

A Community of Practice: EAL Family Learning Club at Churchfields School, Swindon

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The notion of a Family Learning Club at Churchfields was born out of a need to provide partnership between school, parents, students and communities. It was the first step towards a grass-roots form of EAL Whole School Provision. It proved to be an effective strategy for rescuing identity and promoting cultural awareness and valuing other languages.

Family Learning generally is recognised as an activity for the promotion of integration between parents and students. The aim of this project, developed at a secondary school in Swindon, is more than the fostering of a partnership between students and parents. The prime objective of the EAL Family Learning Club is to provide a network of support and an opportunity for parents, students, teachers and the school to align themselves, to develop identities, to share, to learn and to teach and ultimately to create a true community of practice. This community of practice can foster multiculturalism, multimodality and a greater sense of citizenship. It can also create opportunities for communication where communication was failing, for involvement and participation where these were lacking.

As a non-native speaker myself, I had experienced the same cultural and linguistic shock experienced by migrant children and parents when arriving in the UK. I endeavoured to duplicate within the EAL Department what I'd seen in my academic environment in Brazil, and when I was made EAL Co-ordinator I introduced a vigorous system of linguistic assessment using the Trinity College London examination suite. Certain things started to be manifest:

- The more the EAL population was given voice, the more voice it wanted.
- EAL students became mouth-pieces and loud speakers for the voices of their parents or guardians.
- Teaching UK style ESOL / EAL whilst giving the EAL population an identity seemed to reach down into the roots of the EAL community and the department became increasingly involved in social issues.
- With the help of some funding from the sympathetic Local Authority a Family Learning Club was established and held evenings after school.

- Parents began using this situation to talk about some of the issues they encountered when living in the UK.

Our Community of Practice was born out of a clear need for multicultural communication and we started slowly to achieve this and saw that it also began to offer tangible links between school, the student, the parents and the community. After a while, parents were volunteering to help out as teaching assistants, sharing knowledge, asking for and giving help, contributing, communicating and participating and becoming passionate about fostering the identity of everyone involved in our Family Learning Club.

“Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.”
Etienne Wenger (1991)

Paulo Freire, one of the leading exponents of education for social change in the second half of the last century (1972) talked about ordinary working people wanting to learn skills relevant to their harsh and oppressive lives. Social change begins with individuals reflecting on their values, their concern for a more equitable society, and their willingness to support others in the community. Freire's pedagogy of literacy education involves not only reading the word, but also reading the world.

Unwittingly we had connected thoroughly and wholesomely with the principles so evident in the writings of these individuals. The project started to develop its own energy.

- Students wanted to achieve and learn
- Parents wanted to be involved
- Volunteers swelled the team offering support in-class and at social events.

We hope to take this initiative forward to develop it along simple lines for the benefit of everyone, and plan further events promoting positive experiential, inclusive, non-discriminatory EAL-based multicultural integration.

Copies of a complete report of the development of our existing situation are available from
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