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## **FAMILY LEARNING: "WHAT'S THE SCORE?"**

*June Davison*

*Northumbria University, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Tyne and Wear, United Kingdom*

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June Davison

Northumbria University,

Faculty of Health and Life Sciences,

Coach Lane Campus,

Benton,

Newcastle Upon Tyne

NE7 7XA.

0191 215 6305

Email: [j.davison@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:j.davison@northumbria.ac.uk)

## **Abstract**

Family Learning through Football and Coaching (FLTFC) was developed with Sunderland Association Football Club (SAFC) Foundation, an adult basic skills provider, a primary school and the Open College Network. Ten years on this programme has high participation rates and is recognised for its capacity to engage the 'hard-to-reach' in learning.

This paper provides a focused historical analysis and attempts to locate family learning in relation to policy, local authority structures and educational discourse. As cuts to public services continue, there is an expectation that the third sector, including social enterprises such as SAFC Foundation, will step in to fill the gap. The success of FLTFC could be presented as evidence of the effectiveness of the Big Society agenda however taking the long view it is evident that partnership with the public sector is an essential element in the development and continuity of successful provision.

The theoretical framework which informs the paper incorporates brief consideration of the concept of lifelong learning and an examination of informal learning in the context of the family. The emerging localism agenda and issues relating to the current Coalition government's Big Society concept also inform the discussion.

The paper will contribute to understanding of support for learning within families by providing a historical analysis of the endurance and success of a specific family learning programme. The findings of this study have the potential to contribute to the implementation of policy arising from the current review of adult informal community learning (BIS, 2011).

## **Family Learning: 'What's the Score?'**

*June Davison*

*Northumbria University, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Tyne and Wear, United Kingdom*

### **Introduction**

This paper provides a focused historical and theoretical analysis of the endurance of a specific family learning initiative, Family Learning through Football and Coaching, a programme delivered by Sunderland Association Football Club's (SAFC) Foundation of Light. I present an explanatory theory for the success and longevity of the programme. Consideration is given to the current location of family learning within national policy, local authority structures and educational discourse. The theoretical framework underpinning the paper incorporates the concept of lifelong learning and examines informal learning in the context of the family. The emerging localism agenda and issues relating to the current Coalition government's Big Society concept are also considered. I utilise qualitative data from Northumbria University's social impact assessment of the Foundation of Light's programmes (McKenna, *et al.*, 2012) and connect theory to practice by reflecting on my professional experiences and 'insider knowledge' (Robson, 2011), gained during extensive involvement with SAFC's Foundation of Light.

Between 2001 and 2005 I coordinated an extensive Family Learning Partnership in the north east of England. The Partnership aimed to promote links between local regional and national initiatives, ensure complementarities, develop a family learning strategy for the county and help develop a process for identifying and meeting local needs. The role of coordinator was one of change-agent and catalyst. A quality stipulated as essential, as opposed to desirable, in the job description, was a 'sense of humour'. This was a clear indication of the challenges entailed in bringing together a diverse range of partners, however, it was this commitment to partnership working that, among other achievements, developed and piloted an innovative family learning programme, Family Learning through Football and Coaching. Ten years on this programme is the Foundation of Light's family learning 'flagship' programme and still demonstrates high levels of success in engaging parents, particularly fathers, in their children's learning. The programme is recognised as making a significant contribution to fulfilling the organisation's central aims which are to

*Increase access and participation in positive activity: Inspire young people to achieve and raise aspiration now and in future generations: Contribute to safe, healthy and regenerated communities: Be an integral and embedded part of the community.*

SAFC, 2012a

The impetus for the paper developed naturally from my previous involvement with wider family learning practice. The Foundation's tenth anniversary provided a stimulus for reflection and an opportunity to bring together theory and practice. The Foundation's Education Ambassadors identified a need for qualitative evidence to complement existing quantitative data on the Foundation's programmes. Early in 2011 I began to develop an idea for a phenomenological narrative study which would look at the life histories of parents taking part in 'Family Learning through Football and Coaching'. This was superseded when the opportunity arose for Northumbria University to conduct an evaluation of the social impact of the Foundation's programmes. Taking part in the social impact assessment enabled me to continue with my intention to investigate the factors contributing to the success and longevity of the course I had been instrumental in developing ten years previously.

As a member of the Northumbria University research team a dual role was acknowledged. My extensive involvement with the Foundation of Light, initially as a family learning coordinator and subsequently as education ambassador, was recognised as contributing a valuable long-term perspective and insight. This complemented my own and my research colleagues' theoretical underpinnings and research skills.

### **What is family learning?**

Family Learning through Football and Coaching, as the title suggests, combines family learning and football. Most of us have an understanding of football and attach our own meaning to the phenomenon, perhaps associating it with multi-national commercial markets or conversely experiencing it, either as participants or audience, as intensely personal and attaching almost religious passion to the sport. Love it or loath it football has the power to generate powerful emotion. However, despite the annual occurrence each October of a national, extensively advertised, 'Family Learning Festival', few of us have an understanding of what family learning and 'wider' family learning are (Campaign for

Learning, 2005). Ofsted describe family learning as *'planned activity, in which adults and children come together, to work and learn collaboratively'* (Ofsted, 2000).

The Skills Funding Agency, the body responsible for allocation of government funding for family learning since replacing the Learning and Skills Council in 2010, provides the following definition of family learning

*Family programmes aim to encourage family members to learn together. They are learning as or within a family. They should include opportunities for intergenerational learning and, wherever possible, lead both adults and children to pursue further learning.*

Skills Funding Agency, 2011: 4

Two specific funding streams support family learning, Family Literacy, Language and Numeracy and Wider Family Learning. Family Learning through Football and Coaching is funded through the Wider Family Learning stream. Wider Family Learning is described as provision where the primary aim is not the development of literacy, language or numeracy skills. In support of a recently launched inquiry into family learning in England and Wales the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) provide this definition of family learning

*Learning activities which involve both children and adult family members, where learning outcomes are intended for both and which contribute to a culture of learning in the family and community.*

NIACE, 2012

A further direct and inclusive definition is provided by Mackenzie, *'Family learning involves families enjoying learning together.'* (Mackenzie, 2010: 9). This broad, encompassing definition captures the power and simplicity of family learning.

## **The Development and Nature of Family Learning through Football and Coaching.**

The origins of Family Learning through Football and Coaching are set within the context of cross sector multi agency partnership working facilitated by public funding. The Family Learning Partnership was preceded by over 5 years of delivery of Basic Skills Agency model

Family Literacy and Numeracy programmes and a successful Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) Round 3 ICT focused family learning project. The Family Learning Partnership drew funding from SRB Round 6 and the European Social Fund (ESF) Objective 3. The annual project budget, including match funding, was in the region of £1million. The Local Education Authority's (LEA) community education service was the major partner with over 85% of the SRB 6 budget for family learning provision and over 70% of the project's ESF funding. In September 2005 a report from the LEA's Director of Education to the Education Scrutiny Sub Committee for the Development of Lifelong Learning recorded the success of the family learning partnership in bringing together Education, Social Care and Health, Culture and Leisure, the County's four further education colleges, the Workers' Educational Association, seven district councils, the County's Primary Care Trusts and voluntary sector organisations. Since then not only has the Family Learning Partnership ceased operation but regeneration funding has ended, there is no longer a Director of Education, there is no Education Department within the local authority and no Lifelong Learning Committee. Amidst the shifting sands of policy, ideology and economic circumstances however one thing that remains as a legacy of the Partnership is a body of sustainable examples of innovative curriculum development including, Family Learning through Football and Coaching.

The need to engage parents, especially fathers, in their children's learning was identified by the Family Learning Partnership and fortuitous synergy brought together the people, the skills, knowledge and enthusiasm to address this need. The initial idea to combine family learning and football came from a primary head teacher, an adult basic skills provider and an enthusiastic football coach. The Family Learning Partnership provided the funding and infrastructure, which supported the development and piloting of the course and the incorporation of optional accreditation at level 1 and 2 with the Open College Network as part of their Regional Family Learning Programme. During 2001 the course was piloted in a local primary school and a local secondary school. Initial evaluations indicated the potential of the programme to engage parents and particularly fathers, in children's learning. In the autumn of 2003 the programme was showcased at a series of NIACE regional conferences, 'Broad, Balanced and Embedded: the Challenge of Developing Wider Family Learning' and in 2004 the programme featured in 'Starting Points in Developing Wider Family Learning' as an example of provision with potential to contribute to neighbourhood renewal (Chisholm, Haggart and Horne, 2004).

The course structure comprises ten weekly sessions of two and a half hours incorporating a classroom-based session with parents and carers followed by games and coaching activities with children. The programme provides the opportunity for parents and carers to examine parenting and child development issues through the medium of football coaching. Modules include the emotional needs of a child, learning styles, behaviour patterns and qualities of a coach. The coaching aspect of the course provides practical knowledge on leadership and working with children in a sporting setting and encourages the adult to recognise the transferable skills used in coaching and parenting. The skills and qualities promoted by the course include physical and fine motor skills, concentration, cooperation and self-confidence and connections are drawn with the National Curriculum. Family Learning through Football and Coaching is the forerunner of a strategically developed suite of courses and activities, which now reach in excess of 40,000 young people and 1,187 families annually in Sunderland, South Tyneside and Durham (SAFC, 2012b). The Foundation's programme encompasses provision targeted at a wide range of age and abilities. Courses include Little Dribblers; Tackle it; Pan Disability; Pitstop; Kickz; Back in the Game; Family Values and Football Fitness (SAFC, 2012b).

### **The policy context**

The family is an important environment for learning and learning in families is an integral part of life long or life wide learning across lifespan. Much of the learning that takes place within the home, the family and the community is informal. Morgan-Klein and Osborne identify a key trend

*..there has been increasing attention in recent years on the relevance of informal contexts such as the family and community. The way in which learning in communities and families impacts on participation in formal learning and potentially brings social benefits, such as improved health outcomes, has been of central government interest.*

Morgan-Klein and Osborne, 2007: 99

This is reflected in the breadth of potential contributions family learning can make to a range of social issues. The Learning Revolution (DIUS, 2009), the first white paper on informal adult learning, sees family learning as playing a part in social issues as diverse as knife crime and disability;

*We need to ensure that family learning continues to meet local needs and priorities but also that it can focus effectively on specific aims, like encouraging greater parental engagement in their children's learning, engaging fathers and boys, tackling the culture of guns, gangs and knives, staying safe, enabling access to family learning for minority groups and supporting families who have a family member with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.*

DIUS, 2009: 27

Three post-1997 policy milestones combine to provide a brief historical analysis of the lifelong learning policy context within which family learning and this specific programme, have developed. In 1998, the Learning Age green paper (DfEE, 1998) acknowledged the key role of the family in relation to lifelong and life-wide learning. A decade later the Learning Revolution white paper (DIUS, 2009) was welcomed by policy makers and practitioners alike for its acknowledgement of the importance of informal learning, including family learning, however, the paper also pragmatically posed the interlinked questions of who benefits and who should pay for informal learning. In 2011, *New Challenges, New Chances* (BIS, 2011), the Coalition's reform plan for Further Education and Skills extended this message with an even greater sense of realism.

Though acknowledging community learning as an *'important part of the wider learning continuum'* (BIS, 2012) and committing to continuation of support for Family Literacy, Language and Numeracy and Wider Family Learning as two of four strands of its £210 million per year safeguarded Community Learning budget BIS makes no reference to family learning in either the Department's reform plan (BIS, 2011) or its Community Learning Trust pilots prospectus (BIS, 2012). Currently only 14% (£37million) of the safeguarded Community Learning budget is committed to family learning of this 5.7% (£12 million) is allocated to wider family learning (BIS, 2011: 3). Though the reform plan promised a *'ladder of opportunity'* from *'community learning'* to *'Higher Vocational Education'* (BIS, 2011: 3) there is no reference to family literacy, language and numeracy or to wider family learning. The only apparent echo of the presence of family learning is in relation to widening participation by better equipping parents to *'support and encourage their children's learning'* (BIS, 2011: 14). Further, the plan points to the introduction of fee loans in further education and skills by the 2013-14 academic year and the collection of fees for community learning from *'those who can afford to pay'*, however defined. Interestingly in

his introduction to the paper John Hayes sets the ground for this development by invoking the words of *'one of the fathers of British adult education'*, John Ruskin, citing *'a thing is worth what it can do for you, not what you choose to pay for it'*. (BIS, 2011)

Undoubtedly, cuts to public services characterise current circumstances, a fact reinforced by NIACE's statement that *'providers are having to make the case for continued funding and delivery of family learning services'* (NIACE, 2012). The funding and the structures that existed in 2001 which supported the development of innovative programmes are no longer available and there is an expectation that the third sector will step in to bridge the gap, which is what the Foundation of Light, as a social enterprise, have over the last ten years achieved.

### **The success and endurance of Family Learning through Football and Coaching**

Partnership at two fundamental levels is central to both the instigation and continuation of successful initiatives that engage parents and carers in children's learning. These two levels are secondary level or strategic partnerships between local authorities and providers and primary level operational partnerships between schools and families.

The original conditions for the establishment of partnership between the Family Learning Partnership and the Foundation of Light were made possible by the availability of funding which provided infrastructure conducive to innovative partnership working. The local authority was the strategic lead with this enterprise and provided the impetus to access available funding. In the current context, cuts to public expenditure have diminished the role of the local authority to a commissioning function. This inevitably alters the nature of partnerships at this level. As cuts to public services continue, there is an expectation that the third sector, reimagined by the Conservative party *'Civil Society'* (Evans, 2011), will step in to fill the gap in service provision. One of the three key elements of the big society as set out in the Conservative party manifesto in 2010 was the opening up of public services with the explicit intention *of 'enabling voluntary organisations, charities, social enterprises and employee-owned co-operatives to compete to offer public services'* (House of Commons Library, 2012). Social enterprises including the Foundation of Light have indeed expanded their provision to compensate for reduced capacity within local authority family learning services. The success of Family Learning through Football and Coaching could in some senses be presented as evidence of the effectiveness of the Big Society agenda. However,

taking the long view it is evident that partnership with the public sector and the infrastructure it provides is an essential element in the development and continuity of successful provision. Additionally, concerns have been expressed by organisations representing the voluntary and community sector regarding accountability and the potential compromising of the sector's independence (Evans, 2011). There appear to be two caveats to any transition from big state to big society, one being the reliance the voluntary sector has upon receiving funding from the state and the other that rather than reducing the size and influence of the state the sector becomes the delivery arm of a big state.

As an outcome of the review of informal adult and community learning (BIS, 2011) Sunderland has been successful in becoming one of the first of 15 Community Learning Trust pilots. The intention is to establish Community Learning Forums in each of the five regeneration areas of the city. A Community Learning Trust Board will subsequently take responsibility for the development of a strategic and operational plan for the city. Composition of the trust and its area forums may be dependent upon the capacity of each sector to engage with and perhaps further stretch resources. It remains to be seen whether this arrangement will differ significantly from previously existing partnership arrangements between the public sector and the voluntary and community sector in relation to the quality of provision and the capacity of providers to develop programmes which effectively and engage parents in their own and their children's learning.

At the primary, operational level the quality of the relationships between schools and families is central in engaging parents in children's learning. Involvement in children's education can encompass a variety of attitudes and behaviours including parental aspirations and beliefs (Georgiou and Tuorva, 2007). One of the most widely recognised typologies of parental involvement is Epstein's (1997) which comprises: parenting; communication; volunteering; learning at home; decision making in school and community involvement. Desforges and Abouchar (2003) put forward four analogous categories: parenting; volunteering; decision making and communicating.

A helpful model explaining parental motivation for involvement with school and children's learning is provided by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005). The model differs from most in that it considers the motivational factors contributing to involvement as opposed to the barriers which mitigate against involvement. From its inception Family Learning through Football and Coaching offered incentives including branded merchandise

and a visit to Sunderland Associated Football Club's home ground. Northumbria University's study however revealed that these inducements were not a significant factor in motivating parents and carers to take part in the Foundation of Light's wider family learning programmes. While the SAFC brand had a '*visible presence in the communities and the region*' (McKenna *et al.*, 2012: 20) and the children taking part in the study demonstrated an awareness of the brand the association with SAFC did '*not act as a motivator for involvement or engagement*' (McKenna *et al.*, 2012: 80).

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (2005: 47) model encompasses personal and contextual motivators and the influence of life context asserting that two central belief systems are instrumental as personal motivators; these are role construct in relation to involvement and sense of efficacy for helping the child succeed in school. If parents believe it is part of the parental role to be involved in the child's learning and they believe that they are capable of producing an effect they are motivated to become involved. One of the key components of this model is parents' perceptions of invitations to become involved. Contextual motivators also come into play in the form of perceived invitations to involvement. Such invitations may be system wide or specific.

Personal motivators include role construct and efficacy. For many of the families in the predominantly working class areas of Sunderland within which the study was conducted there can be a sense that being involved with school is not part of the parental role. This can stem from poor previous educational experiences resulting in a sense that education is for others. Stuart and Thomson (1995) and McGivney (1990, 1999) among others address issues of marginalisation in relation to adult participation in learning. Education can be seen as an identity forming process and the absence of success in initial education can produce a perception that education is for others. This sense of 'otherness' can carry through to adulthood resulting in marginalisation. People who have been socialised within the framework of 'white, middle class male' are more likely to succeed and have their identity confirmed as good and worthwhile. Those who have not and cannot come to terms with it will be identified as failures. One of the results of this process of marginalisation and exclusion is disillusionment with education and internalisation by many adults (and school children) of the perception that 'education is for other people' it is not about us and is not for us. That perception and the consequent non participation in education by significant sectors of the adult population is both the challenge and the starting point for much adult

education and practice. Lochrie refers to the benefits of family learning and its potential to attract what she refers to as non-traditional learners.

*There is a rich literature of evaluations and research suggestive of family learning as a highly useful gateway for non-traditional learners who might not attend a class for themselves but are motivated to learn for the benefit of their children*

Lochrie, 2005: 5

Family Learning through Football and Coaching can be seen as a leveller. It can be experienced as an activity which provides shared common ground and overcomes the idea of 'otherness'. Grayson Perry's (2012) recent tapestry exploration of British culture and class depicted working class Sunderland and featured SAFC's home ground, the Stadium of Light underlining the importance of football in the local identity. Football is not for 'others' – it's for us. Some would say that north-east working class families and football belong together, especially for men. It is a stretch of one's imagination to conceive of Family Learning through Polo, or even rugby, and coaching. It just wouldn't work. Not in the same way, not with the same power and level of passion.

The second of Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's constructs is 'efficacy'. The content of the ten week course is football oriented and entails 'safe' non-academic activities which further add to the sense of this route for engaging in education as being safe, non-threatening and do-able. Anyone can take part in the courses and no pre-existing knowledge of the school curriculum or specific skills or abilities are required. Course content is based around the child and incorporates fun, games and light physical activity. Parents believe they can be efficacious in helping whereas they might not in relation to traditionally perceived school-based academic undertakings (Chisholm *et al.*, 2004; Haggart and Spacey, 2006). If parents believe it is part of the parental role to be involved in the child's learning and they believe that they are capable of producing an effect they are motivated to become involved.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) also allude to contextual motivators for involvement. Genuine invitations to become involved are key contextual parental motivators. This premise is central to my construction of an explanatory theory for the endurance of this family learning initiative. My proposition is that by combining the desire of parents to

support their children's learning with the powerful position of football in the identities of some families this course creates compelling incentives to participate.

Parents in the social impact assessment on the whole referred to responding to the invitation to participate in the Foundation's Wider Family Learning programmes because it came from their child, their child's teacher, the school or the Head Teacher.

*'[my] girls asked me to do it'*

*'My daughter came home with a letter.'*

*'I came along because it was the school.'*

*Initially a letter came home from school [then] wanted to do it because I couldn't do it with my older child [last year] also wanted to know about how maths is done in school*

*Letter from school [I was] volunteered by [my] daughter.*

*School sent a letter, son had read it and he bullied me into it!*

*He [son] was excited...wanted me to come.*

*Would have attended any way to spend time with the children*

*I went along for me kids*

McKenna *et al.*, 2012

Lewis *et al.* (2011: 231) found that teachers deliberately used children as 'messengers'. Not only did this strategy result in increased involvement in school, according to Lewis *et al.* (2011) it also lead to increased involvement with children's educational activities in the home. Invitations from the child are very important as they activate '*parents' wishes to be responsive to their child's developmental needs*' (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 2005: 112). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler recognise that others can also be influential in stimulating parental involvement, '*Invitations to involvement from important others are often key motivators of parents' decision to become involved*' (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1997, cited in Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 2005: 110). It follows that association with a local Premier League football club may act to augment the perceived invitation and encourage parents to feel '*Welcome, valuable and expected by the school and its members*' (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 2005: 110).

The impact of wider family learning programmes may be facilitated by the relationship between the school and the Foundation of Light. Wider family learning activity

is non-academic in focus, non-threatening and fun. Additionally the reinforcement of the invitation by association with the Foundation of Light represents an opportunity for involvement that is responsive to '*differences in parental knowledge, skills, time and energy*' (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 2005: 114). It follows that if parents '*perceive their skills to be adequate, they tend to be positive about engaging with the activity*' (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 2005: 115). The combined effects of strengthening of the invitation to participate and the nature and content of the wider family learning programmes may be essential elements in the success and longevity of the Foundation's programmes. By reinforcing parents' role construct and sense of efficacy initial and continuing engagement is effectively facilitated.

To be successful any partnership needs to be meaningful and to benefit all parties in some way. Hornby and Lafaele (2011) argue that there is a level of rhetoric in relation to partnership between schools and parents. Invitations to take part need to be sincere and supported by commitment to and understanding of the benefits and motivators of parental involvement. Authentic partnership is illustrated in the words of the head teacher whose vision and commitment contributed to the development of the programme.

*We try to be a community school in the truest sense which means that everybody in this community has a part to play and everybody is welcome in this school*

Head Teacher.

Where schools are welcoming and provide genuine invitations, supported by strategic and operational level partnership wider family learning initiatives are more able to be successful in engaging parents.

## **Conclusions**

This paper has considered the development and longevity of a specific family learning programme and put forward an explanatory theory for the success of the initiative. The historical analysis and exposition of success factors presented in this paper contribute to understanding of support for learning within families. The central tenet of the discussion is that partnerships, at strategic and operational levels, factor in the development of successful provision and that this is key to success in involving families in learning. The findings of the study have the potential to contribute to the implementation of policy arising from the

recent review of adult informal community learning (BIS, 2011) and NIACE's inquiry into family learning in England and Wales. Further investigation of family learning programmes using other engagement vehicles, for example the arts and music, have the potential to corroborate or extend the premise forwarded here.

Based on longstanding involvement with parental engagement and family learning practice combined with the findings of Northumbria University's social impact assessment (McKenna *et al.*, 2012), I conclude that the success of Family Learning through Football and Coaching is in part due to the capacity of effective partnership working to create enhanced invitations to involvement in children's learning. Partnership between the Foundation of Light and local schools produces gilt-edged, steel-reinforced invitations to involvement.

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