

The role of family literacy classes in demystifying school literacies and developing closer parent-school relations

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Abstract

This paper is based on a large study of family literacy provision in England, which was carried out between July 2013 and May 2015. It explored the impact of classes on parents' relations with the school and their children, and their ability to support their children's literacy development. The study involved 27 school-based programmes for pupils aged between 5 and 7, and their parents. It used mixed methods, which involved surveys of 118 parents and 20 family literacy tutors, telephone interviews with a sub-sample of 28 parents, analysis of teaching plans and observations of classes. Findings showed that parents wanted to learn the ways the school was teaching their child to read and write, and by demystifying school literacy pedagogies and processes, the programmes developed greater connectivity between home and the school, and parents felt more able to support their children's literacy development at home.

Keywords: family literacy, parents, motivations, pedagogy, home-school relations

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Introduction

An ever expanding body of international research continues to show that family literacy programmes are a highly effective way of improving children's literacy skills and levels of attainment, enriching family relations, developing levels of social and cultural capital and fostering closer home-school relations (see for example, BIS, 2014; Brooks, Gorman, Harman, Hutchison, & Wilkin, 1996; Brooks et al., 1997; Brooks, Pahl, Pollard, & Rees, 2008; Carpentieri, Fairfax-Cholmeley, Litster, & Vorhaus, 2011; Kim & Byinton, 2016; NALA, 2010; NIACE, 2013; See & Gorard, 2015; Swain, Welby, Brooks, Bosley, Frumkin, Fairfax-Cholmeley, Pérez, & Cara, 2009; Van Steensel, McElvany, Kurvers, & Herppich, 2011; Swain & Cara, 2017; Terlitsky & Wilkins, 2015)). This paper is based on a large study of family literacy provision in England: it explores parents' [1] motivations for joining programmes, discusses different models of pedagogy, and demonstrates family literacy's positive impact on a series of parental relationships, particularly with the school and their children.

The research was funded by the Nuffield Foundation and carried out by UCL Institute of Education, between July 2013 and May 2015 (Swain, Cara, Vorhaus, & Litster, 2015). The study investigated school-based family literacy programmes for children (aged between 5 and 7-years-old), and their parents. It used mixed methods, which involved questionnaires of parents and family literacy tutors, an analysis of teaching plans (or Schemes of Work), observations of family literacy classes and qualitative telephone interviews with a sub-sample of parents.

After outlining the origins and background of family literacy and some of the previous research in this field, the paper discusses theoretical influences used in the research and discusses two contrasting models of pedagogy. After providing details of the methodology, the main findings present data on the demographic profile of the parents attending family literacy programmes, their motivations for enrolling, the aims, structure and organisation of the provision, its main pedagogical features and underlying philosophy. The paper concludes by looking at the programme's impact on a series of parental relationships, particularly with the school and their own children, and also with other parents attending the courses. The paper highlights how the programmes help parents demystify school literacy pedagogies and processes, which, we argue, develops home-school connectivity, and makes parents feel they are able to provide more effective support to their child's literacy

development at home. It is these particular aspects that the authors regard as being the paper's main contribution to the field of family learning.

Background and previous research

The term 'family literacy' was first used by Denny Taylor (1983) while carrying out research in the US during the 1980s with six middle-class families. Initially it referred to the interrelated literacy practices of parents, children and others in their homes (Barton & Hamilton, 1998), but soon came also to be used to describe a research field and a range of educational programmes for parents, or other carers, and their children.

From the work of Bus, van IJzendoorn, and Pelligrini (1995) onwards, the vital part of parents in supporting and developing their children's literacy development has been demonstrated over the last two decades, even though, researchers such as Goodall and Montgomery (2013), Harris and Goodall (2007) and Timmons and Pelletier (2014) maintain that some parents remain unaware of the significance of the part they play. Previous research suggests that having a relatively poor level of general education has an effect, not only on adults' life chances, but also on those of their children (De Coulon & Cara, 2008; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; George, Hansen, & Schoon, 2007; Parsons & Bynner, 2007), therefore a major objective of family literacy provision has been to reach both generations as a means of helping to break this cycle of disadvantage (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Hannon, 1999).

Although family literacy provision in England was initially based on an understanding of the vital importance of the pre-school years in a child's development, and recognition of the diverse literacy practices found within families (Taylor, 1983, 1997), the majority of programmes now running occur in schools and generally involve young children aged four to seven, and their parents. Classes provide opportunities for parents and children to develop and change their literacy attitudes, skills, understandings and practices together, but there is also an emphasis on teaching parents about school literacies.

Carpentieri et al. (2011) examined a series of six meta-analyses of evidence on family literacy interventions (Erion, 2006; Manz, Hughes, Barnaba, Bracaliello, & Ginsburg-Block, 2010; Mol, Bus, De Jong, & Smeets, 2008; Nye & Schwartz, 2006; Sénéchal and Young, 2008; Van Steensel et al., 2011), and concluded that family literacy programmes have a stronger effect on children's literacy attainment than

most other educational interventions. Five of these six meta- analyses found effect sizes greater than 0.3, and in two, the effect size was greater than 0.5.

Earlier Nutbrown, Hannon, and Morgan (2005) found that children showed more progress in literacy when family literacy programmes taught parents explicit methods for teaching literacy. Although this study looked at the pre-school period, Melhuish et al. (2008) list other studies that have found similar relationships between parents attending family literacy programmes and their children's attainment in primary school (see for example, DeGarmo, Forgatch, & Martinez, 1999). The association between training, and long-term changes in child literacy has also confirmed by a number of international longitudinal studies (Abouchaar, 2003; Desforges & Kağıtçıbaşı, 1992; Heckman & Tremblay, 2006; Kağıtçıbaşı, Sunar, & Bekman, 2001; Kağıtçıbaşı, Sunar, Bekman, & Cemalcılar, 2005).

Theoretical influences and models of pedagogy

Social and cultural capital and closer family-school relations

Although family literacy initiatives improve literacy skills for both parents and children, St. Clair (2008) argues that it is also important to see beyond competencies and skills and to look at the social impact of family literacy on participants' lives, and to see how programmes can create and develop social (Bourdieu, 1986, 1997) and cultural capital (Lareau, 1987, 2011), which are metaphors for assets, or resources, that promote social mobility and allow people to gain greater status and power within society. Social capital can refer to the bonds created between parents and children, including the time and attention parents spend in interaction with their children during their learning activities (Parcel, Dufur, & Zito, 2010). It is also developed through changing attitudes towards literacy and school, gains in confidence, changing aspirations, and by modeling behaviours and practices in class and in the home literacy or learning environment (Burgess, Hecht, & Lonigan, 2002; Van Steensel, 2006; Weigel & Martin, 2005; Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2010; Wood, 2002;). Developing social capital can also refer to group membership and the creation of relationships with tutors, and the development of enabling parental networks within the school community (Beck & Purcell, 2010). Cultural capital can be defined as the skills and knowledge, values, styles and tastes individuals possess, and one way it can be developed is when parents gain a deeper understanding of how the education system works, and how children are taught in schools. We argue that the awareness of the school practices by parents, and the ability of parents to

'translate' the messages using their existing knowledge and to apply those in the home environment, are all forms of cultural capital, which is often needed to succeed in the educational system (Lareau, 1987, 2011).

The formation and development of social and cultural capital has been documented in research on family literacy. For example, Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) report that attending family literacy programmes leads to higher levels of parental self-confidence and self-efficacy, and enhanced child's self-concept as a reader and learner. Carrying out longitudinal research in Turkey, Kağıtçıbaşı and Sunar (2001) and Kağıtçıbaşı et al. (2005) also found increases in the motivation of both children and parents, while in their international review of family literacy research Carpentieri et al. (2011) found a greater empowerment of low-income, poorly educated and/or migrant mothers as a result of attending family literacy programmes.

It has been well established that closer collaboration between the parents and the school has a powerful influence on children's literacy development (Le Roux, 2016), and family literacy provision is part of this process. In the US, Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, and Weiss (2006) found that family involvement in school matters most for children whose mothers have less education. More specifically, the authors found that increases in family involvement in the school predicted increases in literacy achievement for low income families.

An influential model of family engagement in education, with clear implications for family literacy, is Joyce Epstein's ecological theory of overlapping spheres between home and school. Developed in the 1980's (Epstein 1987; Epstein 1995), she proposed an integrated theory of family-school relations where there are overlapping and shared goals and responsibilities. The theory emphasises the coordination, cooperation and complementary nature of schools and families, which encourages collaboration between the two contexts to support the literacy development of learners.

When the learning endeavor is combined it brings the two spheres closer together; it increases the interaction between parents and teachers, and can help to create *school-like families* and *family-like schools*. A family-like school appreciates each child's individuality and makes each child feel special and included, while a school-like family recognises, and reinforces, the importance of school homework (including literacy activities) that helps to create academic skills and feelings of success (Epstein, 1992).

See and Gorard (2015) carried out a review of 1,008 studies linking parents' aspirations, attitudes and behaviours to educational outcomes of their children, and identified two processes, which, they argue, may have an effect on parents' attitudes and behaviours, which in turn result in higher levels of attainment for their child/children: namely, *parent as teacher* and *parent-school alignment*. An example of *Parent as teacher* can be seen when a parent is able to instruct their child/children in specific school strategies and techniques, for example in reading, and this can have a 'pedagogic impact or even a long-term impact on cognitive ability' (See & Gorard, 2015, p. 13). Resonating with Epstein's (1987) work on integrated relations, *Parent school alignment* refers to when school and parental expectations and understandings match or correspond, which are often the result of closer home-school partnerships – for example, sending school work home, including shared reading - and this is also likely to have a positive impact on children's attitudes, behaviour and other outcomes, including higher achievement (for example, see Goodall & Vorhaus, 2010; Harris & Goodall, 2007; Goodall & Montgomery, 2013). It also helps to develop cultural capital for both parents and their children.

Contrasting models of pedagogy

Writers such as Anderson, Anderson, Friedrich, and Kim (2010) write that a bifurcation has occurred in the field of family literacy, in terms of its aims and pedagogical approach. The original idea behind family literacy was that it should not only be closely involved with formal schooling, and the ways in which literacy is taught at school, but also take into account the cultural background and resources of the participating families (see Taylor, 1983, 1997). Similar to Moll et al.'s (1992) conception of funds of knowledge, Taylor wrote that, 'the accumulated ways of knowing and funds of knowledge of family members – their local literacies – are complexly and intricately woven into their daily lives' (1997, p. 3). Thus, programmes should support the work that parents already do, and embrace and endorse the literacy related resources that already exist within the home learning environment (see also NALA, 2010; Rocha-Schmid, 2010).

Borg and Mayo argue that some provision views children as the 'object of rehabilitation' (2001, pp. 245-266), and therefore family learning programmes such as family literacy should be informed by Freire's (1970) theory of critical pedagogy, which places learners' own context, cultures and experiences at the heart of instruction. More recently, Timmons and Pelletier (2014) have also warned against forms of family literacy that devalue existing language and literacy use, attempting

to exchange it with a seemingly privileged form of school literacy found in the education system (Heath, 1982; Anderson et al., 2010). Timmons and Pelletier (2014) argue that many programmes use one-way, or 'top-down' conceptions of literacy that do not take sufficient account of parents' existing knowledge and practices (see also Marsh, 2003). Other academics, researching family literacy provision mainly in North America and Australia (see for example, Anderson et al., 2010; Auerbach, 1989; Nichols, Nixon, & Rowsell, 2009; Reyes & Torres, 2007; Whitehouse & Colvin, 2001) also contend that family literacy programmes that use a top-down model seeking to transfer cultural values, from the school to families, are based on a 'deficit hypothesis' and 'deficit thinking' (Anderson et al., 2010, p. 47).

One of our roles in this paper is to report on the provision that we found across the family literacy landscape at the time of the fieldwork between 2013 and 2015, and how this was perceived by the parents who attended the courses, and to a lesser extent, by the tutors who taught them. The position we take in this paper is that, while we can see many benefits of the 'top down' approach that sets out to demystify pedagogies and processes and make school literacies more transparent for parents, we also interrogate and critique this model.

Methodology

The study used a mixed methods, quasi-experimental, design, collecting quantitative data from questionnaires with parents and tutors and tutors' Schemes of Work (SoW), and generating qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with parents and from observations of classes.

The sample of family literacy programmes consisted of 27 courses for Year 1 and Year 2 pupils (aged between 5 and 7 years-old) and their parents, running in 18 LAs (Local Authorities) in England. These courses ran on average for 30 hours (generally over 10 weeks) and registered, on average, nine parents and their children. The fieldwork took place over four school terms between September 2013 and December 2014.

Quantitative data

Parent questionnaires

From a total of 230 of parents involved in the programmes, 202 parents completed questionnaires at Time 1 and 134 at Time 2. The attrition (34%) between the two time points was due to parents leaving the courses, rather than them declining to

participate in the second wave of research. Overall, for the longitudinal analysis, we had valid data from 118 parents who completed the survey at both time points. The number is also lower than the overall Time 2 responses because some parents joined the programme after the first session and therefore were not involved in the first questionnaire. Questionnaires for parents consisted mainly of multiple-choice questions, but Likert-type scales were also used. The questionnaires were administered by tutors and took around 10 minutes to complete. Questions at Time 1 included questions about demographics, motivations for joining the programme and attitudes towards, and practices of, family literacy. Most of the Time 2 questionnaire contained exactly the same questions as Time 1 to allow for pre and post measurement of change, while additional questions at Time 2 were designed to analyse self-reported, and self-perceived, changes in these attitudes by parents.

Tutor questionnaires

Family literacy tutors could choose to complete a questionnaire either online or as a hard copy. The questionnaire consisted of 32 questions, mainly multiple-choice, although a few necessitated an open response. The main sections collected demographic data, the characteristics and structure of provision, information about the curriculum, classroom pedagogies and organization, and enabling and constraining factors of effective provision. Twenty tutors from 15 LAs completed a questionnaire about the course they had taught (17 online) and, as three tutors taught more than one course, the total number of courses we gathered data on was 25.

Schemes of work

Researchers requested a copy of the SoW that tutors were using as a framework to plan their teaching content over the duration of the course. Altogether 26 were returned from the 27 courses and they showed considerable diversity: some were very detailed, while others were set out on a single sheet, although the majority were presented on three or four sides of paper.

For the analysis of quantitative data we used descriptive statistics and one-group t-tests and ANOVA. All data were processed using SPSS software.

Qualitative data

Parent interviews

One researcher conducted qualitative telephone interviews with parents, drawn from 17 of the 27 FL courses. Interviews were semi-structured and typically lasted around 10 minutes at Time 1 and 15 minutes at Time 2. Twenty-four parents were interviewed at both Time 1 and Time 2 (a total of 48 interviews). The themes that were explored included parents' overall evaluation of the course and to find out if, and how, they were using the activities from in the family literacy class at home. Further questions at Time 2 were added to assess changes about their understanding of how the school was teaching reading and writing, and their ability to support their child in literacy. Some themes that had emerged from the earlier conversations were developed and followed up at the end of the course. Some of themes explored at Time 2 were customized to each parent, and therefore not every parent was asked to talk about the same question or theme.

Observations and informal conversations

Visits were made to nine family literacy courses, where researchers mainly observed parents during adult and joint sessions, lasting around 2-3 hours per visit. Only two discrete children sessions were observed, of around 30 minutes each. A detailed descriptive commentary was written during the teaching session, with the prime foci being teaching approaches, teacher-learner relations, activities that were introduced, and the learners' response to them. There were also many informal conversations between researchers and tutors, parents and children, which also created valuable data.

The qualitative analysis involved drawing out themes using a system of 'thematic coding' (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Whilst some codes used were a priori, and derived from the research aims and interview questions, others were a posteriori codes that emerged through the analysis of the data generated. Codes were further grouped or collapsed into families of more general themes.

Findings and discussion

This section of the paper presents the main findings. It begins by looking at the demographic profile of the parents and tutors (including the tutors' qualifications), and then considers parents' motivations for attending the family literacy courses; it then continues by looking at the aims of the provision, the structure and organisation, its pedagogical features and underlying philosophy. The section concludes by discussing a series of changes experienced by parents with a focus on

closer parent relations with the school, their children and other parents on the course.

The demographic profile of parents attending the family literacy programmes

Ninety-five per cent of parents attending the programmes were women, almost all of them mothers, which corresponds with evidence from previous research on family literacy (see eg Brooks, Pahl, Pollard, & Rees, 2008; Hannon, Morgan, & Nutbrown, 2006; Macleod, 2008; Rose and Atkin, 2007; Name of author et al., 2009). At Time 1 just over three-quarters (77%) of the parents were under 40 and just under one fifth (19%) were aged between 41 and 50.

The two socio-demographic characteristics of parents that are typically regarded as being important in the family literacy literature are educational qualifications Burgess et al., 2002; Christian, Morrison, & Bryant, 1998; George et al., 2007; Wiegel and Martin, 2005) and the main language spoken at home (Van Steensel, 2006). Sixteen per cent of parents reported having educational qualifications at Level 1 [2] or below, and 16% said they did not have any. The combined figure of 32% is only slightly higher than the percentage of the whole population in the UK; census data from 2011 reveal that 26% of the population aged between 25 and 50 possess qualifications at Level 1 or have no qualification. Formerly there was a requirement for family literacy managers not to enrol parents whose highest qualification in English or maths was at Level 2 or above but this is no longer the case. Two-fifths of parents (39%) had qualifications at Level 3 or above, including 15% who had achieved Level 6 (the equivalent of Bachelor's, or university, degree), or above, which suggests that the classes did not disproportionately involve disadvantaged parents with low qualifications. While there was an aim for many programmes to target parents with low or no qualifications from deprived areas, in the absence of a qualification requirement, most managers did not prevent parents from joining if they were already at Level 2. In keeping with this educational profile, there were relatively high levels of book ownership: over two-thirds (67%) of parents reported that they had more than 25 books (excluding children's books) in their home.

Almost two-thirds (62%) of parents spoke either mainly, or only, English at home. The most common other languages were Urdu (13%), Punjabi (6%) and Bengali (5%), while for almost a quarter of parents (23%) this was not the first family literacy course they had attended.

Tutors' demographic characteristics and qualifications.

Eighteen of the 20 family literacy tutors were women, and over three-quarters (16) categorised their ethnicity as 'White British'. There were very few young tutors: the average age was 52 years (ranging from 33 to 63), and half were above the age of 54.

The tutors held a range of teaching qualifications, but more than half (12) had either a Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) or Certificate in Education (CertEd) qualification for teaching in the post-compulsory setting [3]. The majority (17) held a qualification in teaching adult English/Literacy. The range of these qualifications was very diverse: nine had Literacy subject specialist qualifications, two had a PGCE in teaching English/Literacy to adults, and four had qualifications in teaching English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Only seven of tutors reported that they had attended specific professional development training in teaching family literacy. The average number of hours for the training was 40 but we did not gather details of its nature or content.

Parents' motivations for enrolling on family literacy courses

The four most frequently mentioned reasons why parents chose to join a family literacy class, selected from a multiple choice list, were related to school and school literacies: 82% wanted to learn how to help their child with their general homework, 79% wished to be involved in their child's school life and education, while another 79% expected to learn how the school was teaching their child to read and write. Finally, 68% wanted to increase their own confidence in helping their child with schoolwork. These interrelating reasons accord with the concept of *parent school alignment*, proposed by See and Gorard (2015), and Epstein's (1987) theory of shared aims, which, these authors maintain, is likely to have positive effects on children's behaviours and outcomes.

Parents' responses during interviews suggested that they usually had series of overlapping reasons for enrolling:

I know how important it is, you know, getting your children to sort of be interested in reading, and create a love of books, and just enhance really my daughter's learning really, and just to see if there are other ways I can encourage that at home as a parent, hoping, you know, that the course will give me a few ideas really.

The surveys showed that around four-fifths of parents wanted to attend the course to help the development of their child's, rather than their own, literacy. Most

interviewees reported that they attended the course purely for the benefit of their child. Other reasons, reported by fewer than half of the parents in the sample, were more closely related to their own development and progression, with a third reporting that they wanted to improve their own reading and writing skills. It is not always easy to disentangle the reasons given for participation: parents often reported that they attended their course in order to improve their own English, but this, in turn, was important to them primarily because they were then better placed to help their children with school homework.

It is interesting to note that only about one quarter (24%) of parents expected, or wished, to gain a literacy qualification, and most programmes in the study did not provide opportunities for parents to attain them. A higher proportion of parents who spoke a language other than English with their children at home, as compared with those who reported speaking only or mainly English at home, reported increasing their own confidence, skills and gaining qualifications as their main motivations for enrolling. Similarly, parents with overseas, relatively low or no qualifications, were more likely to see their course as a means of increasing their own confidence and skills, while parents with higher qualifications were more likely to be motivated by the chance to become more involved with their child's education.

In keeping with other research (see eg Anderson et al., 2010; Brooks et al., 1996; St, Clair, 2010; Hannon et al., 2006; Swain et al., 2009; Swain et al., 2015), almost all of 24 parents who were interviewed held a very positive view of the classes and spoke of how much their children had enjoyed attending as well.

Aims of the provision

The SoWs revealed great variety in the aims that the programmes set out to cover. While all courses contained the overall objective of improving parents' ability to help their children learn or acquire (literacy) skills, there was a variety of aims, depending on the 'type' of parents the course attracted, and the relationship between the family literacy manager and the school. Although attention was paid to the parents' own literacy skills, and to a lesser extent, to the literacy skills of the children, the main focus was usually placed on parents learning how to support their children by imitating school literacies. Provision could be flexible and programmes that were running in areas where the great majority of learners were second-language speakers put greater emphasis on developing parents' own speaking and listening skills.

Swain et al. (2009) and Tett (2001) have previously highlighted tensions between schools and family literacy providers stemming from having competing priorities. Whereas for some schools the main purpose of family literacy programmes is to contribute to increasing school standards, by raising children's literacy attainments, many family literacy providers see the potential benefits for both children and adults outside school realm.

The structure, organisation, and pedagogy of family literacy programmes

The most common model, used in 21 of the 27 courses, was a parents-only session followed by a joint parent-children session. Parents-only sessions usually ran between 1.5 to 2 hours each week, while the average length of joint sessions was 30 minutes to 1 hour. Children-only sessions usually ran for an hour. Most classes run during the school day, often in the morning or early afternoon. Analysis of attendance records showed that the average number of parents who began a family literacy course was nine, and 80% attended at least half the sessions. However, 17% of parents attended only a third of the sessions, with 12% present at one session only.

Fewer than a quarter (7/27) of programmes built in discrete provision for children with a KS1 [4] teacher, and this marked a significant change from previous evaluations (see for example, Brooks et al., 2008; Swain et al., 2009). This was related to pressures on schools and their achievement rates; schools were less ready to release children from curriculum time, particularly when in Year 2 they were working towards their KS1 SATs [5], which children took at the age of seven. We also found that some schools were not prepared to fund a supply teacher to allow for the release of a KS1 teacher to take child-only sessions, even though the LA was generally prepared to fund this provision, and, in some cases, provide the KS1 teacher.

There was considerable variation between the pedagogic approaches observed in the parents-only, joint, and children-only sessions, but most of our observations confirmed the tutors' views expressed in the questionnaires. Although we saw examples of some direct, 'transmission' teaching, practice was on the whole characterised by being collaborative, interactive, practical and hands-on. The classes we observed were well organised, and the tutors' survey reveals that the most common form of class organisation consisted of small group (often paired) work, followed by parents working individually, mostly on the same activity.

Tutors were seen explaining concepts clearly and there many examples of contemporary school teaching practices: for example, using body actions when teaching phonics, and explaining reading and spelling strategies. The teaching content on 22 of the courses was closely related to the KS1 school curriculum. The most commonly mentioned activities reported by tutors in the parents-only and joint sessions were connected to school literacies. In order of most frequently cited from the 27 courses, these involved: story-telling (sometimes with props such as puppets) (26 tutor citations from the tutor questionnaires); writing stories (24); modeling reading with children (for example, showing parents how to comment on pictures or use predictive skills) (23); vocabulary-building games and rhymes (23); activities connected to synthetic phonics (21); playing games about different word types (for example, nouns, verbs, connectives); (20); reading with 'Big' books [6] (10); making a story box [7] (8); making books (3). (This list is not exhaustive.)

Pedagogical features and underlying philosophy

Family learning in general, and family literacy in particular, draws on the traditions of adult literacy, early learning, adult learning, parenting skills, parental involvement in schools, supporting children's learning, and school improvement (Timmons and Pelletier, 2014). The main pedagogical approach, or underlying philosophy of teaching, which was observed in the nine classes is summarised by the nine points below [8]. The approach is one that contains the following characteristics:

- i. develops understandings of the pedagogical approaches used in school;
- ii. develops parental understandings of educational and school literacy processes;
- iii. promotes the family as a key unit of learning and the home setting as a vital learning environment;
- iv. promotes parent-child relationships;
- v. increases parents' awareness of the importance of their support in their child's education, including their role as the child's first literacy mentor;
- vi. increases parents' awareness of presenting opportunities for children's literacy development;

- vii. promotes a culture of aspiration for parents and children;
- viii. promotes a culture of collaborative learning for parents and children;
- ix. increases children's and parents' literacy knowledge and skills.

Tutors and parents in the surveys and interviews also confirmed these features, which are presented in no particular order of importance. Although individual parents were seen frequently asking tutors personal queries about their own literacy, such as those concerning spelling and grammar, and tutors generally tried to address these, only a one tutor from the nine courses we observed was seen building on the parents' home culture and integrating families' existing knowledge and practice into their teaching session., which many of the researchers cited earlier in the paper regard as an essential feature of family literacy. Of course, the observations were only snapshots, and this is not to say this did not happen more regularly on other courses. However, analysis of the 26 SoW that we looked at suggests that tutors only tried to incorporate parents' own learning experiences and/or interests into seven of the 27 programmes, and we do not know how integral this was to their pedagogy or how frequently this happened. Overall, the evidence shows that the main aim of the tutors was to teach parents about the methods of teaching literacy found in schools, and to make these school literacies as visible as possible. Every parent we interviewed did not question the literacy practices taught in school – including, for example, an emphasis on synthetic phonics - and believed that it was essential to use this approach if their children were to succeed.

We should also stress, however, and as we have written above, that the main reason for parents joining these courses is that they positively wanted to learn about school literacies; they wished to be shown the 'right' or 'correct' way to teach their child at home, to understand the concepts and learn the terminology of, for example, a 'split diagraph' [9]. Indeed, the main incentive used by LA managers to recruit parents was that 'this course will help your child to improve their literacy by explaining how the school's teaching of literacy works'.

Parents reported that learning about how the school was teaching literacy was the most useful part of the course, and spoke about how this helped them to avoid different and potentially confusing terminology.

Researcher: And you would say that [learning about school literacies] was the most useful thing then?

Parent: Yeah, definitely, what they do, how they learn at school, then you can support that at home rather than doing it differently.

Knowledge of school literacies also enables parents to gain a better understanding of what counts as legitimate knowledge (a form of cultural capital), and therefore we argue that this process benefits parents, rather than leaving them as disempowered, as suggested by researchers such as Anderson et al. (2010) and Rocha-Schmid, 2010). Having said this, while family literacy provision aims to reach out to adults-as-parents, and to empower them as co-educators, the extent to which the provision actually empowers parents is a matter of debate. For instance, they did not seem to have any tangible agency in the design or implementation of the family literacy programmes, or have any influence over school pedagogies. Vincent (1996) points out that the word 'empowerment' emerged as a symbolic term during the late 1980s and 1990s, and has since assumed a number of often nebulous meanings and connotations that are rarely critically scrutinised. For instance, the distinctive form of school literacy taught by the tutors was rarely critically evaluated by neither the parents nor their children (and possibly not by the tutors, either). Far from challenging the way their children were being taught literacy, the parents uncritically accepted how and what the teachers were doing as being 'the correct way', and thus supported the hegemonic discourse of the status quo. In other words, they supported what Iris Young (1990) refers to as the 'ideology of expertism' (cited in Vincent 1996, p.467), which reinforces the exclusive right of professionals to pronounce on matters within their domain of expertise.

Parental relations

Parents' relations with the school

Home-school relations can be viewed as constituting a point of intersection between the private and personal space of home and the public and professional space of school (Cole, 2007; Forsberg, 2007). Although the responsibility of the teachers seems to be located mainly in the school, and the parents' responsibility in the home, when parents engage with, and support, their children with their school work at home, school life can be seen as moving into the territory of home life, or intruding into the private sphere making the boundaries and responsibilities more blurred (Book & Perala-Littunen, 2015). We have used the word 'relations' rather than 'partnership' advisedly, and view the latter term as hinting at 'a warm glow of joint endeavour' (Vincent, 1996, p. 466). Although we found closer relations, and a

set of deeper parental understandings, we found little evidence of there being any equal partnership between parents and the school.

One of the main messages taught in the family literacy classes is that the future of their child is not only dependent on the work of the teacher, but also on the parents themselves as co-educators (Timmons & Pelettier, 2014), and the awareness of their role resulted in the parents having a higher level of confidence in the power of education (Ule, Živoder & du Bois Reymond, 2015). The family literacy programmes increased this understanding, even for those parents who already were already aware of the role they could play. Through the classes, parents gained a greater appreciation of the school context, including its aims, processes and practices, and therefore began to resemble Epstein's (1992) 'families-like schools' and increase See and Gorard's (2015) parent-school alignment.

Fifty-six per cent of parents who completed the questionnaires said that, as a result of attending the course, they now felt more confident to come into school, and 51% mentioned that this included talking to their child's teacher. In addition to parental self-reported changes, statistical analysis of the knowledge and understanding of how literacy is taught at school before and at the end of the programme demonstrates that the scores were significantly higher at the end compared with scores achieved at the beginning ($t(117) = 3.34, p = 0.001$). These data also suggest an increase in parental confidence in helping their children with their homework ($t(112) = -3.44, p < 0.001$). Further analysis of the programmes' characteristics, based on the information from the SoW, indicates that there were also larger positive outcomes in children's reading when parents were encouraged to focus on their own learning experiences. Moreover, further analysis of the characteristics also provides some indication that on programmes where parents had an opportunity to focus on their own learning experiences ($F(1,108) = 13.2, p < 0.001$), and/or own interests, ($F(1,108) = 6.8, p = 0.01$), they also experienced greater increases in their understanding of school literacies.

The qualitative data also suggest these changes experienced by parents after their engagement with the programmes helped to develop closer home school relations: over half the parents interviewed believed that their relationship with the school had improved and was now closer than previously. Parents also felt more able to approach teachers and to use the same language as they would expect to find used in schools.

Because I now know these tricks that the teachers are using, as I said before, I can reinforce them in the house, so it means that it's continued education,

because a child goes to school to learn but they are with you most of the time, so you've got to make the most of that time that you have with them. But I've got three children and it's very difficult to split my time between the three, so anything I can learn of how school's doing things I can then reiterate in the house, and also it means if I think they are struggling in a certain area I can speak to the teacher in the same language, I've got an understanding. It's not like the teacher's speaking French and I'm speaking German, we are speaking the same language because we know what's being taught, you know. So I do think I've learnt more about how a child of that age learns things.

This parent's main concern is that the methods she is using are consistent with those used by the teachers, which means there is a greater alignment (See & Gorard, 2015) between the two contexts of home and classroom, and this diminishes the chances of confusing the learner. She also alludes to the fact that children from age five to 16 spend 85% with their families, parents and communities, and only 15% at school (National Literacy Trust, 2008).

Out of eight parents who reported no change, five indicated that this was because they already had a very positive relationship with the school before the course. Of these, two were school governors, and two worked as volunteer helpers in classrooms. Moreover, another mother said she was talking to her child's teacher less often as she now had greater trust in her. There was also evidence that some children's relationships with schools were also improving, as they became more confident learners as a result of working alongside their mothers and in an environment that they perceived to safe and less threatening than the classroom.

Researcher: Has your child gained confidence from being on the course?

Parent: Yeah, I really, yeah, I really do, like I say, my daughters quite shy and she's not very, she won't put her hand up because she feels like she'll get the answer wrong, but in the group she didn't feel like that, she put her hand up and even if the answer was wrong nobody said anything to her to make her feel like, you know, not very comfortable in the situation. So her confidence has really built a lot since the course I think.

Parents' relationship with their child/children

Another one of the main objectives of family literacy programmes is also to increase parents' awareness of the crucial role they play as their child's first, and continuing, 'literacy mentor' (Timmons & Pelletier, 2014, p. 512), and therefore part of their remit was to work on developing closer parent-child relations (Bouffard, Little, & Weiss, 2006; Pianta, 2004). When all 28 parents were asked during the interviews what their 'favourite part' of the course was, over half (16) said that the best thing was the chance to work with their child and to have quality time together on a one-to-one basis, and many commented on how this had helped to bring them closer together. Almost three-quarters (74%) of parents reported in the survey that playing the games (a common part of family literacy provision) and other interactive activities had given them a reason to spend more time with their child; 63% felt that this made their relationship closer, and 58% said that games and activities encouraged them to talk to each other. Fifty-nine per cent said that the family literacy course itself had brought them nearer to their child.

In addition to these self-reported changes, survey analysis at Time 1 and Time 2 shows the frequency of shared literacy activities between parent and child had increased by the time the programme finished ($t(117) = -3.73, p < 0.001$). These included: telling stories ($t(117) = 2.18, p = 0.03$), playing rhyming and other language games ($t(117) = 1.93, p = 0.06$), watching educational programmes on the TV or computer ($t(117) = 2.26, p = 0.03$), visiting a library ($t(117) = 3.20, p < 0.001$) and/or borrowing books from the library ($t(117) = 3.62, p < 0.001$). Again, these data suggest that the greatest positive changes in the frequency of shared family literacy activities were experienced by parents on courses where tutors did not directly link their teaching only to the school curriculum ($F(3,101) = 3.0, p = 0.04$), on courses where parents could use more of their own learning experiences ($F(1,108) = 9.3, p < 0.001$), and where parents had a say in the choice of the activities they worked on ($F(1,103) = 5.7, p = 0.02$).

Eighty-nine per cent of parents said they had played literacy games made or learned in class at least a few times since the course had finished, with 45% reporting having played them at home a few times a week or every day during the course. The games also involved other members of the family, and just over two-thirds of parents (70%) testified that other family members joined in with these activities. Almost two-thirds of parents (64%) said that siblings played, a further 40% mentioned fathers, and 13% said that one or more grandparents took part in these activities at home.

Two parents spoke of how the course was benefiting other, particularly younger, siblings who sometimes wanted to join in with the activities (the games, for

example). Moreover, the knowledge and skills that parents were acquiring on their course could be passed on to younger children as they grew up:

Researcher: [So] you've learnt to use these things with Ollie [10] in the future, even if they are not really applicable to Melody now.

Parent: And we will not make mistakes the same as with Melody when she was reading and could not say what the story was about. And definitely we will keep an eye on Ollie if he can read and understand what's in the story, and even say who wrote this story, yeah, just explain [to] me who was there or answer simple questions.

Some parents also talked about the important benefit for the child of watching them, as a parent, modeling how to be a learner.

It's perfect really because you don't often get an opportunity to spend quality time just with one child doing something that interests them, and I think it's great that the child sees you doing things with them and learning as well at the same time. Because I say to my children every day is a school day, every day you'll learn something new, and I think it's important that you lead by example, and that you are doing something with them.

Parents' relationships with other parents

In her PhD research about family literacy programmes in South Africa, Le Roux (2016) argues the classes provide a platform for the creation of social networks that offer parents opportunities to be a resource to others and establish networking opportunities. Almost two thirds (65%) of parents reported in the questionnaires that they had made friends on the course, and three-fifths (60%) stated that they now felt more able to talk and work with other parents.

Parents spoke in interviews about how it was interesting to find out how much time other parents spent reading with their children, and how other family circumstances were similar or different to their own. It was good to make new friends and, even though some parents already knew each other, some formed closer ties during their course. Over two-thirds of parents mentioned how much they appreciated the social side of the course, and some spoke of how much they had learned from other parents. Just over a third (35%) of parents in the survey

mentioned building up a support network, and this suggests that they were building up resources of social capital.

Yeah, it was really good to meet all the parents, because you are not thinking from one point of view, like you hear different point of view from different mums, like how they are coping and their ideas and everything, so when we share the ideas between each other it gives more confidence how you can deal with the situation in each scenario. It really helped, like keeping in touch, and now we are good friends, now we have exchanged phone numbers and everything, so we just speak to each other even when we are not going to class anymore.

Conclusion

Researchers now have access to a burgeoning and compelling literature, which shows that family literacy programmes provide a wide range of benefits for parents and their children, as well as for schools and providers, and this paper adds to this body of research. The findings on the links between school and home literacies were particularly striking, and the reasons most frequently cited by parents for joining a family literacy class all related to school. Parents reported that the most useful aspect of the course was learning more about school literacies and the programmes helped to demystify pedagogies and processes. Anderson et al. (2008) have also reported that in a study of family literacy from 20 years earlier, the most significant and beneficial part that the parents recalled was making the school pedagogy visible and understandable.

Parents saw their responsibility as supporting the teacher's pedagogical approaches, and wanted to do something both *with* and *for* their children. They wanted to learn how their school taught literacy so that they could support their children more effectively when they applied this approach at home. This is not to suggest that parents felt that they had, or were somehow meant, to replace highly trained professional teachers, who have a wealth of knowledge and experience. Family literacy can only provide parents with a partial understanding about the concepts and pedagogy involved in literacy teaching, and of course the aim of the provision is not to replicate a teacher-training programme. However, we argue that parents can be used as a resource and have the potential to support, reinforce and complement what teachers do in the classroom in the home setting. Moreover, family literacy involves much more than simply 'teaching school literacy'; it increases parental sense of self-affirmation and confidence and their appreciation of

their own central role in their child's education and literacy development, particularly in the home literacy environment, and puts the family at the heart of the educational enterprise. Our study also showed how programmes also help parents to form and develop closer relationships with their children, promoting a culture of collaborative learning, and create networks with other parents on the courses, providing them with higher levels of social capital.

Anderson et al. write that 'conceptions of family literacy and family literacy programmes continue to evolve and that complexity is an inherent feature of the phenomenon' (2010, p. 49). However, the main conclusion from our study suggests that the prevalent model that dominates the family literacy landscape in England today is a 'top-down' one, and the family literacy curriculum has little space to incorporate existing parental knowledge and practices. However, there is also some limited, indicative, evidence, which suggest that when parents are given the chance to focus on their own learning experiences in the class there were larger positive outcomes in children's reading, and parents experienced greater changes in their knowledge and understanding of school literacies. However, this seems to have happened on around only a quarter of programmes in this study

As we have written earlier, many researchers (see for example, Anderson et al., 2010; Auerbach, 1989; Nichols et al., 2009; Reyes & Torres, 2007; Rocha-Schmid, 2010; Whitehouse & Colvin, 2001) have criticised the model, which is based on a 'deficit hypothesis' (Anderson et al., 2010, p. 47), and involves the direct transmission of school values and approaches to parents to be used with their children. This model of family literacy and wider family learning is at odds with some of the original, founding, principles of family literacy with schools and families working together. Moreover, our study shows that by following the lead of the school and family literacy professionals, and uncritically accepting the school methods of teaching literacy as being the 'right' way to teach, the parents could be seen supporting the hegemonic discourse of the status quo and the 'ideology of expertism' (Young, 1990). Moreover, we also acknowledge that there is still a hierarchy of knowledge involved between school and home, which is defined by 'a lack', with one side (the parents) trying to gain access to, what is assumed by them, to be knowledge of a higher form. Thus, there are issues of power and inequality in the relationship between the family and school, and ongoing debates about what counts as 'legitimate knowledge'.

Having said this, our overall argument is that parents benefit from this dominant model, or approach, and rather than feeling disempowered we maintain that the opposite is true. Being able to learn about schools' pedagogical approaches

(Wolfendale, 1996), being able to use some of the same language and feeling more able to communicate with teachers means that schools and parents approach literacy learning in a more cohesive and consistent way, and this leads to greater parent-school connectivity and alignment, which in turn, is also likely to lead to improved pupil achievement (Goodall & Vorhaus, 2010; Harris & Goodall, 2007; Goodall & Montgomery, 2013). Moreover, operating on the same wavelength, not only leads to a shared understanding of how literacy is taught in school, but also helps to foster a sense of community and develop closer home-school relationships. When parents feel welcomed by the school, and teachers sense that parents are working with them, the bond between the school and home contexts is strengthened, enabling parents and teachers to work towards common goals of improving pupil attitudes, motivations, behaviours and attainment.

Footnotes

[1] The term 'parent(s)' is used throughout the paper to refer to mothers, fathers and carers.

[2] In the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), Level 1 corresponds to a level expected of a 'poor' GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education), Grades D-G, which is a qualification generally taken by 16-year-olds in England, while Level 2 is a 'good' pass, Grades A-C. Level 3 is equivalent to A Level (or the General Certificate of Education Advanced Level), which is a school-leaving qualification generally taken by 18-year-olds.

[3] A PGCE courses is usually one year in length, full-time, and a CertEd is usually two-three years of full-time study.

[4] KS1 (Key Stage 1) is the term used for the two years of schooling in maintained schools in England, normally known as Year 1 and Year 2, when pupils are aged between 5 and 7.

[5] SATs are Standard Assessment tests in maths and English taken by children in KS1 at the age of 7.

[6] Big books are books that are printed in large type face so that they can be used with a group of learners.

[7] A story box is a joint activity between parent and child where they make up, and often present, a story using props such as puppets. The activity encourages characterisation and improvisation.

[8] Although this list of characteristics is primarily the work of the authors, some of these features have similarities with those identified by the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) in Ireland (NALA, 2010).

[9] A digraph is two letters, which together make one sound (as in the word 'chat'). When a digraph is split by a consonant it becomes a split digraph. For example: in the word 'wrote' – the 'oe' here make one sound.

[10] All the names of the participants in this paper have been changed.

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