



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Active learning through family
engagement

Improving family engagement
through a process of reflexive
action research



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Contents

Summary	4
Background	5
Methodology	7
Findings	9
Conclusions and Recommendations	24
Appendix 1	28
Appendix 2	29
Appendix 3	30
Appendix 4	32
Appendix 5	37

Summary

The project is an action research project, carried out in partnership between the School of Social Justice and Inclusion, at the Faculty of Education and Communities at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David and five local primary schools. The project has been successful in addressing its aims, which were to:

- work with family support staff and leaders to develop and implement practical family engagement initiatives that directly enhance and extend parents and carers involvement in their children's education;
- support local staff to set up project monitoring and evaluation systems to assess the impact of their work;
- contribute to a more robust Welsh focused knowledge base about the range of activities that support family engagement;
- focus on supporting the most socially disadvantaged/ excluded families within the chosen communities

The continuing success of the project will rely on ongoing and meaningful engagement with schools to ensure the offer of support and challenge effectively meets their needs.

Background

Schools and teachers in Wales are likely to be faced with continuing pressures. Schools and teachers are expected to be able to deliver ambitious targets for children. Estyn has recently noted that the best teachers have high expectations, challenge their pupils and think critically about their own practice (Estyn, 2017). This project has provided an opportunity for schools to create space for leaders and teachers to collectively explore how family engagement contributes to this vision, particularly in relation to thinking critically about their own practice and how best to actively engage families in the education of their children.

It has been argued that because of financial strains on education budgets, as well as the mounting evidence of the benefits of parental involvement for children's overall well-being, individual teachers, schools and education systems are asking parents to increase their levels of involvement in their children's education and to be more present in their children's lives (Borgonovi and Montt, 2012, 13). Research reveals that for students in primary school, differences in parental involvement are associated with greater differences in student performance than any variations in the quality of schools (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003).

Children from poorer backgrounds have consistently left school with lower levels of education attainment than their financially better off peers. The Welsh Government has recently reported that 'in 2014 only 28% of learners from deprived backgrounds got 5 GCSEs at A*-C including English/ Welsh and Maths, compared with 62% of better off learners' (Welsh Government, 2014, pg 3). Welsh Government has found that schools that are able to engage with their families and community groups as serious and practical partners in education are more able to raise standards and improve learner well-being. This engagement is also an essential tool for narrowing the attainment gap between learners from richer and poorer backgrounds (Welsh Government, 2015, pg 5). This project was further informed by the recent work of Welsh Government in developing a toolkit for family engagement in schools (see Appendix 1 for a summary of promising approaches in family engagement).

Schools have an important role to play in helping close the educational attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged classmates. This project has acknowledged and increasingly responded to the importance of the wider socio-economic conditions in which a child grows up. There has been a growing interest within the project in initiatives that aim to bridge the gap between schools, families and communities (Welsh Government, 2014) and an acknowledgement that 'Schools do not exist in isolation: they are a key part of a network of statutory, private sector and voluntary organisations that serve and support the local community.' (Welsh Government, 2015, pg 9). Initially, the instigators of the project were aware of a variety of school based practices aimed at addressing the challenges of engaging families in their children's learning. These varied from well-integrated whole school approaches to more limited initiatives. The project team identified little documentation providing insight into the challenges involved and any outcomes secured from this type of work. There was a realisation though that relationships between schools and families are often deep and complex although there is little robust

evidence of what has worked for schools, parents and children in relation to family engagement.

The project has considered these issues in great depth and detail through a process of actions research. Action research has been defined as 'the study of a social situation carried out by those involved in that situation in order to improve both their practice and the quality of their understanding (Winter and Munn-Giddings, 2001, pg 8). This process of action learning has been an appropriate means of addressing many questions concerning family engagement within communities.

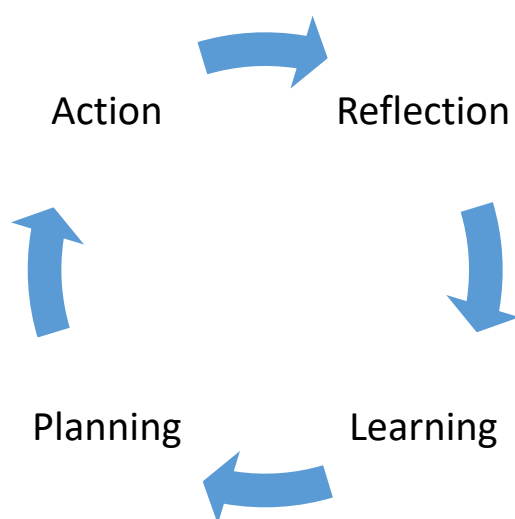
Each school, with the support of the network, has developed bespoke initiatives drawing on existing knowledge, developing practical approaches with the aim of enhancing family engagement in education to benefit children and families. It is hoped that the initial results of the project will contribute to a growing body of knowledge and resources for both front line staff and school leaders, the methodological approach and participatory ethos of the project has certainly enabled school leaders and staff to improve their practice and their understanding of the lives of the children and families with whom they work.

Methodology

The project team, the researcher, school leaders and staff delivered the aims of the grant; we communicated between and within schools and schools liaised with communities; we were involved in ongoing evaluation and adjustment to school based interventions. Our interventions were coordinated at termly workshops, we continually evaluated, and planned responsive activities.

The project has adopted a participatory ethos, pursuing an action learning approach as illustrated in figure 1.

Figure 1. Action Reflection Cycle



The focus of the project has been the development and testing of a range of novel approaches to progressively engage families in the education of their children. There has been a particular focus on families who have previously been less engaged in the lives of their children's schools. Some children in the early years, and Key Stage 2 are in receipt of a number of types of interventions, potentially coming into contact with a range of different types of services. What the project wanted to achieve was transformational change for these children and their families.

The project has worked with five schools from diverse communities across south west Wales. The schools are based in communities with high levels of diversity, socially, economically and culturally. The project has engaged with schools in rural and urban communities with a high level of cultural diversity both within and between school catchment communities.

Each school has developed a local action plan based on their distinct priorities and how they can utilise the assets at their disposal to develop a bespoke approach to progressively involving parents in school life. Further, to develop their approach to family learning and to begin to engage some parents in their own informal learning. The project has enabled school staff to better understand the dynamics of school-home expectations and the pressures on some families. The project has further enabled school based staff to develop initiatives providing practical support for parents. Importantly, the project has also

provided opportunities for parents to increase their understanding of the expectations of schools.

The project has offered a forum for schools to identify and work through challenges and areas of similarity, beginning to clarify what 'good' and 'effective' family and community engagement means to them. The project has identified specific priorities for action in each individual school and the assets available to support subsequent responses.

The project has enabled school staff to come together regularly, to develop and extend their reflexive practice, to continually work on and refine their growing understandings and appreciation of what works in family engagement. One of the themes in discussions was that of ensuring the knowledge and understanding which was accruing in the project would be shared and as far as possible mainstreamed within each school. Through the workshop process, partners have become increasingly comfortable, sharing their successes and equally, what they regard as their failures as experiences to be learned from.

The project team consider that this work to date has been the start of an ongoing process of action research. After this initial funded phase of the project just one school has indicated that they wish to withdraw. Four of the remaining schools remain committed to the project and pursuing further ideas and models of practice that have begun to emerge through the first phase of the project. The schools remaining are very keen on continuing with the project and the pursuit of greater understanding of the impact of their new approaches. The desire is to continue with the project to begin to generate longitudinal data on the impact of these novel, and increasingly reflexive approaches to meaningful family engagement.

The following section contains an exploration of the findings and outcomes of the project. For consistency, these findings have been organised according to the initial project aims.

Findings

The findings from this study are based on analysis of accounts of practice from school leaders and staff, from the project lead's accounts of workshops carried out, and from observations of family engagement in practice. These findings have been critically discussed in project workshops. These findings consist of statements made by educators in either the project lead's accounts or the individual project reports or reflective accounts from schools. Where a quote is given its source is acknowledged.

To aid consistency and clarity, the project findings are grouped under the project aims, which were to:

- work with family support staff and leaders to develop and implement practical family engagement initiatives that directly enhance and extend parents and carers involvement in their children's education;
- support local staff to set up project monitoring and evaluation systems to assess the impact of their work;
- contribute to a more robust Welsh focused knowledge base about the range of activities that support family engagement;
- focus on supporting the most socially disadvantaged/ excluded families within the chosen communities.

Aim 1: work with family support staff and leaders to develop and implement practical family engagement initiatives that directly enhance and extend parents and carers involvement in their children's education.

It is clear that each individual school context has made for challenging situations, one of the initial challenges included the capacity of the project to engage parents and carers and to enhance their involvement in the education of their children. The community context of each school was unique, this immediately necessitated an individualised approach to the thinking and planning of each local project. Each school initially identified that they had previously, or wished to with the funding from this project, 'buy in' family learning activities. This was one of the initial findings of the project, that there are a range of off the shelf family engagement activities available to schools and that, in the experience of this project, these were largely unsuccessful in engaging and meaningfully working with families in schools, particularly families who might be regarded as being hard to reach.

One school noted a range of activities which had been bought in previously with a comment from the head below:

- Maths numicon
- Read Write Inc.
- Letter formation
- Digital App
- Basic First Aid for parents

'The uptake for every session was extremely poor and the project failed'
(School leader).

The considerable range of activities now available for schools to buy-in may appear attractive, in the experience of this project, take-up of these approaches were initially regarded as almost a default option by schools. The increasingly reflexive approach of this project enabled schools to explore the effectiveness of such initiatives and why they are largely regarded as being attractive but often appear to have limited impact. Rather, initial experience from this project suggests that bespoke, local approaches (developed and facilitated by school staff and leaders) have been significantly more effective in engaging children and families in school based activities in comparison to bought in, off the shelf initiatives.

The project workshops provided the opportunity for the increasing development of an analytical reflexive approach, to help people to face up to difficult issues and not to avoid them. All the schools learned through the project that locally designed approaches are needed to effectively further family engagement. The project found that even though the wider community and private sector may be able to offer family engagement activities which in some cases are funded externally so carry no cost to the school, these are not necessarily effective in achieving desired outcomes. One leader noted in relation to family engagement activities provided by an outside organisation:

'If it's free, it's in, if it doesn't work, what have we lost'?

This realisation that local approaches are most effective in engaging families from disadvantaged communities was a clear finding from the project. This proved a key learning from the project and raised many questions for leaders and staff. However, the sentiments of many conversations were summarised by one school leader who responded to the challenges facing schools in order to increase their capacity to deliver in a more participatory way with the comment 'the job is wider than the training'. This realisation throws up challenges for the system in addressing the breadth of the challenges in responding to this new knowledge and understanding of the demands on the profession.

In relation to how schools publicise family engagement activities, the team became increasingly aware of how to communicate effectively with parents. Increasing knowledge of how to communicate these activities was important, as poor approaches appear of limited value:

'We publicised the (family engagement) activity using Facebook and twitter and nobody turned up'! (School leader)

One school however, noted an eight fold increase in parental involvement at information sharing events during the life of the project. In that measure alone it is clear something significant happened to achieve this result. To achieve this outcome the school adopted an approach of drawing on local parents to act as catalysts for communication within the community, using key individuals as conduits for the flow of information. Crucially, considerable thought was necessary to identify parents with an appropriate profile in the

community. The notion of trust and respect emerged as themes necessary for effective family engagement. Those charged with delivering family engagement approaches work best when they are not only known to the community but importantly, known and trusted. As a result of this approach, the school could identify 'the impact of the changes (in communication strategy) has shown higher numbers of parents attending events aimed directly at their children's education. And has also shown a rise in the number of children wanting to attend the school' (School leader).

The schools increasingly became aware that in order to make real transformational change that different patterns of thinking are needed on the part of school leaders and staff. The project enabled those involved to develop greater empathy for families and children, this is illustrated in one comment from a head:

'We're used to putting school first, not the parents. When we've put activities on we haven't thought which day would suit the families best. It's a learning curve'.
(School leader)

As noted above, in relation to the development of practical activities, schools often buy in family learning from outside parties. Through this project, the schools largely began to realise that these activities were not effective in achieving their objectives. On one hand, this bought in provision may be regarded as family engagement work but the success of these initiatives came under quite some scrutiny within the project workshops.

In response to a growing understanding that buying in third party organisations wasn't necessarily an effective means of family engagement, the schools progressively developed a wide range of activities that offered families novel means through which they could become increasingly involved in schools. A list of these practical, in house activities include:

- Well-being Wednesdays
- Well-being day
- Geocaching Project
- Home visits
- Table Tennis
- Story Sack
- Positive Play activities
- Gift bags
- Parents coffee mornings after assembly
- Parent Point Forum
- Core Parents Council

These activities enabled school staff and leaders to understand that it is simply not enough to offer new activities, but rather, it is when and, most importantly, how these activities are offered which is crucial. For example, rather than organising a parental engagement activity starting mid-morning and being critical of families for poor attendance, rather consider what might encourage parents to stay in school, hence one school organised parents coffee

mornings immediately after morning assembly which resulted in greater take up from parents.

All schools engaged very well with the project although some found it more straightforward than others to adapt their strategies to maximise the effectiveness of new understandings. For example, in relation to home visits it was acknowledged that for some schools, reaching out to families in their homes was more of a challenge than for others. One leader noted that:

‘We really wanted to go out to families with a goody bag after half term, the nursery teacher and a teaching assistant will be going, this will provide us with lots of information but releasing staff is a big worry, the potential for what could happen’.

In another school it was noted that the family engagement lead had used outreach work in the home of one family, supporting the child’s mum and getting the child ready to attend school. The head noted:

‘He’s a different child now, because of these things, he’s a different child now, he was a completely closed book’

This family had become increasingly involved in school: as a result of the outreach work, the family engagement worker noted:

‘We spent an hour together and I made them two cups of tea, the child and the mother, now she calls school and asks for me in person’.

In summary, the project has provided the opportunity for leaders and school staff to reflect, to analyse, and to compare current practices in successful family engagement work. This space has enabled family engagement staff and leaders to explore, develop and implement practical family engagement initiatives that directly enhance and extend parents and carers involvement in their children’s education. The project found that the most successful family engagement activities were developed in schools, when staff and leaders work together (ideally with the community) to understand how schools can respond to the wants, needs, and expectations of the local community (An example of the culmination of this approach is described within Appendix 2).

Aim 2 support local staff to set up project monitoring and evaluation systems to assess the impact of their work

Leaders were interested in the potential of the project to bring together research and evidence informed practice within their own contexts. There was an understanding within the project that thoughtful application of theory is crucial. Contemporary research papers were regularly shared between the project lead and the schools. Participants felt that one of the real benefits of this project was in the exchange of information and visits to each other's, and one school external to the network, made possible by the project. It could be clearly observed that school staff particularly found these opportunities for school visits and tours of schools particularly fruitful. There was a great deal of sharing resources between schools from each of the school visits.

It was understood that social changes have a bearing on what happens in school and that what works in one school and community may not necessarily work in another, but that schools should continue with reflexive practice in the pursuit of meaningful family engagement, being involved in the action learning cycle. For example, the schools in eligible areas had worked with Communities First (the Welsh Government's flagship regeneration strategy) and in some areas had been carrying out excellent work but it was noted that Welsh Government funding and subsequent work was coming to an end. One leader noted:

'Communities First have been absolutely amazing, we have been able to take part in so many different visits for free. It's such a different operation compared to school'.

This one school's experience of engaging with Communities First was at odds with some of the other schools experiences and provides further evidence that each school and community is different and needs unique strategies for family engagement.

Monitoring and evaluation of the project was important, our understanding of the means of gathering the type of data and how to effectively analyse it to identify measurable impacts of the work developed throughout the project (see briefing notes shared with schools in Appendix 3 and 4). Initially, the project considered developing clear goals, the group initially began by thinking about 'how to get more parents involved in school, how to get them more engaged', one of the project workshops considered what to measure and how to measure it. There was a query about the importance of what are regarded as soft outcomes and a realisation that these may be what the project wanted to measure (workshop notes). Indeed, these soft outcomes may be difficult to measure but their development is crucially important in some families in order to increase their confidence and subsequent involvement in school. An example of soft outcomes of family engagement may include:

- Improving self-confidence or self-esteem
- Improved individual appearance/presentation
- Improved language, numeracy or Literacy accommodation skills
- Improved ability to get on with people/teamwork
- Ability to write job application letter or prepare CV

Individual schools used different means of gathering data in relation to family engagement, from monitoring attendance at events held at school to the use of new technology such as Scoop, Speakr, and See-Saw.

One school leader reported a number of measurable outcomes in relation to attendance of children and families, that, as a result of the project:

Attendance has risen 1.2% in the last year.

Voluntary attendance (responding to appointment letter without reminder) at Parent meetings has risen from 55% to 70%.

Last information sharing meeting before the project was attended by 6 parents. An information sharing meeting at the end of November was attended by 50 parents.

This significant increase in parental attendance at an information sharing event goes some way to demonstrate that parents are more confident about attending school. Table 1 contains an excerpt from a project evaluation report.

Table 1. A school notes the impact of the project in it school development plan:

1 Targets	Outcomes / Success Criteria
<p>Improve the quality of transition from home to school and to 'close the gap' by focusing on supporting the most socially disadvantaged/excluded families</p>	<p>Majority of parents and pupils from most socially disadvantaged/excluded are engaged. Baseline/incerts data analysed - majority of pupils' speech, language, communication skills improved Improved attendance to 95%</p>
<p>Progress Review/Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome gift bag is given to every pupil in the nursery setting and parent asked to complete a 'First Steps' booklet giving information about their child • School provide practical non-threatening sessions such as craft, cooking, cultural sessions. These activities succeeded in engaging parents who previously rarely became involved with school activities. • School offered parent and pupil activities such as: Christmas Cards, Valentine Day's Cards, Easter Cards, Cooking, Cultural sessions eg Korean/Chinese, Jewellery making • EAL lessons for our Chinese parents <p>Success Criteria</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater uptake from parents from socially disadvantaged/excluded • Improved data, school moved from the 4th quartile to the 2nd quartile in both FP and KS2 • Attendance improved from 91% to 92% however this remain a challenge as the school remain in the 4th quartile 	

As can be seen from Table 1, this initial, broad sweep attendance data for example showed an increase in attendance of 1% across the school cohort. When this data was discussed in one of the project workshops it was noted in the narrative of the report that 'the attendance of specific group of pupils showed improvement'. When encouraged to delve more deeply into this data, the school leader was able to track the attendance of the children of members of the families who were by now regularly involved in the family engagement project.

The school was able to track the attendance of the children of families who had taken part in a weekly family engagement project which had continued for a year. This bespoke, locally developed project grew out of an evaluation of the realization that previous, bought in family learning provision had not worked. Of the children from 9 families involved in this locally developed, weekly project, five of the children had increased attendance, averaging a considerable 5.5% increase over the duration of the whole family engagement project. Of the 4 children whose attendance decreased during the project, the average decrease was 2%. This suggests on one level that the benefits of this form of family engagement in this school outweigh any of the costs.

One of the areas which could be developed further is in growing the confidence of staff to actively reflect on their experiences of their work and to commit these reflections to paper. The project encouraged school leaders and staff to maintain reflective accounts of their learning throughout the project. This can be identified as a weakness and was not consistently adopted by all schools. This relied on already very busy people regarding writing possibly as an extra task in a busy working day. This is an important opportunity for further exploration.

One school leader identified in the school that communication between parents and school was a problem and was able to clearly identify a number of impacts of the project resulting from a new communication strategy:

'The reputation of the school within the community has risen – shown by higher numbers of children wanting spaces in the school. Parents are engaging with teachers in conversations about their children's education more frequently. Children are attending more regularly as a result of better communication with parents explaining the consequences of lower attendance'. (School leader)

Initially, and understandably, staff have been more comfortable in descriptive and more quantitative approaches to assessing the impact of their work. This project has provided the space for staff and leaders to explore how they can assess the impact of their new softer approaches to family engagement work, this work is very much ongoing.

In summary, the project has supported local staff to set up project monitoring and evaluation systems to assess the impact of their work. Staff have been encouraged to reflect deeply about what they are aiming to achieve in their work. To explore how enhanced family engagement can be assessed. School staff have been encouraged to engage in

reflective writing, encouraged to keep a reflective diary. This has proven something of a challenge for most of the staff. The project has considered a number of frameworks (See Appendices 3 and 4) for recording and evaluating family engagement activities including models of reflective writing including Gibbs' six stage reflective cycle. The project also explored management models of evaluation including Kirkpatrick's four stage hierarchical model of evaluation. The project considered further the importance of understanding the wider implications of changes in strategy and the implications for organisational development. The project explored McKinsey 7S framework (see Appendix 5) to encourage leaders to understand and gain confidence in exploring the potential implications of, for example, altering family engagement strategies.

Aim 3 contribute to a more robust Welsh focused knowledge base about the range of activities that support family engagement

It is vital that schools are clear about what they feel is needed from their family engagement activities. In one school the focus of the project was clear and was illustrated in an evaluation report:

‘The aim of our work was to get a better attendance at events directly influencing their children’s education such as meet the teacher events or information sharing events such as reading schemes etc. The aim was to give the parents a voice in the school so that any concerns were reduced and opinions could be fed back. We approached parents who were well connected within the community to create a core Parent’s Council’.

This illustrates the potential of opening up a dialogue between schools and families in helping to achieve desired outcomes in family engagement.

Welsh Government noted two strands to family engagement, engagement with the school in general, and secondly, engagement with their child’s learning (Welsh Government, 2015, pg 6). One of the key findings of the project, as highlighted in the quote above, is that these threads appear to be progressive among some communities. Schools can enhance the learning of some children by firstly encouraging and supporting families to engage further and build trust with school in general, before specific targeted learning activities might be possible. The school in this regard functions as a lever, as noted by Welsh Government, acting as a powerful lever to enhance children’s learning (Welsh Government, 2015, pg 5). As families become more actively engaged in schools they are more likely to identify with the school and see what schools are doing for their children. This new knowledge on the part of parents will function as further leverage to engagement, not merely with school but with their child’s learning as suggested by Welsh Government.

One of the findings emerging from the project was the need to understand and work with school communities and wider networks. Unanimously, every school agreed that where family engagement was working well, there was someone functioning as a catalyst, a fulcrum helping the school to open up to the community and helping the community find new ways of accessing what the school can offer. Frequently, this person was a local person, they were well known, respected and trusted within the community. In one school the head noted:

This project developed further across the school as teachers and non-teaching staff took an interest in the developments of Well Being Wednesday. Teachers were able to build on the relationships with parents and have a direct impact in class. For example, parents felt more confident to approach the teacher to discuss progress and any matters of concern. The parent’s evening at the end of the year achieved the highest turn out since opening.

There is evidence that the learning from the project has begun to cascade, this head was also able to confirm that:

Other schools in the authority have been to see Well Being Wednesday in action and to discuss its impact. Many are planning to introduce a similar idea and have kept in touch with the school to support the development.

In relation to developing trusting relationships with families, one leader noted that:

‘Schools need to understand the children’s stories and biographies, one girl was worried about her mum’s health, the child was anxious about mum’s diabetes, others are young carers, it’s important we know about these issues and respond appropriately’ (school leader).

In one school, a participatory and peer education approach was adopted, drawing on the social capital of key parents, a school leader noted:

‘The impact of the changes has shown higher numbers of parents attending events aimed directly at their children’s education. And has also shown a rise in the number of children wanting to attend the school.’ (School leader)

Experience from this project shows that school staff need to be able to reflect and to be observant and spot problems and be prepared to intervene. In one school this system works effectively, making excellent use of the Speakr app. This system gathers information from children themselves. In one school this has enabled the staff to respond really quickly to issues raised by a child over a significant incident which had happened overnight.

One school indicated as part of its evaluation of the project:

‘The school is placed in free school meal (FSM) benchmark group five with 57% of pupils currently eligible for free school meals. 40% of pupils were identified as having additional learning needs, including 2.4% statemented pupils, 20% on school action plus and another 18% on school action’.

This school was able to drill down, drawing on data to observe that, as a result of the project:

100% of parents (sample of 38 parents) felt welcome and that the process (of family engagement) was of benefit to them and their child’s development in school. Of the 28 children targeted, 21 showed an improvement in their attendance over the period of the summer term, of that 21, 16 pupils achieved the national average for attendance for the first time in their school career.

School leaders investing wisely, for example using the Pupil Development Grant to fund and use technology based apps such as Speakr demonstrates sound strategic leadership. Investing in such systems and ensuring the information generated is used wisely is worthy of note. This demonstrates excellent strategic leadership.

One school noted when asked ‘how are you engaging with your communities?’ That a range of approaches were used to develop a broad strategy of communication with parents, using different formats and methods. This broad based approach was evident across all schools, that

a range of methods of communication is regarded as being more effective in establishing communication with families and communities, examples include:

Formation of a Parents' Council

Introduction of Class Dojo across the school

Follow up letters to parent meetings to parents who have not responded or didn't show attend initially.

New web site with more friendly interface and class pages

In one school a group of parents previously not engaging with school at all have become increasingly involved to such an extent that they have set up a social media presence for the school. This is an example of the importance of involving a range of families in a variety of formats. This degree of parent power may not be appropriate in all communities but is an effective approach in the community where it is working very well with the potential to develop further. This activity could be a hook with which to engage the families in a programme of learning, based in the school which responds to their wants and needs and not those previously assumed by the school. This increased involvement of families is a very powerful means of overcoming one of the barriers to engagement identified by Welsh Government in 2015 (Welsh Government, 2015: pg 8).

Taking the recommendations of the recent Welsh Government toolkit on family engagement as a benchmark, it can be seen that this project has enabled the extension of our understanding in relation to family engagement in Wales. The project schools have applied much of the learning from the toolkit, in addition, the project has identified the importance of the need for schools to better understand the lived experiences of children and families.

From a standpoint of anti-oppressive practice, schools should develop the capacity to really ask themselves a series of questions, from the perspective of the children with whom they work:

- What do I need?
- What do I need you to think about?
- What do I need you to do?

When tasked with answering these questions in one of the project workshops, leaders and school staff were somewhat taken aback, noting that they are not used to working in that way.

However, one of the means of understanding the lived experiences of children and families is by actively listening. One leader noted that:

'With our approach we have just listened to their (families) ideas, when they've come to me I've usually just said yes. They are usually really nice ideas. The focus I suppose has been on giving experiences to the children which would be

beyond their normal sphere of er, of er, experience. Just going places and doing things’.

One school leader, when asked to consider the outcomes of the action research project to date, commented that:

‘The biggest influence of the project has been, not upon the parents/carers, but upon school staff who have learned that future engagement activities need to be bespoke, child-centred and non-threatening’ (school leader).

This comment summarises much of the learning from the project, that the most important approach to family engagement is based around anti-oppressive practice. That to meaningfully engage families, schools and staff should appreciate that individual, local approaches are necessary, and that schools need to develop child centred approaches.

All the literature underpinning family engagement acknowledges the need to respond effectively to families who might be regarded as being disadvantaged. This is the theme of the final aim of the project.

Aim 4 focus on supporting the most socially disadvantaged/ excluded families within the chosen communities.

Due to fiscal austerity policies and a resultant reduction in support services within communities, school leaders and staff are in a critical position in communities to identify and potentially respond to issues associated with social disadvantage. The project has enabled schools to better understand and offer families more attractive opportunities to engage and involve parents who are most socially disadvantaged.

Through the project, schools became increasingly aware of the importance of adopting an approach which is non-judgemental, adopting many of the principles of informal and. Progressively, nonformal learning, for example understanding the need to alter their offer to better respond to the felt needs and wants of parents and families. This approach brings with it significant challenges for schools. However, the results from the project provide evidence that this approach does work, and its results are demonstrable in the relatively short term. Work initially has involved informal learning, defined as having 'no set objective in terms of learning outcomes and is never intentional from the learner's standpoint. Often it is referred to as learning by experience or just as experience' (OECD, no date). The tentative findings from this project suggest that when working with families who are most disadvantaged that this informal approach is initially more effective than a more traditional approach of non-formal learning, which can be associated with being rather organised and which can have learning objectives (OECD, no date). Our findings suggest that minimal formality and structure are initially more attractive when offering engagement activities.

One example of this increased understanding arose as a result of an informal approach used by the school when it became apparent that some children did not own nightwear. This meant that the school needed to understand what this meant and alter its approach to its fundraising 'pyjama day' to take this new knowledge into account to avoid alienating parents or children who may have opted to miss school that day. This is an example of school staff being open minded and reflexive, making alterations to the way things usually happen.

One school was able to identify improvement in attendance of children whose parents are regularly at the school's family engagement project. More than merely attending (and passively consuming whatever is on offer), the families are progressively becoming actively involved in the development of the group and the school itself. Arguably, this increased attendance is linked to greater parental involvement in school. Of the children from 9 families involved in this locally developed, weekly project, five of the children have increased attendance, averaging a 5.5% increase over the duration of the whole family engagement project.

Parents have become increasingly involved in their school which has set up a forum, supported by school staff where they are developing their confidence and learning new skills and understanding through this involvement. This demonstrates the benefits of an informal education approach initially, progressing to a more non-formal approach as confidence and engagement of families increases.

This forum initiative has enabled a group of parents who were previously uninvolved with the school to become increasingly involved, wanting to volunteer their time, to take part in school based activities on a weekly basis and to support the school with fundraising activities. This has culminated in the group of parents developing a profile on social media championing the work of the school. Looking at this work from different perspectives offers opportunities for learning for school staff and leaders. There are potential risks with this approach; questions about how the name of the school may be used on social media, which perhaps reflects an approach to reputation and risk management. However, when discussed in the project workshop the whole project group explored the strengths of this approach, the potential for learning conversations stemming from the desire and motivation on the part of the families involved to become champions of the school within the community. The network group explored the potential costs and benefits of this approach. It was suggested that rather than focusing on the potential risks with this initiative rather an approach of working with the current strengths and passions of families may prove a fruitful approach to family engagement. This approach of starting where people are is one of the fundamental principles of informal education (Deer Richardson and Wolfe, 2001).

One school noted that using new technology could be an effective means of reaching families who are particularly disadvantaged, and that:

‘Introduction of a new texting system will allow more frequent messaging to parents and allow us to focus on specific families’.

Principles of participation and empowerment have been identified as being important across schools and throughout the life of the project to date, the project has found that:

‘We have learned that events where children’s participation is integral are much more likely to ensure greater levels of participation by parents/carers. Both projects are being planned for Spring Term 2018’. (School leader)

The fact that four of the five schools originally involved in the project remain committed to working together is testament to the effectiveness of this actions research approach. The opportunities made available to the schools have been many and varied. One leader noted that ‘the more we look out, the more enriched we become’. This is one of the findings of the project, that however much pressure there may be on leaders and school staff to be preoccupied with the classroom, if real family engagement is a desired outcome, then considerable thought and effort are needed to better understand communities and to work with them. One school has been able to identify the next cycle of its actions in relation to the project, these include:

The school is fortunate that is that it has a large room that will now be developed solely for the parents. Work with local agencies has assured that a number of projects and schemes will be available to the parents, these include, baby massage, potty training, opportunities to gain accreditation, core skills and life skills. A number of social events have also been planned to develop wider networks for the parents to access.

The project has enabled schools to question their taken for granted assumptions when working with families who are disadvantaged or at risk of social exclusion. Arguably, it is the learning and subsequent action that has stemmed from this process of reflection that has really increased the ability of schools to reach out to families who have been more disadvantaged and to progressively involve them in the lives of the school. There are many examples of the impact of this outreach approach to parents. This new approach comes with potential risks but the potential rewards are significant. It is clear from this project that where schools are supported appropriately and encouraged to be imaginative in their work that families previously unresponsive to school can become engaged. The next phase of the project will include an examination of how this involvement can be developed further into action which complements the education of children in school.

Conclusions and recommendations

The project has been successful in enabling schools to develop strategies and approaches to improve their family engagement work. The results of the project show that by creating capacity to explore, to understand, refine and extend existing family engagement work can bring benefits for schools, families and most importantly, children themselves.

At the outset of the project objectives were identified, working together, the network has enabled schools to develop strategies to address and achieve these objectives, to:

- Identify local challenges, areas of commonality and to explore what good and effective family and community engagement looks like in their local context;
- Identify priorities for action;
- Identify in-house resources and community based assets available to support their direct work with children, families and communities;
- Continually map current action against identified challenges;
- Develop a collective, reflexive approach to individual problem solving that has enabled the project partners to design flexible strategies for family engagement;
- Explore issues of service sustainability;
- Facilitating partners to share their successes and equally their failures as learning experiences;
- Create space for schools to reflect on the relationship between family and community engagement in education.

Family and community engagement may be regarded as a commodity, something with a social value to it. Third party providers offering to come in to schools and deliver family engagement activities have identified an economic opportunity. The evidence from this project suggests that bought in engagement activities offering predetermined activities and experiences are, largely, ineffective. Our findings tend to suggest that in-house, bespoke provision developed locally, led by someone who has a positive profile and is respected by members of the community and organised in line with the principles of informal and non-formal learning should be adopted to effectively engage with families, particularly those who may be regarded as being disadvantaged.

The opportunities for school to school support have proven invaluable. The visits to each school, seeing current practice, learning from observation has proven an effective means of knowledge transfer. Each school visit strengthened the network and provided opportunities for learning.

The project explored the importance of being better able to understand and place value on individual progress and not solely attainment of children. Our understanding of this issue has improved, for example by being able to drill down to individual attendance data.

The project welcomes an increasing focus on well-being in schools, within the Estyn inspection framework and the forthcoming new curriculum. The learning from this project has enabled all those involved to increase their understanding of the well-being of children and school staff in creating vibrant learning communities.

Schools are proud to demonstrate what they are doing in relation to family engagement. The project has enabled them to gain confidence in what they are doing, adopting a strengths based approach and not a deficit model. This is an important aspect of organisational development.

The project has demonstrated increased attendance of both children and families where figures are available. The new outward looking, outreaching approach adopted by schools appears to have made them more welcoming to families, significant improvements in attendance at parental engagement events and of children at school has been recorded.

Increased understanding on the part of leaders and engagement workers of seeing the issues surrounding communities and families from a different perspective, more from their perspectives than that of the school. For example understanding that a child may be worried about the health of a parent, or a crisis at home and really beginning to understand the impact that distress has on the capability of the child to learn. For example in relation to learning theory, how can one teach children when their minds are elsewhere?

Relationships between school staff and families has changed. This has been the content of much discussion and debate at the workshops. Exploring what are the ethical issues involved, what do school staff and leaders need to understand in relation to managing these new boundaries.

Better knowledge, improving the knowledge and reflective capabilities of staff, one head noted 'where does the learning and development of school staff happen with advisors becoming fewer and farther between'. One family engagement worker noted that 'we tried parent sessions during the day and it didn't work, we've added a coffee morning after assembly now and it does keep the parents involved more, the project has made me understand how parents think, what would make them come'.

The local development and delivery of family engagement work has helped overcome barriers to engagement. By schools offering progression for families through informal learning to non-formal learning, initial results in engaging previously hard to reach families has been very positive. School staff represent the school and education and as relationships have been identified as being so important in fostering engagement, the development and maintenance of such relationships need considerable effort. One of our conclusions is that internal development and delivery of progressive family engagement is an effective model.

The network has enabled school leaders and staff to feeling emboldened to try new things. The creative and reflective space offered by the project and the supportive nature of those involved has enabled individuals to test out new ideas, to check their thinking and to begin to collaborate.

The content of family engagement activities needs attention, based on locally identified priorities – how can this family engagement work broadly meet the needs of children and families who are disadvantaged within an increasingly challenging public finance context. It is important for educators to be able to adapt thinking and challenge the taken for granted. For example, moving away from literacy and numeracy classes for adults to a more

welcoming approach, for example offering tai chi, or candle making. In this way the offer is non-threatening and sets the tone for a new relationship between families and school.

Recommendations for further research

Well-being of staff, in a decade old study it was found that teaching is a stressful profession, the stressors arising from three main factors, those intrinsic to teaching, cognitive factors affecting the individual vulnerability of staff and systemic factors that operate at an institutional and political level (Teacher Support Cymru, 2007).

To develop better understanding of strategies enabling groups to progress from family involvement to family engagement, from informal learning to formal learning.

To develop the capacity to enable and ensure all staff improve higher order empathy skills particularly towards the most socially disadvantaged/excluded families.

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Appendix 1: What does the evidence suggest is good practice in family engagement?

Welcome meetings

Welcome leaflets

Family workshops about reading

Family workshops about numeracy

Family workshops to develop parent/ carer skills

Family learning programmes

Stay and play days

Story sacks and activity bags

Storybooks created by families

Family prompts

Engagement in learning through social media

Virtual learning environments

Home visits to new families

School readiness workshop or leaflet

Welsh Government, (2015).

Appendix 2: Researcher observation of Well-being Wednesday

I observed the session, present were 22 adults made up of five groups and 2 individual parents. Those present were a mixture of young parents, mature parents and grandparents. Two relatives were male, one individually with his child, the other as a couple.

The focus of this session was to engage parents of Key Stage 2. The room layout welcomed people into the space, it was big enough to give people the chance to be anonymous, to take up a space in the corner of the room, out of the limelight, around the corner from the main activity. The space available at the modern school and the accessibility of the room make it easy for parents and carers to get into the session, both physically and socially.

One of the activities the groups are involved in include playing with clay. When asked about the project one parent notes 'it's fun, a load of people come'. The converse being where family engagement doesn't work 'maybe they (the parents) don't like the people who are running groups'.

From observation it is clear that there are a mixture of levels of interaction between parents and children. Similarly, the older group of children helping run the session are keen to help organise it, asking the family engagement worker 'have you got a job for me'?

One of the thoughts arising is that there is not merely involvement, engagement or disengagement, rather there appear to be, even within the group taking part here levels of involvement and engagement.

It is clear this also offers parents an opportunity to engage with each other as members of the community. Another question arises – where else are they able to do this on a regular basis?

It is noted by the family engagement worker that the ability to take something 'away' with them is important for parents. That there is the opportunity within the session to create something meaningful for them and their family.

It is clear that the increased involvement with the school gives the parents a chance to reconnoitre the school, during the school day, to check out the school and assess how/ what it is doing for their child. This may influence how much parents/ carers feel they should contribute to their child's learning after school.

Again, observation reinforces the importance of good and trusting relationships between parents and carers and a key person within school.

During a brief discussion with a parent after the session it is clear that the widespread success of the project is due to the relationship between the worker and community members. The main draw of the well-being Wednesday activities is that they are fun, the parent is clear that 'the children look forward to it, I do it for the children'.

Outcomes from well-being Wednesdays have included parents being involved in first aid training, food hygiene and play training. Analysis reinforces the importance of the relationship; that the family engagement work has to be accessible, it has to be attractive and offer something appealing to children and parents/ carers. Also, that there is something practical produced in the session.

DW 5th July 2017

Appendix 3: Deepening Reflection

Reflection on learning for the project means moving beyond the descriptive, and subjecting your experience to greater scrutiny.

In *Learning by Doing*, Gibbs (1988) outlines the stages for a 'Structured Debriefing', which are based on Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle and which encourage deeper reflection:

1. Description: What is the stimulant for reflection? (incident, event, theoretical idea) What are you going to reflect on? Feelings: What were your reactions and feelings?
2. Evaluation: What was good and bad about the experience? Make value judgements.
3. Analysis: What sense can you make of the situation? Bring in ideas from outside the experience to help you. What was really going on?
4. Conclusions (general): What can be concluded, in a general sense, from these experiences and the analyses you have undertaken?
5. Conclusions (specific): What can be concluded about your own specific, unique, personal situation or ways of working?
6. Personal Action plans: What are you going to do differently in this type of situation next time? What steps are you going to take on the basis of what you have learnt?

Hatton and Smith (1995) identified four levels in the development of teacher reflection from teaching practice. In your reflective writing for the project we should be looking for evidence of reflecting at the higher levels, of critical reflection.

1. Descriptive writing: This is a description of events or literature reports. There is no discussion beyond description. The writing is considered not to show evidence of reflection
2. Descriptive reflective: There is basically description of events, but shows some evidence of deeper consideration in relatively descriptive language. There is no real evidence of the notion of alternative viewpoints in use.
3. Dialogic reflection: This writing suggests there is a 'stepping back' from the events and actions which leads to different level of discourse. There is a sense of 'mulling about', discourse with self and an exploration of the role of self in events and actions. There is consideration of the qualities of judgements and possible alternatives for explaining and hypothesising. The reflection is analytical or integrative, linking factors and perspectives.
4. Critical reflection: This form of reflection, in addition, shows evidence of an awareness that actions and events may be 'located within and explicable by multiple perspectives, but are located in and influenced by multiple and socio- political contexts'

1. Description: What is the stimulant for reflection? (incident, event, theoretical idea) What are you going to reflect on? Feelings: What were your reactions and feelings?

2. Evaluation: What was good and bad about the experience? Make value judgements.

3. Analysis: What sense can you make of the situation? Bring in ideas from outside the experience to help you. What was really going on?

4. Conclusions (general): What can be concluded, in a general sense, from these experiences and the analyses you have undertaken?

5. Conclusions (specific): What can be concluded about your own specific, unique, personal situation or ways of working?

6. Personal Action plans: What are you going to do differently in this type of situation next time? What steps are you going to take on the basis of what you have learnt?

Appendix 4: How to Apply Kirkpatrick's Hierarchy of Evaluation

Level 1

Start by identifying how you'll measure reaction. Consider addressing these questions:

- Did those taking part feel that the session was worth their time?
- Did they think that it was successful?
- What were the biggest strengths of the session or the programme, and the biggest weaknesses?
- How well did they like the venue and style?
- Did the session accommodate their personal learning styles?

Next, identify how you want to measure these reactions. To do this you may use satisfaction surveys; however you can also watch participant's body language during the programme, and get verbal feedback by asking directly about their experience.

Once you've gathered this information, look at it carefully. Then, think about what changes you could make, based on feedback and suggestions.

Level 2: Learning

To measure learning, start by identifying what you want to evaluate. (These things could be changes in knowledge, skills, or attitudes).

Once the project or programme is finished, assess to measure what participants have learned, or measure learning with interviews or a focus group.

Level 3: Behaviour

It can be challenging to measure behaviour effectively. This is a longer-term activity that should take place weeks or months after the initial involvement.

Consider these questions:

- Did those taking part put any of their learning to use?
- Are participants able to share their new knowledge, skills, or attitudes with others?
- To what extent are people aware that they've changed their behaviour?

One of the best ways to measure behaviour is to conduct observations and short interviews over time.

Also, keep in mind that behaviour will only change if conditions are favourable. For instance, effective learning could have taken place in your sessions. But, if the overall organisational culture isn't set up for any behaviour changes, the participants might not be able to apply what they've learned.

Alternatively, people might not receive support, recognition, or reward for their behaviour change from those close to them. So, over time, they disregard the skills or knowledge that they have learned, and go back to their old behaviours. As an educator you can mitigate the risk of this happening by promoting a stable and consistent relationship.

Level 4: Results

Of all the levels, measuring the final results of the project is likely to be the most time consuming. The biggest challenges are identifying which outcomes, benefits, or final results are most closely linked to the project, and coming up with an effective way to measure these outcomes over the long term.

Here are some outcomes to consider, depending on the objectives of your training:

- Increased project retention.
- Increased active participation.
- Higher self-confidence.
- Participants more satisfied.

Considerations

Although Kirkpatrick's Four-Level Evaluation Model is popular and widely used, there are a number of considerations that need to be taken into account when using the model.

The model assumes that each level's importance is greater than the last level, and that all levels are linked. For instance, it implies that Reaction is less important, ultimately, than Results, and that reactions must be positive for learning to take place. In practice, this may not be the case.

Kirkpatrick's model is great for trying to evaluate in a "scientific" way, however, so many variables can be changing in fast-changing contexts that analysis at level 4 can be limited in usefulness.

Key Points

The Kirkpatrick Four-Level Evaluation Model helps us measure the effectiveness of the project in an 'objective' way. The model was originally created by Donald Kirkpatrick in 1959, and has since gone through several updates and revisions.

The Four-Levels are as follows:

1. Reaction.
2. Learning.
3. Behaviour.
4. Results.

Adapted from:

Kirkpatrick's Four-Level Training Evaluation Model - Analyzing Training Effectiveness (no date). Available (online) at: www.mindtools.com/pages/article/kirkpatrick.htm

Kirkpatrick's Hierarchy of Evaluation

Worked example

Level of Evaluation	Youth Work Project
4. <i>Results</i> (Community Impact)	Community changes its opinions of young people, young people's opinion of the community changes, facilities expand and improve within the community
3. <i>Behaviour</i> (Transferable Skills)	Young people's behaviour improves, evidenced via holiday scheme incidents and during regular contact
2. <i>Learning</i>	Young people regularly demonstrate increased skills, knowledge and improved attitudes
1. <i>Reaction</i>	Young people are satisfied with the programme, they see results and keep turning up

Kirkpatrick's Hierarchy of Evaluation

Example:

Level of Evaluation	Project
4. <i>Results</i> (Community Impact)	
3. <i>Behaviour</i> (Transferable Skills)	
2. <i>Learning</i>	
1. <i>Reaction</i>	

Appendix 5 McKinsey 7S – A model to aid organisational development

A model for considering organisations and change. Use this to guide your analysis of the organisation and to provide structure on the changes you may feel are necessary to improve the quality of service.

Bear in mind the red aspects are seen as being hard elements of the organisation, the brown aspects are regarded as softer and more flexible, although perhaps

