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Book Reviews

Family Learning - engaging with parents, Policy and Practice in Education 25,
Jeannie Mackenzie
Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press (2010) pp.80 Pbk. £14.50
ISBN 978-1903765999

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This book is an invaluable resource for any professional interested in developing partnerships between parents and schools. Useful practical examples and case studies are held together by an incisive analysis of the positive impact of viewing parents as educators, examining language for inherent manifestations of power and constructing educative projects as a collaborative endeavour sustained by dialogue.

Jeannie Mackenzie takes apart assumptions involved in unthinking attempts by schools to engage parents and instead defines an approach to family learning which is distinctive. Family learning is not about engaging parents as helpers to support their children's schooling, but focuses on how schools can engage with children's learning in family and community settings. Mackenzie stresses the knowledge parents have of their children and their children's interests, motivations and skills; but explains clearly how this knowledge can be downgraded and devalued when efforts to engage parents are focused on the educative enterprises of the school – 'It is as though the educative enterprise of the school becomes so absorbing that everyone becomes a potential pupil' - with parents left 'fumbling about with unfamiliar curriculum materials'. Instead she gives examples of practice which work from parents/carers' own knowledge to build real engagement with learning at home and for the benefit of not just under-achieving children but a developing community of practice which includes the school.

Using current Scottish practice she examines the impact of policy on parental involvement and its failure to address key issues in supporting family learning. Measurable representation of parents on formal bodies such as School Councils has taken precedence over harder-to-measure involvement of parents and carers to support children's learning in – and from - their home settings and activities. She argues that this has the greatest effect on parents who themselves found schooling less than engaging – efforts to involve them in schooling on the school's terms will often flounder. They may retreat to the position of the outsider who sees themselves as inexpert in a school setting and opts out of involvement or simply goes through the motions of meeting with teachers, bending the rules to keep the peace or – if they have the confidence - writing off the school as of no value for their family. These forced responses feed into teacher mythologies – that parents are not interested, don't know how to help their children, or already have a role in the school – an approach which could be caricatured as 'school is ok, families and communities need to become ok'.

Mackenzie also warns the practitioner who believes they do understand the purposes and practice of family learning to remain vigilant about checking their assumptions. She gives examples of strategies for and measures of parental involvement which, even though led by family learning protagonists, inadvertently put the school and schooling, rather than the child's learning, at the centre. It is all too easy to default to assuming educative enterprises are led by the school rather than the result of genuine dialogue and collaboration in the community of practice represented by family and community interests. Regular visits to this book should keep those working with parents on their toes!