of the mining community was built around the notion of the 'family wage' earned by the men. There was little in the way of public childcare provision (except of course during the war years) and women had a limited number of 'lifetime pathways' and few social settings for learning. Families and communities did not necessarily consider education, particularly for girls, to be important. The aspirations that parents had for their daughters were typically restricted:

I asked you know if I could stay on at school and ... 'no, we need the money ... you'll go to work' ... I was gutted ... I was the only one who passed the 11 plus ... But I mean I don't blame my mom and dad ... we never had a lot of money ... But, I can't ever remember Dad sitting and reading ... with us, neither did my mom ... We used to take our reports home ... I don't think he even commented on them. He didn't show a lot of interest at all.

One mother reflected that this lack of parental commitment to education had been 'passed down'. Families did not experience much support from schools for children to continue in education. 'There were a lot of closed doors about everything – not just schools, with everything'. The strike changed many women's lives, but there is also a recognition that family life may still constrain women:

What you haven't got to do is forget that they still need support, which is what the colleges tend to do ... some have got horrendous lives at home ... and they haven't even anywhere to do homework, and their husbands are saying 'this is ridiculous, my tea should be on the table'.

As the community began to change and new industries – catering, leisure and retail – came into the area what people wanted from the centre began to alter. The introduction of the Children Act in 1989 also caused the centre to review its operations. Its hours of opening (from 9.00 a.m. until 10.00 p.m. on some days) with weekend opening, were difficult for staff to sustain. A process of formalising and professionalising the centre had begun.

Meadowbrook centre

A rural south-west England town, Meadowbrook has significantly changed its character over a generation. A young mother vividly captures the transformation from a rural to an urban town. When she was young:

... we entertained ourselves, it was safer ... I would go up the fields tadpoling and ditch jumping. We made our own entertainment. Now the fields have disappeared. Streams have gone. But kids don't entertain themselves. It's almost like it's a lost art.

The family worker continues: 'everything has been more developed, the new houses have been built, the estate is getting bigger'. Doreen says 'the town now has its problems especially with the teenage element', because there is nothing for teenagers to do. Nothing.' Mothers are too worried about risk to let their children roam.

Two large, ethnically white, working-class estates were developed in the town and, in the 1970s, became the focus for drugs and gang warfare as well as rivalry between the estates. These extreme features began to diminish in the 1980s but the estates remain characterised by very high unemployment, poverty and crime. Teenagers continue to have nothing to do and there are problems with young men, which cause people on the estates to feel unsafe.

There is general disaffection from schools and public services, which often lack co-ordination. Parents say that schools are unapproachable and put up 'a front' to parents. Many of them condone their children being absent from school. At the same time, parents have difficulty in communicating with schools that complain of aggression in the community.

There are huge barriers for parents with all the schools. The parents don't feel comfortable going in. Maybe it's lack of communication skills, or lack of confidence again, the aggression comes out. So they're going to these teachers with a very, very simple problem that, because they're not quite sure what to say or do, they get very aggressive.

This family worker speaks of 'cycles of disadvantage: large families, the ways mothers talk to their children can be heard from generation to generation'. The challenge is to break the chain:

How do we help them develop confidence, feel better about themselves, some aspiration to reach for something better; how to help them see the relevance of education and training?

Meadowbrook centre is managed by National Children's Homes (NCH), a large voluntary agency, together with the support of the Social Services Department and the Education Action Zone. It was purpose built as a family centre in the mid-1990s to replace informal youth work in a run-down estate house. The centre was located in the grounds of a primary school in a large housing estate and focused as an informal drop-in centre for families in need, and became a centre in which the families played a leading role on its management committee.

The extensive renovation of the centre in 2000 – sponsored by Surestart in partnership with NCH and the Housing and Social Services Departments – created a brightly decorated and fashionably furnished resource for family support. It is a pastel-coloured building, in the image of a doll's house, which is attractive to parents and their young children. At the heart of the centre is a communal kitchen that encourages families to share a cup of tea and the local news and gossip of the day in a relaxed setting. Surrounding the kitchen are a number of activity rooms all plentifully equipped with appropriate toys and learning artefacts. The new centre developed a more formal programme of activities and of management style, which did not include the parents.

Family ethos and tradition

The tradition in *Meadowbrook* is for roles and responsibilities within the family to be divided between mothers and fathers. The mothers feel isolated. 'A lot of women don't get a lot of support from their husbands, so they are battling on their own with the children.' Fathers are very reluctant to get involved in any discussions at the family centres about the family and childrearing. They are unwilling to share the task of looking after the children and supervising their behaviour because they do not see it as their role. It is the mothers' task to manage the children and the home, it is the man's task to get a job and earn the money for the household. 'It's a very old-fashioned view really'.

Mothers, however, recognise in poor communication a deeper concern. Sandie spoke of the way that she and her husband have different ways of managing the children in the home but do not seem able to talk together about how to agree a shared approach. 'If there was somewhere we could get to go in the evening and just learn how to communicate together in the home on the same basis, that would be really, really good.' Another parent learned that he didn't take the time to talk:

We never put aside any time to talk to one another. We were in the house 24 hours a day with one another and didn't talk. We were so oriented around the children and getting the stuff ready for them ... we never took any time for ourselves. I think a lot of relationships stumble because you don't get the communication going on between you both, and not setting time aside.

'Men don't communicate', Emily complained. 'They will shout and they will put their foot down when they think it's necessary, but they don't see their roles as communicators'. And they find it difficult to express their feelings. Both believe the unwillingness to talk lies in quite fundamental male dispositions:

I think it's a macho thing, men suppose they have to be able to control and when they don't it's like they have failed or so they think.

Men they believe may cope 'when the children are little' and directions can be effective, but, when the children get older and instructions start to fail, their husbands flounder. Bev asserts that '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'. Emily supported this understanding:

You have got the head of the so-called household, the father, and the up-and-coming young male, it's like two lions warring for their pride almost.

The young women attribute their husbands' male natures to their restrictive upbringing, which taught them to believe in the distinctive role of men in the family, which wives and children should respect as a natural right, whereas the mothers believe respect has to be earned.

Norton centre

Norton is a multi-ethnic district of a midlands city. The geography divides broadly into three: north Norton is predominantly an Asian community; in the middle is a poor white community, with some African Caribbean families and a small number of Asian families; while the southern area houses more multi-ethnic communities. There has always been high unemployment, though a lot of people were able to work in local industries (gas, railways and public transport) and in light engineering. In the late 1970s and 1980s, jobs began to go and people began to leave the area. Poverty and deprivation exist across Norton as a whole, but especially within the African Caribbean community. There has been a lot of mobility (because of housing as well as employment changes) and local schools talk of an annual pupil turnover of 20 per cent. There are a considerable number of young single mothers in the area, though many have strong family networks among the population.

The centre developed in the mid 1990s out of the collaborative work of a number of schools, initiated by one headteacher, who recognised the need to co-ordinate support for parents to encourage learning in the home and the community. When a building became available it was used to begin with as a drop-in centre for parents, who were provided with information packs as well as advice and support, especially in relation to any concerns that might arise in their relation to local schools. The centre was particularly effective in driving an emergent network of community agencies and associations to co-ordinate provision of services, but its work focused principally on developing a partnership between parents and schools.

The centre manager believes that many in the area are labelled, often by public services, as having low aspirations and teacher expectations have themselves often been low. Nevertheless, the migrant minority communities have brought strong commitment to succeeding in their new lives and wanting their children to work hard and achieve well in school. Many families, however, have experienced schools (and other public services) as intimidating and unwelcoming places. A group of parents were critical of some teachers who 'do not have the time for parents', are formal and use an obscure language. Parents 'do not want to appear stupid' by asking questions and carry with them memories of school as a controlling institution. They can experience frustration (and sometimes discrimination) in dealing with schools and services, which generates tension and expressions of anger.

The centre is based in a former nursery school located at the foot of a large tower block of flats in the multi-ethnic south of Norton. It is part of the Education Department and supported by significant sponsorship from the Education Action Zone. The centre is managed by a Community Worker and a Community Education Officer, and employs a secretary and a team of five parent–school partnership workers. They work collaboratively with many local agencies to break the cycle of family disadvantage in the area.

Family ethos and tradition

A generation of men and women had migrated to *Norton* from the Caribbean islands in the 1960s. Family life took different forms, though some of the marriages did not last and mothers were left to bring up their children alone. In this context, patterns of childcare and family support developed. Older brothers and sisters helped out as well as extended family and friends. Fran recalls that:

Everybody was in a sort of network ... it was the case of you don't go to other people's houses, it was more of a family network. My aunt lives across the road, and my uncle lives up the road.

Becky's mother worked long hours and left her with family friends who came to be known as 'aunties'. Parents' control of children was strict:

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 address children. They were figures of authority rather than friends.

Fran felt that she and 'the kids' were as much brought up by elder sisters and brothers, with whom there was a little more conversation than with her parents.

Families were described in terms of hierarchies of status and differentiations of role. Mothers and fathers are both characterised as strong figures, ruling in their distinctive domains, yet the father was regarded as the head of the household. Maxine's father 'controlled the household to a degree where he made you understand that I am the man of the house, therefore what I say goes'. They could watch telly with their parents, but his interests and preferences came first. Her mother was 'the wife, the mother really'. For Fran, though it was her mother who was 'the backbone regardless, even though dad works and whatever, my mum still held down two jobs and looked after us ... I have always felt my mum is a strong black woman'.

Girls were expected to look after their brothers in addition to being responsible for housework. Maxine:

... had the responsibility of looking after my other three brothers ... because I was the only girl and the eldest ... So that was given to you as it were. The boys did very little. If my dad was in the house the boys did very little.

So there are men's roles and women's roles. In the homes, space, resources and opportunities were also allocated to reflect the positions of members of the household.

The form of family relations in Norton is traced to cultural traditions in the Caribbean and the experience of migration to Britain and the disillusion of a beleaguered and excluded community. Serena believed 'it is, you know, a cultural and a generational thing'. She reflects on the background of her family and community in Jamaica. When her father came over here, he thought that, if he were to gain respect as a black person in a white environment, he had to have that respect from his family: if you didn't have that you'd have nothing. The migrating Jamaicans believed they were being invited to England, wanted to be respected and therefore the family had to act with dignity. What they experienced, however, was discrimination and racism. Nevertheless, the black community was resilient and displayed considerable 'optimism that it would change and that not everybody is like that'. There was great determination and self-belief. Serena feels this is now eroding: 'the culture has changed and, I think, the Afro Caribbean community, the black community has lost its strength because it is not a community any more'. The challenge now 'is to work to recreate the community'.

5 Settings and activities for family learning

The family centres were chosen to reflect different patterns of formation and approach to family learning. How would they define their 'spheres' or 'objects' of learning? To what extent would they focus their activities on the individual family member, perhaps the mother; how much would they work with the family as a unit; and to what extent would they develop activities in and for the community? What 'settings' or activities would the centres construct to support the process of family learning? Would the choice of setting and activity for family learning vary with the different kinds of professional leadership in each centre?

Support for parenting in Breezefield

The *Breezefield* centre is now managed by the Social Services Department. It is a one-storey concrete building, occupying a central position on the outskirts of a large housing estate, in a convenient location for users and for professionals based in the area. The remit extends to a number of other areas in the locality. Inside, it is a large, bright, welcoming and well-resourced environment. Facilities include: advice and information leaflets about a range of services for children and adults; a large central activity area with low-level hexagonal tables and chairs for children's group activities; sofas where parents can sit and chat while observing their children; a 'soft area' with padded foam blocks in bright colours for children to explore climbing; a ball pool; a 'wet area' with sink where children and parents can paint and do messy activities; a large gym with pool table, basketball and a range of wheeled toys for young children, with chairs for parents; baby changing room; laundry room; photocopier room; and meeting rooms.

At a local policy level, there is commitment across the authority to community development and family learning, with a district-wide strategic group with local strategy groups as necessary. Targets include:

- developing the curriculum to include areas 'less threatening' than literacy and numeracy (e.g. arts and crafts)
- working with men
- development worker support
- sharing of good practice.

Family learning is identified as having the potential to address educational disadvantage, engender positive attitudes, raise achievement, widen participation in adult learning, counter social exclusion, promote active citizenship and build community capacity. Approaches within the district include Family Literacy, the Share Project, Storysacks, Storyshare, arts and crafts work, Helping in Schools, Family Numeracy and IT. These involve schools, the FE college, the Community Education Development Centre (CEDC), the Adult Education Service, nurseries, the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), the Library and Information Service, health visitors and the Pre School Learning Alliance (PSLA), and the local Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership. A new post was created in October 2001 to develop the strategy, linking adult and community education officer responsibilities to the development of family learning strategy for the district. It aims to:

... capitalise on that initial enthusiasm ... Parents who have been doing the family literacy then come to me and say ... I want to know what I can do next I'm really keen.

(Barry, Adult Education Centre Manager, Breezefield)

In the 12 months from January to December 2000, the centre worked with some 3,475 families and received a total of 56 referrals. The goals of the centre are expressed in the Annual Report, which comments that:

... the complexity of tasks and the level of responsibility has intensified for family workers ... For new staff it has meant adjusting to a completely new way of working, away from the nurturing skills of open access e.g. nursery, to the more formalised process of individual family work and the production of reports.

A typical week at the centre now includes parent and toddler groups, possible home visits, individual family work, learning activities linked with outside resources, a baby group (nought to 18 months), talks from health visitors, sessions on baby massage, a junior youth club and a Health Action Zone informal parenting programme.

Parent and toddler groups

Most of the parents and grandparents who bring their children to the playgroup choose the centre for its high-quality resources. Many of the mothers work part time or full time. Although parents and carers are expected to be responsible for their children while in the group, activities are provided and organised by the group workers.

Improving understanding of – and relations between – home and school

Parents and workers see the groups as an important preparation for school and activities such as the junior youth group offer some important supplementary activities. Pilot work is under way with a limited number of primary schools to alert schools to the services the centre staff can offer. Schools have not been making referrals to the centre and the EAZ has had little impact on centre–school relationships. Some discussion is taking place about developing more resources to work with Key Stage 2 pupils (seven to 11).

Childcare and family support in Meadowbrook

Meadowbrook defines its central purpose as working in partnership with parents, teachers, business and the wider community to ‘raise standards of achievement and create new opportunities for learners of all ages’. The manager believes she has to tackle deep strains of low self-esteem and confidence in families and the community. The challenge is to address the impoverished levels of communication between parents/carers and their children with support that encourages improved language skills. An extensive array of settings and activities of childcare and family learning are provided to address these issues.

The EAZ community nursery nurse

The community nurse works in a number of settings but, principally, with families of pre-school children in their homes, focusing on children who have communication problems, receiving her referrals from health visitors in surgeries. Most families welcome the support to help them communicate better with their young babies/ children. On average 16 families are seen each week. Her practice is to work through play, using books, stories, songs, rhymes and imaginative activity. Ways of engaging mothers in other activities are also being pursued, as many feel isolated and have poor self-esteem.

Family centre activity library

The activity library aims to stimulate learning of the alphabet and the family and community worker encourages a lot of parental involvement. A variety of activities bring the stories to life and she responds to parents’ suggestions for new toys with different age groups. Parents borrow a box of objects linked to letters of the alphabet and return it perhaps a week later. Nineteen families are using the boxes. Some volunteer to give a lead on new boxes – on food, on play, on hygiene. Ownership for parents is a key goal, while the worker plays an advisory role ‘to enable learning by example. We want to encourage recognition of the enjoyment of parenting, that it is not a chore’.

Enthusiastic parents also get opportunities to work with young children, supported by relevant courses.

Happy Days playgroup

This setting has nearly 50 children whose ages range from two to four years. Provision is made for children with special educational needs. Three staff are employed in the playgroup, which opens each weekday morning and on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. The activities are required to develop the national 'early learning goals', which include – in addition to communication, language and literacy – creative development, personal social and emotional development, and knowledge and understanding of the external world. The playgroup has been praised by Ofsted for its work.

An American scheme called High Scope provides the model for the scheme's approach to learning.¹ The intention is to build up the confidence of children by getting them to make their own decisions. The guiding concept is 'plan, do, review':

... to experiment with things, to try things out ... They learn to realise they can make decisions and they can to some extent change what is around them.
(Centre manager)

Parents are encouraged to stay and watch activities, learning how to play with their children and talking with playworkers about the role of play and about their children's development.

Family support settings

A variety of additional settings and activities provide support for families in the community. A *credit union* visits once a week (to provide financial advice and support), as does the *health visitor*. 'Social' activities are offered to help families settle into the centre. These include *family cooking* at lunchtime, an *art therapy* group and an *annual summer camp*. The art therapy, for example, does not require prior skills or training. The project worker says she is:

... not an artist and is no better than them, so they will try anything, and they have done some wonderful work ... people say they really like the opportunity to have a go, because they don't have the materials at home, or the time.

A crèche is available and the parents work in a group. When personal issues arise, 'we take them out and spend five minutes with them and then bring them back'.

Counselling young mums: young person support worker

A social worker, with counselling training, visits the centre two days a week to see young people between 11 and 18, referred to her from GPs, health visitors and sometimes parents. The issues discussed vary a good deal: family relationships and break-ups, parents separating or divorce; bereavement; sexual abuse cases and also drug and alcohol abuse cases. Young mothers may have other issues and the service helps them to get the services they need. The social worker's approach is to try:

... to know them as individuals, as people. You have got to make them think what they want out of life; where they are coming from; where do they want to go? Who do they want to be?

And it is only when they value and respect themselves that they are willing to accept what has happened and move on ... learning that they can make choices and make things happen.

The role of the support worker is to help by giving information and developing an understanding of networks, resources. You are giving people the opportunity to make choices that will support them.

The family and community support workers: informal settings

A small number of outreach staff work with family members, often mothers, in informal community settings, helping to raise the self-esteem of families on the estates. The style of these groups is to encourage people within the community to lead and run them, and also to ask them to identify needs and to get people involved in activities that will lead to further initiatives.

Karen works on the local estate as a family and community worker, a role that is 'not seen as a teacher, because you're playing and you're getting the kids to socialise'. She has formed a self-help group, and discussion takes place in pubs and offers mutual support, particularly in coping with teenagers. Parents bring a great variety of issues to the group. Small children may have sleeping problems, older children may be getting into drugs. Some parents refer to divorce and stepfamily concerns, while issues such as bullying are a frequent anxiety. Karen's role is to enable the group to share their own learning from experience and, if necessary, to provide helpline numbers (for example, Job Centre benefit numbers) as well as names of specialist counsellors or solicitors.

Deeper discussion has revealed the lack of communication between partners and the inability of male partners to involve themselves in the day-to-day problems that arise in bringing up children. 'When I said about husbands, partners coming up, they were like don't be stupid they don't have anything to do with the kids.' At the centre of Karen's work is helping parents to learn to communicate more effectively, and she feels the group is having a positive effect:

Definitely communication is the big one but they've all started to do a bit better now. Talking is important because I think people forget that we're not mind readers ... they'll come in and, instead of ranting and raving and swearing and smoking and drinking too much, they will say 'Well look I've got a problem and it's this' and they are coming out to actually talk.

Parents as partners in Norton

The principal activity of the *Norton* centre is to help families understand the school system, how to communicate with teachers and learn how to support their children's education. Workshops have been provided on Statutory Assessment Tests (SATs) (how the child is graded and how you prepare children for tests and help them understand what is actually involved in tests), on homework (showing their children how to do homework, 'letting it be fun as well as educating them'); and especially on the national programmes of literacy and numeracy. Many parents have said they do not find the school environment very welcoming. Workshops seek to help them understand the pressures on schools and teachers, and the way schools are organised and work:

Teachers don't have the time – they don't have the time to say 'oh good morning' and have a chit chat. It isn't that they are being rude they are just concentrating on what they have to do for the rest of the day.

(Mother)

Encouraging family involvement requires parents to be valued as co-educators. Workshops address two barriers to their contribution to learning. The first is to help parents recognise the expertise and authority they have:

What parents bring to it is the keys for the child, being able to say what motivates this child, what interests the child, what worries this child. They will know when is the best time to work with this child and what is the thing that might excite them.

(Family worker)

What the centre emphasises is the partnership between parents and teachers. The second barrier is to help parents recognise that the home is as important a site of learning as the school. Workers in the centre frequently hear parents ask: 'Why are the schools getting me to do their work?' Their reply is to encourage parents to focus on the educational interest of their child, 'do you want the best for your child?' They begin then to develop understanding of learning, the way it can develop in any setting and the responsibility of parents as well as teachers to support that potential for learning. The centre employs *parent partnership workers* who encourage teachers and parents to see each other as partners. 'We are mothers who work within the school learning about the school system and then passing it onto other mothers'. The centre devotes considerable time to help parents learn how to relate to and communicate with schools generally, and especially in contexts of disagreement, where emotions may be running high.

It is putting yourself over properly because like they say your children can't be there all the time for you and you have to go out into the world and face people. So it's the way you speak to explain yourself to people, they need a lot of that because we were finding that they were all isolated at home.

(Family worker)

Workshops have helped to build up parents' confidence so they can approach teachers and say what they feel. The centre also devotes time to working with schools to help them see parents as partners. They encourage schools to become more skilled at relating to parents and developing sensitivity to the barriers that parents experience in trying to get involved: the constraints of time and childcare, and, in multi-ethnic communities, many parents can feel isolated, with language often forming a barrier to getting involved with the school.

Purposes of developing parenting skills

The further key purpose of the centre is to provide support for families in childrearing, helping parents to address concerns they face and the skills they might develop. A recurrent focus is on helping parents to adjust their strategies of control as the child grows up: what is appropriate for a three year old may not be appropriate for a nine year old. With older children typically, the power of the peer group may challenge family values and control. Parents need to learn how to talk differently to older children and to discuss with them rather than instruct them, to help them make the right choices. The Community Education Officer articulated the issues involved:

They have to learn to talk to them ... I think one of the difficulties in some areas, and I think in Norton, 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, you thump it.

Identity and variety in settings for family learning

The Breezefield centre provides a comprehensive range of settings and activities for family learning, focusing on the needs of family members, but also seeking to address the needs of the family as a whole, where necessary, with home visits. While the centre had its origin in the solidarity of community activity in support of the miners' strike, its work has become focused on helping parents to develop the skills that will enable them to counter social and economic exclusion. In Meadowbrook, the purported purpose of the family centre is to provide support for families in need. Activities for fathers have been established but have not flourished. The reality of the centre's provision, however, focuses on the needs of mothers and their children. A variety of settings are created that support mothers' learning needs at different stages of childrearing, though the emphasis is on the nursery years and then on children at primary school. The Meadowbrook centre has, however, been more successful than the other centres in developing outreach work that engages family members in the sphere of community development work, for example, encouraging families to work together to create a community garden.

There is one aspect of centre activity that has engaged the energies of family workers in each area and that is the relationship – sometimes problematic – between families and schools. Both Breezefield and Meadowbrook centres provide support for parents where necessary in their relationship with schools. In Norton, this task of developing a more effective partnership between parents and teachers provides much of the focus of its activity, offering support for minority ethnic parents when they experience difficulties in their relationship with schools. It is this sphere that provides the arena for the professionals to engage with the presenting needs of particular families.

6 Practices of encouraging learning

The family centres were set up by different local government departments or reflected different partnership groupings led by a particular service. These sources shaped the purposes of the centres, their programmes of activity and the modes of learning they encouraged to support family development. These differences can be expressed in the following ways:

- the training approach to improve parents' skills to flourish in contexts of economic and occupational change
- the social services' approach of modelling good practice of forming and improving family relationships
- the education service approach to enabling learning by encouraging inquiry and reflective deliberation.

These conceptions of practice were exemplified in the different centres of our study. Nevertheless, underlying the differences were many shared understandings of the purposes of learning and the capabilities that learning should enable within families and between adult carers, as well as between carers and children.

Skill formation: the trainers' approach

The approach in Breezefield to encouraging learning emphasised parental training. Centre workers believe they have information and skills to pass on to parents, especially in their childrearing practices:

I always say that we have got loads of information as workers. We have got the theoretical part, if you like, and it's about passing some of that on to parents.

Parenting skills groups have looked at needs but also how these impact on children's learning. A number of parents who came to the parent and toddler group commented on the value of 'picking up tips' from other parents and of simply 'being able to talk' about problems with children. Opportunities to take part in learning on their own behalf are viewed rather differently by many of the mothers, who often expressed aspirations to learn alongside recognition of practical barriers:

I'd like to do something like nursery nursing or teaching ... something to get satisfaction from.

I would like to do more childcare courses.

I'm too tired of a night to go out and do a course.

Centre staff acknowledged that attempts to 'put on courses' with the local community learning centre had met with mixed success.

A new education centre was built on the library site adjoining the centre during the course of the research. Funds will enable a crèche to be provided at the new education centre while parents and carers access learning provision, something that Breezefield has not been able to offer consistently. There are, however, concerns about 'a lot of funding going into one area' and the consequent unbalanced level of facilities available to people in adjoining districts with no Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) or Sure Start funding.

Staff also had views about promoting particular types of learning to parents. On the one hand, it was felt that parenting is a 'full-time job' and that parents may not want to be out 'learning other things', particularly if the assumption is that these have to be 'employment related'. On the other hand, there was a feeling that learning could also be about volunteering opportunities and 'community needs'. Surveys of parents certainly demonstrate that informal family and community support is valued (Ghate and Hazel, 2002).

Although the term 'family centre' is supposedly 'gender free', it is actually applied to activities and services that are still aimed primarily at mothers. Some research indicates that fathers are reluctant to engage with most parenting services (Ghate *et al.*, 2000). Proposals have included offering services for fathers to suit men's preferences. This, however, raises the question about whether women also should be offered the same opportunity to shape provision according to their expressed needs.

Modelling good practice: the social services' approach

The dominant paradigm of practice in Meadowbrook is for a professional to work alongside families to provide models of good practice about play, or communicating with a child, or between parents. This is sometimes called 'scaffolding'. The professional provides a framework of support and guidance within which parents can try out their skills and develop their confidence in a particular practice. Hazel sits on the floor with the children and shows how to play with the child and models in particular how to develop communication with the child. Joanna models by example how parents can help children to become acquainted with the alphabet and the early stages of reading. Diana models with her teenage mothers how to reflect on the traumas they are facing and to clarify their sense of who they are and how they are

to proceed. Karen has created a self-help group that fulfils a similar function for mothers facing stress in their families: she models how conversation can help them work through their difficulties.

Karen has also developed a 'scaffold' to support the community working to create something together. She worked with a mother and toddler group to create a play area for the children. The group wanted to build on the example provided by the creation of a memorial garden for a little boy who had died of meningitis. Consultation with the local school led to involvement of the students so that they too would feel, as with the garden, some sense of ownership and respect. The EAZ was willing to sponsor the project but its budget did not support the early estimates of cost:

We managed to sort of scale it down to a safe all-weather area because it was just grass, for the bikes and the prams to go on, some sort of garden beds, vegetables, herbs, some ... a play area, and somewhere for the adults to sit. So I said 'well that could be done you know, if we all work together'.
(Karen)

The garden is a tribute to community effort, with much of the work being done by the families. This involved hiring a mini-digger and constructing the surrounding fence together with ornamental features of the garden and play space. When it was completed, Karen felt it was time to step back and enable the group to take responsibility for the space themselves, watering the flowers and replanting each year.

Enabling reflective learning: the educators' approach

The Norton centre acknowledges the many spaces of learning. Enclosing learning in a school is to neglect the contribution of home, community and work, and fails to recognise how each of these spheres contributes to developing the potential, the capability and understanding of young people:

For me, learning is about change. It moves you from where you are to where you want to be, or it just moves you a little bit along that road, you may not know where you want to be but it's just moving, it's constant change. You see for me the key part of learning is about self-awareness. You get to know yourself a bit more ... you wouldn't want to stay where you are.
(Family worker)

Self-awareness develops the capacity for self-reflection and sensitivity to the needs of others. Individuals need 'to be able to see themselves as part of something more' and to understand the wider social and community context of their lives if they are to be able to develop and change themselves.

The philosophy of the Norton centre is that, in the long term, people are agents of their own behavioural change. They will choose change only if their value and potential as human beings is recognised and realised:

When we accord people respect and affirm our belief in their capability, we develop their confidence and then a willingness to acknowledge that concerns exist, and that they can contribute to addressing them. Working in this way can effect real change over the long term.

(Family worker)

This approach is fundamentally different because it seeks to address not the surface presenting issue but rather underlying 'awareness and aspirations'.

Respect and recognition

To encourage the learning process, the Norton centre places a great deal of emphasis on establishing the appropriate preconditions for learning: respecting individuals and families, valuing the authority they bring to any discussion with the school, and inviting them to join a conversation through which parents and teachers together (and often young people themselves) will resolve the troubles that have arisen.

- *Respect others as people, not treating them as objects:* the language of respect is that which values the parent and respects their views. Situations are not prejudged, avoiding a blaming or 'parent as problem' approach. Centre staff approach parents as equals, seeking positively to identify their strengths;

You don't come up to somebody and say 'you've got a problem here and we can do this about it'. Rather, it's like saying 'What do you think is the situation? Are there some changes that can be suggested? What is the implication of working in that way? What can we do to move forward on that?'

(Family worker)

- *Valuing their authority:* involves recognition that parents are knowledgeable about their children and speak with authority. 'We all need to appreciate the value of what parents bring to the partnership of learning.' The centre understands that

'the parent is the first educator' and sees that parents themselves often do not appreciate what they have taught their child and how they have accomplished that process of learning.

- *Inviting parents to join a reflective conversation* : which reflects on and thinks through the issue at hand, and where questions that encourage parents to elucidate their experience are raised:

If you have a parent who perhaps doesn't acknowledge that their child does have difficulties ... you can afford to be honest and say 'Hang on why do you think he or she did that ...? The evidence I have is ... so let's have a look at this together. What's your perception of that? How does he or she behave at home? Let's look at what we think is appropriate in these situations.' But it's a way of doing that without making that parent feel put down.

(Family worker)

Through conversation, parents are able to clarify their reasoning and their analysis of a situation to work out shared understanding and agreement. The purpose of good thinking and talking together 'is to clarify what the real reality is really, what we share together and then we come up with what is important and, for me, the work with parents is about saying "what is happening with your child's learning?".' Workshop discussions on 'behaviour management' illustrate the kinds of dialogue that prepare the way for reflective learning.

- *Three year olds and learning to resist instrumental goods* : a workshop in the nursery focused on sweets. Should sweets be given as a reward? Is it a bribe? Some staff in the nursery give sweets although others do not, arguing that some children in the district have the worst oral health in the city. Some parents do not believe in sweet giving as an incentive or reward. Discussion with parents and teachers revealed the deep codes of motivation that schools or families develop in their educational or childrearing practices. Providing children with sweets to work hard, or to put things away, or to pick up litter teaches them to become motivated only when they are given external incentives, rather than undertaking a task because it is important to take responsibility for a place or an object.
- *Nine year olds and learning to reflect and make choices* : a workshop with parents focused on what is (in)appropriate behaviour for nine year olds such as coming in late at night, swearing and the way they talk to their friends, or messing about in communal places. When children are of nursery age the authority relations seem clear and parents feel in control. Yet, with nine year olds, there is

often a shift in how parents perceive themselves and they feel less in control because the child is older. They are harder to motivate, and they are influenced by other things and other people. Parents begin to experience that the behaviour isn't always clear-cut, it is not necessarily right or wrong. They don't like what is happening but do not know how to deal with it. The centre encourages parents to discuss the presenting issues with their youngsters and to encourage them to think for themselves, to reflect on what they should do and to make their own considered choices: 'from a very young age there should be that process of discussion with them'.

Talk rather than instruction or incentive mechanisms is regarded as the most effective way of influencing youngsters, though for talk even to take place requires parents and young people to acknowledge that they are part of something for which they cannot escape responsibility. One of the key perspectives that the centre promotes with parents in the workshops is recognition of making the right choices:

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, it's okay, you can choose differently'.
(Family worker)

Passing over responsibility

The workshops ask parents to reflect on why they want children to behave: is it for the parents' sake or because they want their child to behave for themselves? Their choices will be more responsible if they have learned to reflect and make choices. For that to happen, parents have to learn to 'pass over' responsibility to their children so that they can become responsible choosers:

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)

Talking is the medium of learning, learning what to do or decide, and part of that learning is to recognise the value of talk itself as learning with and from others.

Difference and unity of purpose

The three centres have developed different programmes and settings of activity to support families and their learning. Meadowbrook focuses principally on supporting families in their needs for childcare. Settings are constructed around play, or reading, or care counselling for young people, in addition to activities that provide informal and outreach support for families. These include therapy activities (art, cooking and health classes) as well as counselling on all the concerns facing their day-by-day family lives. The Norton centre focuses on supporting the family in its relationships with schools, helping parents to understand the complex school system as well as learn how to interact with it. Its workshops lead inexorably to discussion and advice about childrearing and family relationships. The Breezefield centre, from being a community centre led by the women's movement, has transmuted into a social services led family centre with an emphasis on referred parents, assessments and skill training.

While the centres illustrate a variety of programmes and practice in support for families, they also reveal degrees of unity of purpose. In Meadowbrook, whether the activity is reading or play, the purpose is the same of improving the communication of mother and child severally and together, while, in Norton, discussion about the school or about the children leads to the same point of enhancing communicative capability. Similarly, in Breezefield, the referrals and assessments identify the necessity of improving capacity for conversation and communication. Family support from whatever presenting concern leads towards the same horizon of learning in the family: enriched communication as the medium of enriched understanding and capability to cope with the pressures of social and economic change.

PART III
TOWARDS THE LEARNING FAMILY

7 Families learning to care differently

In Part II, we described the traditions of family formation and relationships in each community, which typically involved gendered divisions of labour in the home and a hierarchy of ascribed authority between parents and children. Here, we examine how mothers, typically, are learning to change patterns of communication and relationship within their families. This involves changing the way parents relate to each other, as well as to their children, reorganising domestic arrangements and changing shared family activities. It presupposes challenging assumptions about roles and relationships and establishing different principles of communication. These attempts to re-form families offer a number of case studies in cultural and generational change and learning.¹ Individual family members, often mothers, have been striving to escape past traditions and to change their families. Their journey reveals different layers and outcomes of learning: acquiring particular skills and capabilities, enhancing their understanding of their families and relationships, and striving to change their lives.

Respect and achieved authority

Young African Caribbean mothers attending the centre in Norton want to develop a style of childrearing that avoids the restrictions of their own upbringing, believing the severity of their parents' control to be unreasonable for children. Children need to learn to be independent and responsible young adults. Janice realised this when she had her first daughter:

That's when I got to the point of saying 'she's not going to go through what I went through'. I just wanted to change ... do we have to be so strict? I would like somebody to at least hear my opinion for once, hear how I felt.

Change is challenging and Becky reflects on the ways she reproduces some of her mother's behaviour. Becky describes this as a 'battle with myself', in which she struggles to find her own way to care for her son.

As Doreen's children are growing up in Meadowbrook, she is trying to persuade her husband to change how he communicates with them. She wants to respect the children, listen to what they have to say and discuss with them what should happen:

As your children grow your relationship with them has to change ... from being from what I call a management role to a consultant role ... when they get to about 12 or 13 ... because they don't lie there and obey you. You are not in charge, and that's when the problems seem to come.

But this ethic rests on a different conception of authority, which the mothers have had difficulty persuading their partners to accept. Men see their authority as unquestionable. Some see disagreement as a rejection of their authority and 'enter a battle' with the youngsters. The mothers, however, believe that parental respect and authority has to be earned. And this depends on establishing a different relationship with their young adults:

If you give the respect you will get it back ... You have got to listen and listen and listen to children and I think some men find that difficult ... when a teenager is talking, they've got to tell them what they're doing is wrong. But they want to be valued, to be worthwhile, all those sort of things that listening does for you ... you have got to talk in a different way.

Parents need to work out together how they expect their children to behave. But realising the change is a painful struggle, producing tensions between partners.

Transitions to independent choosing and taking responsibility

Fran believes it is essential to give children choices: 'I want her to grow up to be an individual, to understand herself, learn about herself'. An expectation of passive obedience does not develop the capacity to make decisions in circumstances where it is vital to do so. If children are with others who want to encourage truancy or misbehaviour, only those who have been brought up to think for themselves can have the courage to act independently.

Maxine wants to correct aspects of her son's behaviour that she disapproves of but also to engage with him differently. She tries to encourage sensitivity to others and does not allow fighting games or guns, or watching aggressive videos. 'Explanation is important because the saying why means that it will make sense to him.' She invites him to reflect on his 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.'

Conversations develop shared understanding

Joan feels she has created a home that enables communication and personal responsibility. 'They're given a lot more choice and we have a lot more conversations, we communicate more, whereas where I'm coming from you weren't allowed to communicate.' Creating this time to think and to talk about what is happening in our lives is not easy. She notices 'in a lot of our lives we don't have

time to sit back and analyse a lot of things ... We just get on with it most of the time.' Joan ensures she is around when the children come home from school:

We're all in the kitchen doing whatever we're doing ... As soon as I come home it's 'how was your day today mom?' ... at least they're interested ... we're sharing that with each other.

Conversations also take place in the living room or in the mother's bedroom. 'We're watching a favourite programme or something, we'll be commenting on it, we'll be giving our views on it.' There is give and take in the home about rival TV interests, with Joan and her daughter enjoying watching soaps and her son preferring wildlife and science programmes:

I said to him 'I don't mind sitting down and watching one of your science things' ... he may learn me something new ... But they like to chill on my big bed in my room just to watch TV ... I don't mind because when I was growing up you weren't even allowed past the border line to go in the bedroom.

When she does want her own space she explains to her children: 'they do understand and they give me that opportunity to have that space'.

Some of the families are also making time for conversations about the relationships between parents and children:

I literally say to my daughter 'How am I doing? ... Is everything okay?' ... And we have a good chat ... And the feedback she gives me is really, really valuable ... And what's so good with her is because of the way we do communicate with her.

Maxine understands that what is going on in such conversations is a deep code of her as mother wishing to communicate her value of and respect for her daughter.

In Meadowbrook, Sandra's husband is a long-distance driver, home only at the weekends, and she is struggling to encourage him to open up. 'He can't ... I think I put it down to how people help each other, because he came from a very, very strict family and I know his brothers are like it as well, they don't open themselves up.' Sandra came from a broken home and told herself that, when she had children, she would 'be open to them'. Her own experience as a child made her feel 'pushed out because I didn't know what was going on'. The differences between her and her husband came to a head, provoking for the first time the reflective conversation she sought:

... we have gone through a very, very bad patch where to the point that we were on the verge of splitting up. And I think it's because I said to him 'that's it, I have had enough'. I cannot cope with his mood swings ... He's got male form of PMT ... And he has now started talking a lot more to me, not so much to the children, so the problems on that side are still there, but to me it has changed.

Noreen has a child with an eating disorder, which has led to difficult behaviour and to disagreements with her husband about discipline. She tried different approaches with her son, using both incentives and punishments, but has come to believe that talking and persuading him to change the way he behaves is the more effective method. Noreen's husband finds conversation difficult, but she is trying to change this and persuade him that a shared approach is the only way:

... we've had so many battles in previous years ... he's been to a dietitian so you know he's growing as he should be and he'll grow out of it ... I said 'Ken, you know if you keep on, he's going to refuse food and he's going to take it psychologically ... when I was a kid I was allowed to eat food and I wasn't pressurised ... he wasn't allowed to leave things ... he's trying to do that with Dougie so he's got different ideas than what I have and it can cause problems. I think ... approaching him and saying 'look what are we going to do or how do you feel?' I think he's becoming a bit more aware.

Ann and John were unemployed for some time and became volunteers through the family centre. Even though they were together at home, when out of work they were unable to communicate with each other, 'staring at the walls' when they were not preoccupied with meeting the children's needs. John remarked on learning about the extensive demands of housework that caused him to change and to start to talk to Ann:

I consider myself lucky. Although I was ill it gave me an insight into bringing up children, which I don't think a lot of fathers have. I had always worked and my wife had stayed at home with the children ... there is a bit more to this than her ... putting her feet up all day and watching television ... The planning that goes into a day's work of taking the children to school ... to have to do the washing ... get the washing on the line, to get the food, to get the ironing done ... you have got to get it done by dinner time because you have got to go out to pick up the children.

Courses they took part in together required preparation and thinking, and they felt that the stimulation of activity created a happier family atmosphere. The counselling

at the centre also helped John and Ann to learn to talk together again. Life had been filled with 'so many problems to think about' they had no time for themselves. The process of talking changed things and making time for themselves became something enjoyable rather than a chore. The centre offered an opportunity to socialise, particularly to a family on a low income. John now feels that he will seek full-time work, having volunteered at the centre for six years, though he still plans to offer some voluntary time there.

Activities together as a family

These conversations continue when they go to the pictures or bowling. 'We do enjoy going out together as a family', though Joan acknowledges that it is more difficult during the teenage years. This is when more traditional assertions of parental authority may emerge. She organises family activities, makes it clear when she considers it important for her older children to take part and welcomes their friends' involvement too. Becky also is trying to ensure more family activities during the week and especially at weekends:

At the moment I wouldn't say that we do things together. I read to him every night. I try and make sure that that happens and I've done that since he's been a baby, and I help him with his learning.

She is also aware that her son, as an only child, can be deprived of companionship at home and arranges for his friends to stay on occasion so that he can share his games and toys.

Spending more time with children than previous generations had done was seen as important and there was often a sense of regret. Describing a series of outdoor and indoor activities that she and her husband undertook with their grandchildren, a grandmother in Breezefield said:

I do more with my grandchildren than I did with my own children ... I should have done a lot more things with my own children ... when you're young and you've got a family, like my sons and daughters-in-law they're out working too ... make a nice home ... so they can go on holiday, and we were the same ... Now we're retired ... so we've got more time ... my own two sons have done quite well in their jobs and what have you but I'm ashamed sometimes to say that I should have spent more time with them learning them different things. Saying that they haven't done too badly like you know.
(Beth)

Time to engage in learning activities with children is one aspect of the relationship. However, this time together was also seen as a key feature of a different type of relationship in which both children and adults display different traits and behaviours:

I think they're more forward. I think you tend to ... like grandparents when we were younger, you used to go to your gran's and you had to sit didn't you? You know you had to sit whereas now I mean I think grandparents like join in and do things with them a lot more than what our grandparents did.
(Bronwen)

Supporting learning in the home

A number of parents and grandparents at the parent and toddler group in Breezefield explored some of their own learning experiences and the changing nature and extent of family support for learning. Brioney was angry about the lack of choice that had been available to her and determined that things would be different for her son:

I could have stayed on at school. I were offered chance to stop on, but then my dad said 'no', he weren't willing to support me. He thought it were time, 16 you should go out and get a job ... I do believe that I could have done better ... I used to like painting and stuff like that and I'd have had a better chance if I'd gone to art college. Jake will never be stopped if he wants to do anything; he'll get a chance.

Brett was the one father who brought his son to the group regularly and, while he felt that his parents had generally recognised the importance of school, 'I never missed it', he also recognised now that there had been little advice about options and that parents had not been encouraged to get involved:

I just couldn't wait to leave you know and get a job. I didn't really think about a career. I just left and that was it, I went mining. But I realise now like that there was more to things than mining, there are other careers that I could have taken really if I'd thought about it.

Bridget feels that there have been some important changes in the way that schools now relate to parents, saying:

The doors are open today, and that makes a lot of difference. There were a lot of closed doors about everything – not just schools, with everything, and now everything's more open.

She referred to the lasting impact of her schooldays on her own feelings about her abilities and on her attitude to her son's learning:

I were always going to school, wanting to know how *[my son]*were doing. Didn't want him not to be good at reading and writing because that were my downfall and so I were more aware of It ... I did more with my son than what my parents did with me ... So I actually encourage him. I mean at five year old I have a private tutor to come into house for his reading because I was obsessed with it really a little bit.

Bridget has gone on from working in a factory and a cafe to becoming a social services care assistant, and then to responsible management roles in a number of care settings. She feels that her strengths lie in working with groups and in her 'ability to talk', but still feels that 'putting it on paper' is a problem. Support from her husband has been an important factor and she now also asks her son to help her:

You see, where I couldn't put into words; my husband would put it into words for me because he's quite good at that. And also my son, who's, you know, he's doing Level 3 now of his management course ... He's not that good with his writing, but he's a lot better than me and he's doing quite well and I'm quite pleased with him.

For younger women, the experience had tended to be more encouraging, with parents ensuring that homework was done. Several mothers referred to the experience of having children and of caring for them as having enhanced their own sense of their capabilities and possible future work choices:

I think it started when I had him, when I had the little one. It was like ... Something that keeps me going. I like to learn, I like to teach. Like with little one I like to sit down and explain things and teach him ... learn and things and I feel that I can do it for others as well not just sit there and learn one person ... I want something where you can feel a bit of pride like when you get ... when you do something you can feel good about yourself.
(Bonita)

The emerging deliberative family

These narratives reveal mothers, in the main, striving to transform their families from a tradition of ascribed roles and authority relations in which they were brought up and, for a number, are still experiencing, and suffering, with their own husbands and partners. They believe it is a tradition that bears unfairly on women, restricts

expression of affection and inadequately prepares children for transition to a world in which they have to make their own responsible decisions. The mothers have been learning, sometimes struggling, to create a very different family form in which relationships express respect and care for others, in which communication invites giving, and asking for, reasons in pursuit of shared understanding that grounds authority in agreements rather than imposition of inflexible rules. They are 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. Though these mothers have typically taken the lead in fundamentally changing their families, they nevertheless believe that caring is a shared responsibility that should be undertaken together between partners, where they exist. Time needs to be set aside for the necessary dialogue of reaching shared understanding between them about their day-by-day practices of nurturing children.

Even where mothers are bringing up their children alone, the challenge of creating a family that learns to care differently from the past can be a struggle because it can be hard to shake off the 'habitus', the learned behaviours, of their own childhood. The mothers may have to remake themselves even as they are remaking their family.

They have been supported in these struggles by their centres, which have exposed the families to different modes of learning. In these spaces, the mothers experience guides for their 'journey of learning'; how to communicate and to talk the language of persuasion and negotiation with their children and partners. In the centres, they encounter not only professional counsellors but also mentors among themselves as they share the lessons they have gleaned in the struggle to create such deliberative families.

8 Parents discovering direction

The centres are exercising influence on the families in their care, encouraging them to develop more reflective relationships between parents and children as well as between partners. Typically, however, the centres work with individuals, usually with mothers, to provide a variety of support for families including: respite, counselling, guidance in changing practice and training opportunities. The centres will not transform the lives of all those who enter their care, but below we offer examples of the changes taking place in the lives of parents: their turning points, the layers of learning experienced, the capabilities acquired and aspirations developed for the future.

Ann and John

- *Motivation to contact centre* : family in crisis generated by unemployment.
- *Experience at the centre* : counselling, courses, activities, volunteering.
- *Layers of learning* : skills, self-esteem, qualification, a sense of agency as an individual, in the family and in the community.

John has been coming to the Meadowbrook centre for seven or eight years. He was suffering from depression:

I had got an illness that stopped me from working, they basically said I would not work again. And the problems that went along with that and all the benefits everything else, they always messed the benefits up, we were never getting the money we were entitled to. There was just lots of things going on. We lost our house, we had to go bankrupt.

Such dependence caused John to lose confidence and his sense of identity:

All through your life you are imposed on, you are told you go here and there. You are a number to somebody somewhere, and it doesn't matter whether you are signing on or you are getting incapacity benefit or you are getting whatever benefit.. You almost lose your identity ... Even people know you as your child's dad instead of you as a person. So when I am here I am spoke to as John and so straight away that is a bonus for me because someone actually knows who I am.

This sense of subjection may have been rekindled by adversity, but its roots often lay earlier at school:

I did really well up until Year 3 of my senior school and then there was just one thing. I sat up with my mum in the night-time writing this poem to read it out in school in front of the class to be told I had copied it out of a book. And when I said, 'excuse me, I did not', I got punched in the back by a female teacher. Straight after that I lost all confidence in school and started bunking off quite often. I passed with two O Levels and four CSEs Grade 2. But I know I could have done O Levels across the board. I think it does still occur at times, the damaging effect, and I think it's crucial now, to be told I was stupid and thick ... it's those key words, stupid, thick, that are repetitive in your brain and I think it's with you even when you grow up.

Such experiences drain confidence and self-esteem. Ann, John's partner, agreed with this. She too was:

... miserable at school, you can get good teachers and you can get awful teachers, and I had one teacher who used to say 'Ann you are not worth a carrot'. And I don't think he ever knew how dreadful that made me feel. I think he thought it was kind of funny and a joke.

The centre provided an opportunity for John and Ann to get out of the house, meet other people and get away from the pressures they were experiencing, while learning how others were coping. At the centre they feel they are treated with respect and their concerns are discussed in a 'relaxed and friendly', confidential way: 'you don't feel that the whole world is listening'. At the centre they do not feel 'judged':

In a way it's more of a friendly atmosphere and you don't feel that you are being judged. I am not saying that about other organisations but I think professional organisations I think sometimes are run too much central. You can be more open, can't you, you can release more of your problems here.

They each say the centre has been crucial in helping them 'to rebuild their confidence and say actually you are somebody'. They have taken up courses offered by the centre. Even though a lot of adults who attend the centre cannot write, John feels they are not made to feel inferior: 'a lot of people don't write. What's nice about doing courses here is that it's not like writing at school.' For John, they helped him break the cycle of depression rekindling a sense of capability:

I have found that doing the courses here broke me from being in the house to coming out and actually stimulating the brain again, to having to think about things and to come home and just do small pieces of work. Not hefty homework, it might be a bit of research and all of those things have helped in

pushing me forward. I went to do a BTEC in Forest School which is an NVQ III and they sent me on to do an NVQ in Child Care which is what I'm doing at the moment. So it gives you a chance to think of where you want to aim or where you want to go in life.

As confidence grew, Ann and John were encouraged to act as volunteers and to begin to look beyond the centre. Participation in the life of the centre helped John recover his self-respect and confidence, recovering the capacity to cope with problems as well as create a circle of friends. 'You feel more whole because you have dealt with the things that you needed to deal with and at the same time you have made a lot of friends and you have still got those.' He has 'made a steady progression to looking beyond the centre':

I will stop voluntary work altogether now because I volunteered now for six years I just feel now that it's time for me to look back at full-time employment. I have overcome ... though I am going to find this a really hard task, yes it's going to be difficult going back to full-time employment after.

During his time at the centre, John wanted to contribute to rebuilding the community which had become fragmented: 'people didn't mingle with each other'. He thinks that the centre has helped considerably: 'it is a place for meeting people and bringing people together ... So I think there are pockets of people now who are feeling more as a community rather than as individuals.' John got involved by chance with the local Sure Start initiative and in time was elected Vice Chair:

From then on really, because I have done some courses here, they have given me the confidence to go back out and help the community and get involved. And I eventually went on and the group chose me to be the Vice Chair.

Ann has also been learning, through the centre, to contribute to the processes of community development. She has worked with another mother to help to set up a parents' forum:

People are sometimes afraid of approaching professionals to ask the questions or ask for help. We felt that if there was some parents they could come to and ask questions they might feel more comfortable doing that than actually coming to a Sure Start meeting.

It is 'another way of community building' because it helps to encourage people to become involved not only to learn about what is happening but also, more

importantly, to clarify what the needs of the community are and thus influence the services provided. Ann believes that:

Parents can only change things themselves. We can take all the advice from professionals that we want to. A lot of the time you ask and they haven't got a clue what you are on about because we are the ones living on this estate. We are not a statistic, we are not a number, we need things we want.

The challenge is to encourage families in the community to attend the forums so that the different needs are expressed. It is difficult, but Ann has developed the confidence to persuade parents and to speak out at meetings.

Fran and Maxine

- *Motivation to contact centre* : problems in relations between the home and school.
- *Experience at the centre* : parent partnership workshops; volunteering.
- *Layers of learning* : social skills in relating to professionals, self-confidence, discovering a sense of vocation.

Fran and Maxine are African Caribbean mothers who are committed to their children's education in school and offer to support reading in the classroom when invited. They attended the Norton Family Centre workshops and were invited in time to become part-time parent partnership workers at the centre. They were coached by their manager, Serena, who showed them how to make visits to family homes and how to communicate with teachers in school. They have learned 'on the job':

It's a hands-on job, once you're in there you're faced with different things so then you're learning from it. We have guidelines ... If something arises then we'll deal with it to the best of our ability and how we probably deal with it is putting ourselves in somebody else's situation.

They have also learned by trial and error: 'you learn from your mistakes and you learn from what you do and we learn from each other that's how I see it'. They learn by observing and supporting each other and through discussion in team meetings about how things went. 'Every now and again Serena gives us a one-to-one about how we are doing and how we feel.'

Capabilities

Fran and Maxine have grown in confidence and ability in their new roles. They are proud to think of themselves as 'co-educators' who have developed considerable knowledge of the school system as well as skills in relating to teachers and parents. From being an 'ordinary' parent they have acquired a sense of authority in their role:

I've grown with the position now and people look at you totally different. I'm a parent partnership worker now. Before, when I went in a school, I went in as a parent and they treated you as a parent ... But now it's like you take on a role of a worker. You feel more important, you feel like you're being used properly whereas before I didn't see all that. Teachers seem to consider you more now, and other parents too. You are respected and that sends you sky high.

(Maxine)

I think it is the whole self-esteem thing. I think my confidence has grown more as well. You become a good listener and your listening skills and your communication skills develop more because you have to listen and you have to be able to communicate within schools because you can say things and it goes in, in different ways and you learn from that.

(Fran)

'Finding myself'

At school they liked subjects with teachers who valued and helped them. Fran liked English 'because I liked the reading and he let me explore, he taught me about poetry and how to write stories. I used to get well carried away on stories but it was the only time that your mind could escape something else.' Fran got by at school and then went to college:

I got my grades and stuff alright but after leaving school I didn't know what I wanted when I left school. I went to college for a year and I did a secretarial course there but I left there still not knowing what I wanted. I went into admin. work, typing and a lot of administration work and it was then that I kind of realised what I wanted because then I worked with a playscheme 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 you want to do, what I want in life.

Maxine agreed. You need 'to find a sense along the way. When I get up every morning I don't think about going to work I enjoy what I do. There are a lot of people out there who keep saying "I have to go to work just for the sake of paying the bills".'

She did a number of jobs after leaving school, including a nursing course, supermarket work and butchery, before discovering what it was she wanted to do with her life:

Then somebody approached me and said to me that there is youth work going on, would you be interested in doing some voluntary work with kids? And that's when it clicked for me: talking to children, understand where they are coming from, what is going on in their lives, and for me I thought I enjoy this, this is where I want to be.

This sense of vocation was triggered for both Fran and Maxine by beginning their own families and having responsibility for bringing up their children, and then, at a later stage, starting to get involved with their nursery and primary schools. They began to volunteer and then got drawn into the family centre partnership work. They have built on their experiences down 'their pathway'. They would like in time to organise their own children's group.

Serena

- *Motivation to contact centre* : problems between child and school.
- *Experience at the centre* : workshops; volunteering; apprenticeship.
- *Layers of learning* : social skills, understanding and analysis, agency as a citizen.

Serena is African Caribbean, a single parent, and manages the seven parent partnership workers. She began in the Norton centre as a home-school link worker, based at two schools, and learned how to develop the role by working closely with Barbara, the Community Education Manager at the centre. Serena acquired distinctive capabilities through her work at the centre:

Listening and negotiating in order to meet people's needs. Coping with frustration and anger in the community, angry at poverty, stress they are facing, problems with the school, with people who feel their voice is not heard.

Helping people to understand all the whys: why isn't it working, why is our life going this way, why is my child playing up, why has my partner left me? It is helping them to understand the bigger picture.

A citizen in the community

Serena has ambitions to make a wider contribution in the community and the city. She has been involved with personal, social and moral education in schools and enjoys helping children to develop 'understanding of and communicate with each other and accept responsibility':

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.

Serena wants to contribute further to her African Caribbean community, which she believes is not as cohesive as it used to be:

The people need to be given opportunities. I've learnt that nothing is as it seems, and also if you don't fight for something or if you are not aware of it then you won't ask for it and you won't get it. People need to be given the confidence or the skills to be able to ask for what is theirs, for what is out there ... without having to rant and rave about it. So I latched into that and that belief about parents just need to be empowered, they need to understand what is available to them.

Manjit

- *Motivation to contact centre* : frustration at school's poor communication.
- *Experience at the centre* : enabling confidence and capability to volunteer.
- *Layers of learning* : self-confidence, capabilities, learning to lead by example.

Manjit, originally from Bangladesh, is a volunteer in a number of community schemes as well as in the Norton centre where she has contributed to the 'parents as partners' programme. Her son, now 18, is autistic and she regrets that such a partnership scheme was not available when he was in the primary school. The improved communication, which this scheme encourages, might have enabled earlier diagnosis and support. Only a doctor's letter stimulated the necessary response from the school. Frustrated by such neglect and failure to recognise individual need, Manjit was determined to get involved to try and prevent similar mistakes being made.

The Norton manager encouraged Manjit to join parental volunteer courses and to get involved in schools as a classroom assistant. She was inspired by the Norton manager to participate in courses and to develop the confidence and skills to work in the partnership scheme with schools and families. Manjit was motivated by her commitment to the value of education for the quality of life. She believed that through self-improvement she could lead the children by example:

If you learn yourself you will teach your children. Lead by example. You can do it. The children will see you and will follow, will do it as well ... water the seed and the tree will grow and bear fruit.

Learning, she believes, helps us to improve and realise ourselves step by step.

Step by step you will reach yourself one day.

Betty and Beverley

- *Motivation to contact centre* : the women's movement.
- *Experience at the centre* : education and training.
- *Layers of learning* : personal development, understanding gender relations, collective struggle and social transformation.

Early discussions in the Breezefield area with women involved very directly in the miners' strike and now in another local community learning centre give some vivid illustrations of the 'transformative moments' that impacted on these women's understanding of their personal and social situation, and the way it changed their views of themselves as learners:

... there were women's support groups and we met on a monthly basis, but back in our own villages and towns we actually ran soup kitchens or parcel services and all that kind of thing, just trying to keep the community afloat. Nobody ever imagined that it would go on as long as it did.
(Betty)

For Beverley, involvement in the Breezefield centre itself through the Young Wives' Group led to community involvement, which led to employment:

So I then went on to that committee and became quite active in the area of festival committees ... so I come to the centre more to use their facilities ... and then this clerical officer post became available and I applied to that because they obviously knew my work.

Betty referred to the 'so much awakening or awareness of what was going on out there and what was coming through your television that just wasn't as it was, and it wasn't real', and how women wanted to understand the 'politics and economics of everything':

But, when the strike did end, we got in touch with all the people particularly at Wakefield College and Leeds University and said what could be done? They said show us the demand or the need and we'll put our money where our mouth is ... And ... obviously nobody had any money. One of the trade unions printed us some leaflets and said what would you like to see happen here? Anyhow, it wasn't particularly academic stuff. And the response was absolutely unbelievable ... We just listed 48 subjects that people wanted to do.

Although much family learning may take place in local and relatively familiar environments, this is an example of how dislocations in familiar experience, through the experience of involvement in a major political battle, can result in some important transformative moments.

Betty added that the strike changed women's perceptions of themselves and of their relationships with their families. 'Some of them had never seen their husband's payslip', but, by the time the strike ended:

They came into their own, did women. When the strike did finish they weren't going back to that. And I don't mean they weren't going back to look after their children and their husbands.

Women were, in a very real sense, 'taking it all back home', with the experience of collective struggle and learning being applied to changing personal lives too.

Expanded horizons and emergent community leaders

Lives that have been fractured by illness, or divorce, or isolation and depression are being remade. Mothers, and sometimes fathers, are determined not only to create very different families from those they grew up in or have married into but also to 'find themselves', to discover an identity and vocation that gives a sense of direction to their lives. Typically they failed at, and were failed by, school, leaving their self-esteem and confidence diminished. Taking up low-skill, low-pay jobs after school or college left them dissatisfied and searching for activities that fulfilled a sense of themselves, their interests and talents.

Including families in the learning community

These are narratives of lifelong learning. Capabilities have unfolded over time, and through distinctive stages of experience and support. Often the trigger to enhanced self-belief and confidence was, for mothers, giving birth to and being able to care for a child and this engendered a sense of capability, responsibility and the aspiration for something more than instrumental lives and work.

The centres have played a significant role in these lives offering a variety of modes of learning: from providing respite, counselling and care to begin with, through opportunities for informal learning and more formal courses, to opening up chances for new development. The experiences encourage layers of learning to unfold – self-esteem, skills, qualifications, deeper understanding and the capacity to transform their lives. Family members at these centres have often followed a familiar trajectory of personal development: progressing through activities, to becoming ‘a volunteer’ and then a sessional or part-time worker. These experiences lead from success in volunteering to quasi-professional training and occupational opportunity.

The vignettes above provide stories of expanded horizons of awareness as well as unfolding capabilities. The family members have developed understanding of the importance of the wider community and its well-being to the flourishing of themselves and their families. A number seek to devote their careers to public service in support of generating more socially just communities. In this the centres have played a key role in transforming lives that have been dependent on the community to becoming its emergent leaders.

PART IV
CONCLUSION

9 Mothers, family centres and the remaking of civil society

Studying family centres in contexts of disadvantage and tradition

Following a survey of family policy development in Education Action Zones nationally, three family centres were selected as case studies. They were located in very different communities: a southern rural town, a midlands multi-ethnic inner city and a northern former mining community. The centres were also different in their locus of departmental control. Nevertheless, each shared experience of disadvantage, struggle and tradition, and each was oriented to work more widely with its communities.

The research was designed to focus progressively on the relationships between family centres and the families attending them. Particular families were chosen for more extended interviewing because of the changes they wished to make to their own families as well as the direction of their own lives. The role of the centres in such change could then be explored. Focus brings limitations for research as well as strengths. While the interviews with family members brought rich narratives about reforming the family and redirection of personal lives, it was at the expense of a broader study that observed families and their practices in community settings.

Nevertheless, the progressive focusing on the nature and process of change in the study of families in different centres and in very different contexts has revealed striking similarities that provide the study with its distinctive findings. As perceived through a number of families attending the centres, family formation in these communities has embodied similar traditions: hierarchy of authority, divisions of labour with distinctive spheres of women's and men's activity, distance between the generations, restricted communication within the family. This formation has been experienced as oppressive and is resented particularly by the younger generation of women, many of whom seek to create a different kind of family relationship. When mothers are isolated in communities, sometimes bringing up children alone and in poverty, they have valued the support of local family centres, especially in moments of crisis.

Practices of learning: care, communication, capability, citizenship

The centres have different origins and presenting purposes depending on their professional rationales in social service, education or community services. The analytical model of learning presented in Chapter 3 has been applied in subsequent chapters to understand the practices of learning in the different centres. While the

centres would like to be working with families, their typical *sphere of learning* is an individual family member, usually the mother. Some activities focus on the mother and child, whether in the early years as in Meadowbrook or with children and teenagers in relation to school at Norton. Men are poorly represented in the centres.

The *modes of learning* activity in the centres emphasised different forms of support: role modelling ('scaffolding') practice of childcare, workshop discussion, or parent training. Yet each centre fulfils four common purposes.

- Each centre provides *care* and respite for 'crisis management' whether it is domestic collapse or a breakdown between a school and a family. The centre becomes a place of stability, calm and support, valuing the families; respecting what they have to say in understanding their situation; working to strengthen their self-esteem and confidence; mediating relationships where necessary.
- Underlying the different forms of provision and learning is a shared purpose of improving the capacity for *communication* and reflective dialogue between parents/carers and children, between partners, and between families and public services. Conversations that emphasise listening, inquiry and reason giving are regarded as the most effective medium of addressing differences and of reaching shared understanding and negotiated agreement.
- Each of the centres seeks to expand the *capabilities* of family members, enabling them through counselling, guidance and experience (of volunteering) to develop growing understanding and mastery of their worlds. They develop the confidence and capability to participate in and change their families and the direction of their own lives.
- The centres, through their varied practices of family learning, are unfolding the capability of families to (re)engage with their communities as *citizens* and partners in the process of developing effective public services.

The layers of family learning and outcome: remaking lives and families

The family centres we have been studying provide narratives of the contribution they have made to the lives of a number of individuals, practices within the family and relationships between families and public services. The centres have not transformed every family, but they have influenced significant change.

Changing individuals: from instrumental to internal goods in lifelong learning

Family members, supported by the centres, have begun to expand their horizons of awareness and find a sense of direction in their lives. They have begun to acquire understanding, experience and qualifications in progressing to quasi-professional and professional positions. A typical route for such progression can be from: centre drop-in client, to volunteer, to access courses, to qualifications, to part-time job, to quasi-professional full-time entrant. A number of family members have learned to:

- pursue ends that are valuable because they are internal to their own developing needs rather than external and instrumental
- develop the capacity for reflective and responsible agency rather than passive compliance
- 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: from place to participation in the democratic learning family

A number of mothers, driven by their own histories to seek change, and supported by the centres to develop the capabilities for change, have begun to challenge tradition and form very different families that are becoming the crucible of mutual care and transition to reflective autonomy:

- 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 role hierarchy
- where individuals (particularly children and mothers) are accorded rights rather than being passive subjects
- in which elaborate rather than restricted communication is expected of family members (the expectations that members provide others with articulate reasons for their wishes and choices, and be willing to listen to the reasons of others).

Changing communities: from subjects to citizens in the learning public sphere

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.

Mothers as the mediators of cultural change

The family centres, though they have endeavoured to involve fathers, tend to focus, almost exclusively, on women in their role as mothers. They have worked to support the needs of mothers in bringing up their children and in relating to a world of public services that may often be experienced as patronising, frustrating and inadequate. While the centres vary in their style of learning, their common approach of developing deliberative communication, capability and engagement with the wider community is supporting change in families and forging new communicative styles in relation to schools and public services generally.

In this way, the centres are encouraging an era of cultural change enabling families and communities to move from traditions of ascribed (restricted code) authority and communication to achieved (negotiated elaborate code) authority. Women conceived as co-educators are defined, tacitly, as agents of cultural transformation to a social order of communicative rationality in family, school and community.

Towards a learning community

The family centres have been working with family members individually and together to create learning communities within the family and beyond. Parents and carers recognise that, if they are to flourish in their own lives, this will depend on the well-being of the family as a whole and its capacity to communicate care in more responsive ways than traditionally. They come to understand the *relational conditions* of 'deep learning' (Haggard, 2000) in creating reflective families.

Both centres and families recognise this reflective learning, at its deepest level, as expanding horizons of understanding so that families come to see themselves as part of something more and are able to engage in the possibilities for agency

presented. Such reaching out develops because they recognise the interdependence of issues (family, school, health, social services and employment) and thus the urgency of involving a variety of services in a network of support if their needs are to be addressed. They come to understand the *social conditions* of learning in creating reflective families.

Families are learning, moreover, to expand their capacity to participate within this wider public space and to change the practice of services through co-operative action. They are learning how to give voice to their needs in traditionally professional spaces and to take roles of responsibility in supporting community self-help and development. In this they are understanding the *political conditions* of creating socially just learning communities. They are learning to become democratic citizens with a capacity for agency to change and remake the public sphere based on the consent of negotiated agreements.

In these ways, the centres are contributing to the creation of learning communities, which encourage families to engage in learning, to support others in learning and to pursue the deeper objective of learning to work with others to create a community of co-operative activity. In this perspective, a learning community is a community of inquiry, in search of itself, acknowledging plural identities and voices that can be accommodated only by enabling all to participate in deliberation of common concerns in pursuit of shared understanding and agreement.

Dilemmas of inclusion facing the centres

The several practices of family centres of this study can be seen to reinforce the broader social policy agenda of inclusion by enabling various families to develop the confidence and capability to address their fractured lives, participate in community activities, engage with public services and re-enter the labour market. A number of contradictions, however, have emerged to confront the centres with difficult questions about the consistency of their practices. The case studies indicate that the centres are striving to rebuild the confidence of families so that they can make an active contribution to the communities in which they live and work. In so doing they encourage participation, confidence to voice opinions in a discussion and responsibility in collective decision making. Yet the question is being raised by some families whether the centres are embodying these values in their own practice.

Two interrelated dilemmas illuminate these concerns: what degrees of formality should define the relationship of families to the centres, and what role should families play in deciding the practices and priorities of the centres?

Informal–formal practices

Each of the family centres, in its beginnings, emphasised informal practices. Meadowbrook worked as a drop-in centre for families, encouraging them to perceive the centre as an extension of their home, indeed as a substitute for an extended family that would offer comfort and provisions in a time of need. Mothers and fathers would often gather during the day and in the early evening, sharing the predicaments they faced and learning from each other about childcare practices that worked for them. Social workers would develop their practice through these informal settings. In the early days of the Breezefield centre the women formed a mutual support group, offering each other advice and encouragement. They discussed informally how they would like a centre to develop their education and what kinds of courses they would prefer. In the centres there were informal opportunities to volunteer and give others help while developing their own experience.

Yet, as the centres have grown, they have become more formal in their arrangements, developing procedures and rules about the use of the centre and access to its records, formalising the roles people can play in the provision of advice. The activities and courses provided by the centres became less *ad hoc* and more formally organised, with sponsoring organisations expecting accountability for their resources. But does the need for greater formality of provision as organisations grow necessarily mean the elimination of spaces of informal advice and support. Families in both the Breezefield and Meadowbrook centres were clear that something important was being lost in phasing out the opportunities for families to use the centres as spaces for gathering together informally to share advice and mutual support. Surveys of parents demonstrate that informal family and community support is valued by parents (Ghate and Hazel, 2002) and a recent NFPI (2003) report comments that more needs to be done to support such informal networks.

Professionalisation and family participation

Such formalising is recognisable as the professionalisation of family centre practice, often reinforced by the Children Act and subsequent policy development requiring appropriate training and specialist knowledge in the employment of family workers in relation to children. The manager of Meadowbrook, for example, argued that the informal tradition in their centre, of families having access to the filing cabinets and the records of those attending and receiving advice from the centre, was completely inappropriate and potentially placing others at risk.

Such professionalising of knowledge in each of the family centres, however, was also accompanied by the distancing of families from participation in centre policy and decision making. Yet, there is no reason why professionalisation and participation

should be mutually excluding. Knowledge derived from specialist training does not need to preclude that gained from experience, and both can inform and strengthen the deliberative processes of policy making. Families in Meadowbrook expressed regret that the Management Committee that had represented family members had been dismantled, while families in Breezefield wanted more use to be made of an Advisory Committee. That centre had come to promote particular types of employment-oriented learning while families wanted to have more of a say in the provision of learning opportunities. Some of the Breezefield staff regretted that there was no effective mechanism for consulting parents more broadly about their views of the centre and valued the challenging questions that family members could ask of the local authority as well as themselves. In Norton, though impressive networks had been established, they included only professional and voluntary groups, with families and the diverse communities not being represented.

The different family centres in this study and their practices of family learning have been motivated by a shared vision of creating active citizens, able to participate in the making of their communities. The recent report of the NFPI (2003) suggests that more needs to be done to consult parents generally about their needs and concerns. But, if centres are serious about enabling families to develop their capabilities to participate as active citizens in the community and at work, then they need to do more to reconcile the dilemmas of professional knowledge and public service inclusion, thus realising their own centres as democratic learning communities. By including families in deliberative decision making, the centres will not only model the central purpose they are pursuing but also, of course, strengthen their centres as public institutions by ensuring a closer relationship between policy and need.

Notes

Chapter 1

- 1 1997 Household Panel Survey, quoted in *Family Today*, Vol. 1, p. 2 (published by the National Family and Parenting Institute).

Chapter 3

- 1 The semi-structured interview schedules used in the case studies are included in the Appendices. Many of the meetings with family centre members formed long, in-depth interviews and a number of these, especially with key respondents, were repeated during the course of the study to explore changes over time.
- 2 In Breezefield, interviews were held with three managers (follow-up interviews with each), five professional workers and seven parents/volunteers. In Meadowbrook, interviews were held with three managers (two follow-up interviews with one manager), ten professional workers (follow-up interviews with two) and 13 parents/volunteers (follow-up interviews with three). In Norton, interviews were held with three managers (two follow-up interviews with two), three professional workers (and a follow-up interview with one) and seven parents/volunteers (follow-up interviews with three).
- 3 The analytical framework of learning drew on: Argyris and Schon (1978); Engestrom (1999); Wells (2000); Edwards *et al.* (2001).

Chapter 5

- 1 Parental involvement in the child's enriched nursery education is central to High Scope. This has been a highly influential initiative in the development of early education in the UK.

Chapter 7

- 1 The centres did not, of course, transform every family in their care. But the similarity of cases we describe across three very different parts of the country is, we believe, a significant finding from our study.

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Appendix 1: Interview schedule with managers and professional workers

I Background: histories, structural change and communities

- 1 What has been the pattern of economic, social and demographic change in this Zone?
- 2 What has been the impact on communities?
- 3 What patterns of exclusion (disadvantage) has change generated?
- 4 How has this affected women and men? (Explore class, ethnicity, age, etc.; explore distribution of opportunities/jobs, rights, resources, etc.)

II Community responses: communities of difference and voice

- 1 How aware are the communities of these changes/impacts?
- 2 What action has been taken; what community groups have been formed?
- 3 What is the history of community activity in this zone?
- 4 What are the current focal points?
- 5 Who is involved; who are the spokespeople?
 - What role have women (and men) played in this?
 - What confidence do people have in expressing their voice?
- 6 How are they organising; what networks/associations have been formed? (socially, politically).
- 7 What is the involvement in local decision making?

III Responses of the policy community

Explore extent of recognition of practical and emotional difficulties of women (and men) in returning to learning, the obstacles they experience (the life cycles they are locked into) and the support they need.

Including families in the learning community

- 1 What policies have been generated locally to address structural change and its impact, and to support community development?
- 2 What values and beliefs inform these policies? (Probe to what degree they are gender sensitive.)
- 3 How does this policy agenda connect with the policy discourse nationally (cf. family support; childcare; early years; social inclusion; education and training)?
 - Relevance to local knowledge, experience, needs.
 - Is there compliance or challenge to this agenda?

IV Learning and capability formation

Explore what forms of learning generate the capability for reflexivity about those life forms/cycles that have structured the deep subjectivities – of women and men.

- 1 Beliefs and strategy about generating learning and capability formation? (Probe throughout approach to generating learning/reflexivity among women and men. Probe conceptions throughout of understandings of learning within the family – who, how, when?; how to enable reflexive, learning families?)
 - What are the values and purposes of learning?
 - What pedagogy (approach to learning and teaching) – extent of active and collaborative learning?
 - Which curricula are most appropriate to enable family learning?
 - Is there an ‘alternative curriculum’?
 - What are seen as the key ‘tools’, materials in learning?
 - What is the role of mentors in enabling family learning?
 - What is the role of informal learning?
 - How is the issue of cultural attitudes to learning addressed (learning not ‘cool’)?
 - Locales of learning; extent of recognition of knowledge transfer from local communities.
 - Learning outcomes and capability formation – expected and unexpected outcomes.

V Family participation and voice in learning communities

- 1 What are family expectations/aspirations for themselves and their children (as against the professionals)?
- 2 Are family members involved in negotiating and agreeing:

- their learning needs
 - the 'relevant' curriculum and style of learning (a 'non-imposed' curriculum)?
(This is particularly important for the gender issues – what is a relevant curriculum for girls and boys?)
- 3 Are family members involved in the process of management and governance of the centre.

VI Organisational arrangements – goals, roles, rules, authority relations

Explore gender issues in the organisation; who occupies which roles, etc.

- 1 Describe the structure of the organisation:
 - The division of labour; how flexible are the roles?
 - What are the strategies of organisational integration – meetings, team work, etc.?
 - How formalised are the rules and regulations (bureaucracy)?
 - What is the hierarchy of decision making – how centralised/devolved?
 - What is the degree of participation in decision making?
 - What are the lines of accountability?

VII Process of strategic management

Explore degree to which gender issues are raised and embodied in the management process.

- 1 What are the systems of strategic management – issue and needs analysis; priority setting, planning and resource targeting; communication, etc.?
- 2 What databases, information systems exist?
- 3 What are the processes of monitoring and evaluation of plans?

VIII Networking (social capital)

Explore extent to which networks are gendered – are there women's groups, etc.?

- 1 Map interagency relations and degree of collaboration.
- 2 Who is involved, how, when?

Including families in the learning community

- 3 What are the blocks in the networks; are there shared purposes, policy frames or not?
- 4 What resources are involved, who decides?
- 5 Degree of partnership and 'joined-up' working.
- 6 How are networks to be generated and supported; what co-ordinating practices work?
- 7 How are successes and problems monitored and evaluated?

Appendix 2: Interview schedule with family member

1 The self as learner in formal settings

Introduce the idea of a learning journey.

I would like to begin by asking you to describe key landmarks in your 'learning biography'.

- Institutional changes (nursery, primary, 11+, 16 +, post-16, etc.
- What went well, what not so well?
- What did you enjoy; what were you good at?
 - What did you gain from 'schooling'?
- What did you achieve?
 - What did you bring to school, did school bring out your talents (which are they)?
 - What capabilities/skills were developed?
 - What qualifications (if any)?
- Did you develop a sense of what you wanted to become?
 - What was this; when did it happen?
 - Did the school recognise and support this aspiration?
 - Did – and how did – the school help you to decide what you wanted to do or be?
- What style/form of learning did you like best?
 - Were particular teachers important influences?
 - How (what capabilities did they support)?
 - Why were they influential?
 - Did you feel recognised as a person/learner?
- Were you involved in any out-of-school learning activities?
 - Significant trips, sport, drama.

2 Informal learning

- The role of hobbies, interests and activities as a child.
 - Which did you enjoy?
 - What did they 'teach' you?

- What capabilities did you develop?
 - Were these solitary activities or supported by the family – how?
- Are you now involved in voluntary activities (clubs, associations, trade unions, church/religious groups)?
 - What and how do you learn through these?
 - What skills and capabilities have you developed?
 - What relation do these informal learning experiences have to formal learning?

3 The learner in the family

a The past (family of origin)

- Were your parents involved in supporting you at school?
 - What kind of relationship/involvement did they have with the school?
 - Did your parents/family feel that school was important?
 - Why or why not?
- Did your parents/family support you at home: how?
- Who were the other key influences on your learning (wider family, grandparents, friends, neighbours, etc.)?

b Your present family

- Are you still involved in learning yourself?
 - What kind?
 - What kind of skills and abilities are you developing?
 - What style of learning does this involve (formal, informal)?
 - Why; what are your ambitions and aspirations?
- How do your family support you now?
- How are you supporting other members of the family?
 - Children (are you supporting them at school; in the home?)
 - Husband/partner?

4 Learning in the family centre

- What learning opportunities are you involved in?

- What form does the learning take?
 - Informal–formal?
 - Didactic–investigative?
 - Individual–collaborative?

- Do the activities lead to qualifications?

- Is there ‘progression’ in the activities?

