



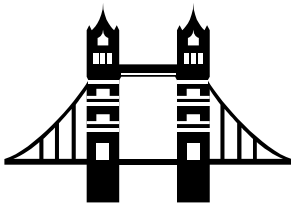
Family Learning: using research to inform practice

SUMMARY

This briefing sheet outlines:

- how to incorporate research into widening participation practice
- some of the reasons why practitioners might choose to spend time on what might seem an extra task
- a list of categories and ways of thinking about family learning
- insights from current research
- a list of references for further reading.

A bridge to aid understanding

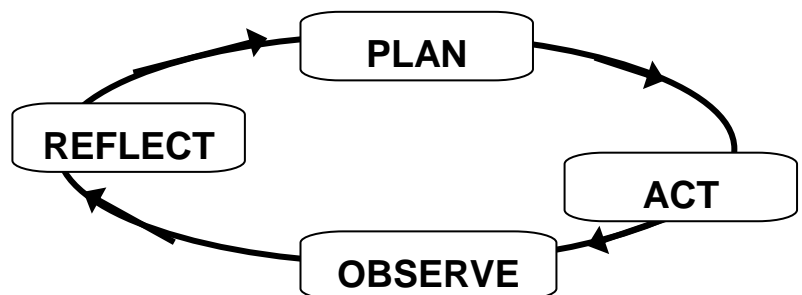


The image of a bridge can be a helpful way of thinking about the role of a practitioner. In essence, practitioners have to work in the world of Higher Education and then travel across the bridge into schools, communities where they translate HE jargon and provide activities aimed at challenging myths and raising awareness about HE. Research findings represent the luggage practitioners' carry with them into the real world and feedback, collected from families,

stand for the goodies that they bring back from their journey. When time permits, a process of reflection can use these goodies (feedback and observations) to improve future practice, and help practitioners to understand what might help or hinder the process of widening participation.

Action Research

This is a form of research popular with practitioners because it allows them to research what they would naturally be doing as part of their work. The four-stage process summarised in this diagram may be repeated to check if changes do



make a difference. The Families And Higher Education Decision-making cycle used an action research process to assist with developing different versions of the parent course 'Your Child's Future'.



Dick, B (1997) *Action learning and action research: Resource papers in action research* <http://www.aral.com.au/>, - Accessed 2015

CATEGORISING FAMILY LEARNING

Categorising family learning is useful for a number of reasons. It can help with targeting who you work with, planning appropriate activities, writing funding bids for future work, describing and disseminating your work to a range of audiences. Discovering individuals' definitions of family learning and comparing with existing definitions can assist when trying to understand the concept of family learning. The Lancashire Intergenerational Multicultural Education action research project developed the following categories. :

How families initiate family learning:

Different starting points appear to influence motivation and levels of commitment to activities offered. Family learning maybe initiated for the following reasons: *interest, necessity, internal, external, individual, collective*

Types of family learning:

Describe the way family learning is offered, for example activities might be: *informal/formal, ad hoc/regular, planned/spontaneous*

Alternatively, they describe the content focus for family learning: *literacy, numeracy, individual or shared interests*

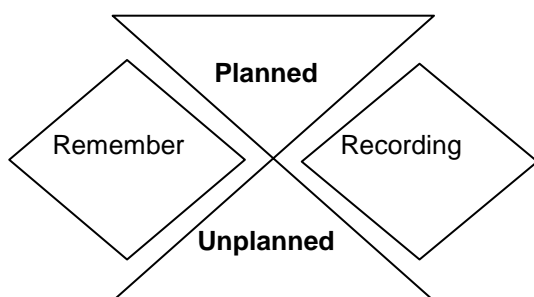
Sustainability factors:

These include factors that enable or inhibit family learning. Sustainability factors can also be categorised according to whether they are internal or external to the family: **practical** - *finance, time, location*, **personal** - *awareness, attitude towards focus, in this context higher education*

Impact factors:

These can be used to assess how family learning influences the views families hold about the learning focus and includes: **personal** - *awareness, knowledge, understanding, attitudes*, about higher education; **evaluative** - *range, quality, relevance, usefulness*

COLLECTING INFORMATION ABOUT FAMILY LEARNING



When delivering family learning activities try to plan what information would be useful to collect.

How will you record family learning and capture the information you need?

Recording information can be naturalistic and need not be an extra task. Think about how you can use enrolment or evaluation forms, activity worksheets e.g. post-its, ideas recorded on flip chart, photographs or use a tape recorder to capture a group discussion e.g. concerns about money.

- ① It is important to discuss with participants how you will use the information you collect and to explain clearly issues of confidentiality and anonymity. For details of "Ethical Guidelines" <http://tinyurl.com/bera-ethics2011>



For an accessible guide to small-scale research:

Knight, PT (2002) *Small-scale research: Pragmatic inquiry in social science and the caring professions*, London, Sage Publications.

IDEAS FROM EXISTING RESEARCH

Although most of the research relating to families role in education is targeted at the home school relationship, there are a number of ideas, which may help when thinking about working with parents to raise awareness about higher education.

Mobilising strategies

McNamara et al (2000) attempted to categorise pupil, parents and school strategies into those that 'mobilised' and 'demobilised' the child. Mobilising factors used by parents include encouragement, praise, surveillance, criticism, teaching, resource support and bribery (ibid: 478), which can complement the support mechanisms provided through school.

Pupils can also help or hinder the involvement of their parents. As discussed in Briefing Sheet 3: College Open Days, pupils are often unreliable when it comes to taking home invitations to parents. McNamara describes this as a form of 'self-demobilisation'. Some parents see this as an inevitable and a positive feature of allowing their children to have greater independence, however, this can contradict their desire for information, which may help them to support their child more effectively. Achieving the right balance is the challenge facing parents, schools and FE / HE sector.

- ❗ It is also important to note that low parental involvement which might be seen as a demobilising factor is not necessarily a sign that parents are any less concerned or interested in their child's education, on the contrary:

'many parents in disadvantaged circumstances are passionate about their children's education and see it as a way out of poverty' (DfEE, 2000: para 62).

According to David et al (2003), self-mobilisation is more prevalent in boys who prefer to keep home and school separate in order to avoid parental surveillance. However, as David et al (2003) also revealed this is sometimes a form of protection, as young people based on their assessment of the family circumstances and pressures facing their parents would actively make the decision not to bother or burden their parents. Feedback from teachers in the Families And Higher Education Decision-making project suggests that many pupils will opt out of activities because they believe the financial burden of going to higher education is too great and they wish to avoid pressuring their parents.

Educational De-mobilising strategies










According to McNamara et al. (2000), schools de-mobilise and hinder parents in supporting their children in numerous ways. The same criticisms could be made of higher education. McNamara identified seven obstacles that alienated parents. These included:

- academic
- cultural
- psychological
- ideological (McNamara, et al., 2000: 482).
- physical
- religious
- social

This list of obstacles is useful to take account of when working with parents in a widening participation context, since they are likely to influence the attitudes and perceptions of some parents when considering higher education as a possible option for their children. Learning to understand what families' value and identifying mismatches between a family's experience and the ethos, culture and opportunities that they perceive the university provides is a crucial stage in the outreach process if higher education institutions are to respond and change to meet the needs of a more diverse student population.

FURTHER REFERENCES

Current research provides a useful insight into the benefits derived from, the barriers associated with, and models that explain parental involvement in the education of their children. Despite the focus on compulsory education, home-school research merits consideration by higher education institutions seeking to learn from families currently under-represented in their institution. The following references outline key issues, which are relevant to the role families play in helping or hindering their young people in attending higher education and the barriers that educational institutions need to address if they are to widen participation.

-  Ball, SJ, Maguire, M and Macrae, S (2000) *Choice, pathways and transitions post-16. New youth, new economies in the global city.*, London, Routledge Falmer.
-  David, M, Ball, S, Davies, J and Raey, D (2003) 'Gender issues in parental involvement in student choices of higher education', *Gender and Education* 15 (1): 21-37.
-  Desforges, C and Abouchaar, A (2003) *The impact of parental involvement, parental support and family education on pupil achievement and adjustment: A review of the literature - Brief No: 433*, June 2003, Nottingham: Department of Education and Skills.
-  DfEE (2000) *Schools plus: Building learning communities. Improving the educational chances of children and young people from disadvantaged areas. Policy action team 11*, Nottingham, DfEE.
-  Foskett, N and Hemsley-Brown, J (2001) *Choosing futures: Young people's decision-making in education, training and career markets*, London, Routledge Falmer.
-  Houghton, A-M and Sharples, H (2001) *Families and higher education decision-making: A day trip to raise awareness, break barriers and widen participation*, University of East London, Standing Conference on University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults.
-  McNamara, O, Hustler, D, Stonach, I, Rodrigo, M, Beresford, E and Botcherby, S, (2000) 'Room to manoeuvre: Mobilising the 'active partner' in home school relations', *British Educational Research Journal* 26 (4): 473 - 491.
-  Vincent, C (2001) 'Social class and parental agency', in *Journal of Educational Policy* 16 (4): 347-364.
-  Williams, B, Williams, J and Ullman, A (2002) *Parental involvement in education - Research Brief No 332*, April, Nottingham: DfES.

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