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Published paper

Wilson, K and Train, B (2004) *The Thanet Back to Basics project*. Basic Skills Bulletin, 21 (7). pp. 1-3.

Evaluation of the Thanet Basic Skills Partnership ‘*Back to Basics*’ Project

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The Thanet Basic Skills Partnership (TBSP) ‘*Back to Basics*’ project developed a strategy to “*improve the basic skills achievement of children and adults in Thanet by increasing the quality, coherence and sustainability of provision through an innovative, community based, multi-agency approach*”. Short courses such as Family Literacy, Personal Development, and Story Sacks have been delivered in community venues thanks to a successful working partnership including the project management team, Sure Start, Adult Education and Thanet Community College. The project has provided invaluable crèche facilities for participating parents, which are a much-heralded success-factor of the project due to limited childcare provision in the Thanet region.

The Centre for the Public Library and Information in Society (CePLIS), Department of Information Studies at the University of Sheffield, conducted a qualitative evaluation of the project in December 2003. The main objectives of the evaluation were to investigate the less tangible impacts of the project upon its participants with reference to two major themes of:

- Level of enjoyment and personal benefit
- Confidence levels and attitudinal change

Project management were particularly interested in the everyday consequences of such personal benefits and attitudinal change, including effects upon lifestyle and interpersonal relationships; family responsibility; attitudes towards continuing education and employment. The evaluation also considered the potential for project sustainability, and considers practical implications such as course delivery and design, and student and staff recruitment. Research methods included a series of focus groups with participating students from a variety of courses, and semi-structured interviews with key project personnel.

Lifestyle and relationships

Respondents commented on how increased confidence levels had encouraged them to communicate more openly with partners, family, friends and peers, and empowered them to confront issues and perhaps defend and articulate themselves more easily than before. Attending courses has given structure to the students’ daily routines, and has a motivating factor in encouraging students to be more organised and adopt a more positive attitude to parenting and domestic issues:

“It’s a communication thing as well... some of us have to deal with doctors, physios, social workers, and I think we’ve all learnt to communicate with them more rather than keeping silent or shouting at them. We’ve learnt to say what we want to say in a positive way”

Family responsibility

Parents are becoming much more aware of, and actively involved in, their children's development and education, and the return to learning and pride in their work is encouraging parents to share learning experiences with family and friends. Parents feel more able to encourage their children to achieve and provide a positive role model for them:

“My twins that go in to the crèche say ‘oh we’re coming here while Mummy does her work’... they don’t know what I’m doing but they’re pleased I’m doing something... it’s positive for them and my [older] boys... I tell them I’ve got my homework to do, so it’s really important that they do their homework and Mummy will do hers”

Continuing education and employment

Many of the students who participated in the evaluation were enthusiastic about continuing in education and considering future career options. The widened social circle has also inspired students to set personal goals, building upon a sense of personal achievement and improved lifestyle and employability, as the groups were keen to motivate each other. The return to learning has helped students to re-establish a sense of self-identity further to having and looking after their children, and to form a sense of belief in themselves and openness to opportunity:

“I do feel more confident. I used to be a quite confident and outgoing person, but since having the children... I haven’t worked for about seven years and I hadn’t realised how insular I had become”

Project sustainability

The instinctive response from most students concerning course delivery was to commend the inclusion of crèche facilities. Beyond any doubt, these students would not have been able to participate without this facility, and their enjoyment has been intensified by having the security of knowing that their children are receiving professional care and supervision. The use of familiar community venues has also helped to overcome barriers to learning:

“Without a crèche I couldn’t have done it. It’s nice and local; the college is too far away for me... it’s been brilliant really”

Project staff attribute the successes of the scheme in raising students’ confidence and self-esteem to the flexible, less didactic learning environment (whereby skills can be nurtured via an inclusive, interactive process) which they have encouraged and developed. Problems with course delivery included the following main issues concerning student recruitment and course content and delivery:

- Some staff expressed a concern over the ‘minimum’ number of students required to secure funding for particular courses. This was a particular cause for concern within courses such as Personal Development, where the highly creative and interpersonal dynamic can be hindered by intimidating larger

group sizes. Recommendations are made regarding a more flexible approach to target numbers under certain circumstances.

- It was felt that more detail is needed at the student recruitment stage in terms of course descriptors; course content, structure and assessment methods need to be clearly defined in order to recruit students with appropriate skills levels and needs. Recommendations are made concerning promotional literature and appropriate student recruitment methods.
- Following suggestions made by students themselves, recommendations are made as to the appropriateness and suitability of written assessment to certain courses and alternative methods of assessment and evidence of learning outcomes.

In conclusion, all staff were in agreement that the multi-agency approach had been very successful, particularly with reference to the combination of different skills and areas of expertise, and the relative ease with which agencies have been able to communicate and work together on a professional level. It was strongly felt by staff that, because of the success and strength of existing working relationships between the multiple agencies, there was much opportunity for sustainability between the partnerships beyond the existing funded period and further to successful future funding bids.

Full report (including TBSP and evaluation team contact details):

Wilson, K. and Train, B. (2004) Back to Basics: An evaluation report. The University of Sheffield, with Thanet Basic Skills Partnership and the Learning and Skills Council.

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