

# Issues that impact on effective family literacy provision in England

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This paper raises and discusses a series of key issues that arose during a 20-month evaluation project concerning the impact of family literacy programmes on the skills of parents and their children. Using a range of mixed methods, the research was based on 74 family literacy programmes in England and involved 583 parents and their children. The majority of previous evaluations of family learning have been quantitative and concentrated on children's literacy outcomes; they have tended to ignore issues from qualitative research (which can both enable and constrain effective provision), many of which are of great interest to policy-makers. The specific issues raised in this paper coalesce around themes of recruitment; accreditation; the educational profile of parents (including the scarcity of men); the physical teaching and learning environment; the competing agendas between local authorities and schools; and planning opportunities between adult family literacy tutors and early years teachers.

*Keywords:* Family literacy, family learning, parents, children, family, policy.

## Introduction

This paper is based on a project about family literacy (FL) programmes in England: it identifies and discusses a number of issues that arose in the course of the research, and also analyses key features that both enable and constrain effective provision. The discussions form part of a 20-month research project, which took place from November 2007 to July 2009, and whose main aim was to evaluate the impact of FL on the skills of parents (the term 'parents' is used throughout the report to mean mothers, fathers and carers) and their children, family relationships, progression and social mobility. The project found considerable benefits for parents, children and schools, and confirmed that FL programmes continue to be effective and bring benefits to parents and children that include, and go beyond, improvements in their literacy skills.

The specific issues raised coalesce around recruitment; accreditation; the educational profile of parents (including the scarcity of men); the physical environment for teaching and learning

(including accommodation); competing agendas between local authorities (LAs) and schools; and opportunities for planning between adult FL tutors and early years teachers.

## Background information

FL programmes aim to raise standards of literacy for both parents and children, and to extend parents' knowledge and skills in supporting their children's developing literacy. They are specifically designed to enable adults and young children (usually aged three to six) to learn together, and generally offer discrete sessions for parents and children to develop their own literacy skills, and joint sessions where parents work alongside and support their children with literacy activities. Provision is free, with crèche (childcare) support (where feasible), and is targeted at disadvantaged parents in areas of low socio-economic status (SES), who hold relatively low-level qualifications, that is, no higher than Level 1 (which equates to a poor pass at GCSE of grades D-G in British terms, or to Level 2 of the scale used internationally, e.g. in the International Adult

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Literacy Survey of 1994-98). The courses are run in partnership with schools and Children's Centres and are planned and taught by staff from providers of adult learning and early years teachers. Courses tend to be either short (30-49 hours within one school term) or standard (60-72 hours over two school terms)<sup>1</sup>, and a typical FL class will last between two-three hours, once a week.

Anderson, Anderson, Friedrich & Kim (2010) have pointed out that there is a tendency for FL to be conceptualised quite conservatively by policy-makers, programme providers, and the main constituents themselves. Technological advances (e.g. mobile phones and the internet) which have changed previous conceptions of what it means to be illiterate (Koh, 2004) have not been incorporated into FL programmes perhaps as much as they could be, and this was also one of the findings in our research.

#### *Previous Evaluations*

Research shows that socio-economic disadvantage is a key predictor of poor literacy development in children. It is also known that poor literacy is an intergenerational phenomenon (De Coulon, & Cara, 2008)<sup>2</sup>, and that having poor literacy skills impacts not only on adults' life chances but also on those of their children (Parsons & Bynner, 2007). There is a significant body of literature showing the vital role of the family dimension in the literacy learning of young children and parents (see, for example, Hannon, 1986, 1999; Hannon & Jackson, 1987; Hannon, Weinberger & Nutbrown, 1991; Hannon, Morgan & Nutbrown, 2006; Whitehurst, Epstein, Angell, Payne, Crone & Fischel, 1994; Brooks, Gorman, Harman, Hutchison & Wilkin, 1996; Brooks, Gorman, Harman, Hutchison, Kinder & Moor, 1997; Brooks, Harman, Hutchison, Kendall & Wilkin, 1999; Brooks, Pahl, Pollard & Rees, 2008; Hirst, 1998; Ofsted, 2000, 2009; Brooks, 2002; Wagner, Spiker & Linn, 2002; Desforges & Abouchar, 2003; Feinstein, Duckworth & Sabates, 2004; Horne & Haggart, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 2004; Hodge, 2006; Anderson &

Morrison, 2007; Carpentieri, Fairfax-Cholmeley, Litster & Vorhaus, 2011).

Six major studies from Sénéchal & Young (2008), Mol, Bus, De Jong & Smeets (2008), Erion (2006), Nye, Turner & Schwartz (2006), Manz, Hughes, Barnaba, Bracaliello & Ginsburg-Block (2010) and van Steensel, McElvany, Kurvers & Herppich (2011) indicate that FL programmes have a greater impact than most educational interventions on child literacy acquisition (see Carpentieri, Fairfax-Cholmeley, Litster & Vorhaus, 2011). Five of the six meta-analyses found effect sizes greater than 0.3, and in three, the effect size is greater than 0.5. However the meta-analytic evidence indicates that the majority of these evaluations have concentrated on children's literacy outcomes<sup>3</sup> and when Brooks et al. (2008) reviewed 29 programmes of family literacy, language and numeracy provision (FLLN) they concluded that research has been unable to provide a definitive answer to whether two-generation FLLN programme benefit parents as much as children<sup>4</sup>.

#### **Methodology and the sample**

The FL project we were involved in employed both quantitative and qualitative methods. We used established instruments<sup>5</sup> to assess progress

<sup>3</sup> Due to the constraints of space, we are unable to report on parents' progress in reading or writing, although these data are available elsewhere (see Swain et al, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Brooks et al. (2008) also found that very few studies used a controlled trial; most had used matched-group and one-group pre-and post-test designs, which means that much evidence needs to be treated with caution.

<sup>5</sup> The instruments used to assess the parents' reading and writing are known as the Go! tests. These were developed in 2003 for the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (based at the Institute of Education, University of London) by the National Foundation for Educational Research in England and Wales (based in Slough, England). The tests cover Entry level and Levels 1 and 2 of the UK Qualifications Framework, which correspond roughly to ISCED Levels 0-2 and (somewhat confusingly) to Levels 1-3 of the scale used in, for example, the International Adult Literacy Survey of 1994-98. The Go! tests are research instruments with two parallel (statistically equated) forms for both reading and writing, and are also secure instruments in the sense that they

<sup>1</sup> In the LSC Guidance (2009/10), Standard courses are categorised as running for 60-72 hours.

<sup>2</sup> Coulon et al. (2008) also concluded that improving parents' literacy skills can lead directly to improvements in their young children's cognitive abilities.

in reading and writing, and carried out classroom observations, semi-structured questionnaires and in-depth qualitative interviews. Data also came from email exchanges and from comments at 12 whole-day training events that were used to introduce the project to FL managers and practitioners, and train them in methods of gathering data. These were attended by a total of 133 Local Authority (LA) managers and FL practitioners.

A total of 42 LAs were involved in the research, from across all nine government office regions in England, representing 28% of the 152 English LAs. Of the total of 74 courses that were evaluated, 44 (59%) were short courses and 30 (41%) were standard courses. The vast majority of short courses were around 31 hours of teacher contact time, and most of the standard courses were around 53 hours of teacher contact time in duration<sup>6</sup>. Almost all of the FL programmes took place in schools, and only three Children's Centres featured in the research. In all, 583 parents and 527 children took part in the evaluation and were assessed on a range of areas, including their progress in reading and writing. In addition, the project interviewed 101 of the 583 parents, plus 62 adult literacy tutors, 62 early years teachers, 33 LA managers and nine headteachers.

94% of the parents involved were women and 78% of parents had English as their first language. The children were aged between three and seven years old at the beginning of the course. The average number of learners per course was around nine parents and children on both short and standard courses; the average attendance for parents and children was around 79%, and the average retention rate was around 84%. The research was unable to track parents who had left but it needs to be highlighted that, whilst many parents dropped out for legitimate reasons, some might actually have found employment, which can cause a tension when figures appear to dent retention but are actually the result of progression (Lamb, Fairfax-Cholmeley & Thomas, 2008).

Although research has been able to demonstrate the profound effects of FL in a

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are not publicly available, in order that they do not influence the adult literacy sector in the UK. For details of the projects in which they have been used see Brooks and Hannon (2012, in press).

<sup>6</sup> Calculated by adding the contact hours of the parents-only session to those of the joint session. It does not include the contact hours of the children-only sessions.

number of areas, there is a lack of information about what actually happens inside FL classrooms, and so the classroom setting where the crucial interactions between teaching and learning take place still generally remains a black box. One of the objectives of the project was to take the reader inside a FL classroom and delineate common forms of practice. Although there is no space in this paper to report on the pedagogical approaches, these findings are available in Swain, Welby, Brooks, Bosley, Frumkin, Fairfax-Cholmeley (2009).

Researchers made 14 visits to 12 FL classes in 10 LAs. They formally interviewed adult tutors, early years teachers and headteachers, but they also spoke informally to parents, children, crèche workers, parent mentors/liaison officers and teaching assistants. During the teaching sessions researchers wrote a detailed descriptive commentary with the prime foci concentrating on teaching approaches, teacher-learner relations, activities introduced and learner responses to these. It was not the primary intention to comment on the effectiveness of the various approaches, and researchers tried to describe events, rather than make value judgements. Extracts from interviews and observational fieldnotes are used to illustrate particular points and opinions.

### **Themes and issues**

During the research a number of themes and recurring issues began to emerge, which both enabled but also acted as constraints for effective provision: these are grouped under four headings of FL programmes, parents, schools, and FL tutors and early years teachers, although these are used primarily for organisational purposes and some themes/issues overlap. This section is followed by a summary of the key features that the researchers concluded enable effective FL provision.

#### **A. Family literacy programmes**

##### *Recruitment*

Issues around recruitment are particularly important because if a programme does not attract sufficient numbers it will not be viable to run. The LSC explain guidance (2009/10) states that a minimum number of nine parents are needed for a course to start, although this was subject to different perceptions from different LA

managers, and some were more flexible than others in their interpretation of the nine-learner rule.

One LA manager was prepared to take the wider picture. For instance, he recognised that some small schools (with, say, 20 on roll in reception) find it difficult to recruit the minimum number of nine parents per course, against larger schools, perhaps with a three-form entry with, say, 90 on roll. He therefore took the overall average numbers from courses across the whole LA to bring the average up to around nine parents per programme. Although he would not allow courses to start if there were under six parents, he believed that if a small school had a particular need, the overall benefits were worth it, and so, in effect, he was prepared to subsidise the smaller settings. He also recognised that the partnership with schools was key, and was also prepared to maintain programmes in a school year when numbers of adults were lower than usual so that the school would stay on board for future years.

It was the schools themselves that were identified as being the key partners within the LAs in the recruitment and delivery of FL, and this needed a high level of commitment from headteachers and teaching staff. The two strategies that proved to be particularly effective were employing parent support (or liaison) officers or pastoral coordinators/ child protection officers (who understand parental local concerns and issues) within the school, and using past and present parents from FL courses to act as 'learning champions' to attract other parents. In the latter case, it was felt that parents often understood many of the local concerns and issues, and the fact that they could see things from their peers' point of view gave them more credibility than staff, who tended to be associated with the 'official' culture of the school. Successful methods of advertising mentioned were using flyers and letters, which were translated into first languages if needed.

Recruiting is about building relationships, as the following headteacher explained:

*As well as advertising FL in our school newsletter, we target specific year groups and send individual letters to parents. We started doing this about three or four years ago and it has had a tremendous impact on recruitment.*

The adult tutor in the same school commented:

*It has got to the stage with recruitment now where she [the early years teacher] doesn't have to do anything; they [the parents] approach her at school, and say 'when is this next course coming up, and can I come?'*

#### *National Tests*

Another factor that may have an impact on recruiting parents is the need for participants to take national literacy tests at Level 1 and 2, which may exclude less qualified and less confident parents, many of whom have bad memories of their time at school, and some may think they are not clever (or intellectually capable) enough to join.

Around the time the research project began, in 2007, there was a drive by the then Labour government to get more parents to take accredited literacy tests in order to meet national targets, and which was also seen as a way of helping parents find employment (see, for example, the two policy documents, *Every Parent Matters* (2007) and *Skills for Life: Changing Lives* (2009)). Although a desire to gain a qualification was a relatively low priority for most parents, almost all of them reported their willingness and desire to take tests. They felt a genuine sense of achievement when they gained an accreditation, and that this contributed towards a gain in confidence and an aspiration to progress onto further courses, sometimes at a higher level, as well as, potentially, making them more employable.

*I wasn't fazed by it, and was glad I was given the opportunity to gain an updated qualification*

*It was nice to put yourself through an exam at the end, to test yourself.*

Some identified conditions that made them feel more comfortable about doing tests such as not being pressured, taking practice tests and being tested in small groups.

*We did a few mock exams. They [The teacher] give [sic] us a few, because they said - with you not being at school, it makes you prepared, because lots of us haven't had any exams since we've been at school. I quite enjoyed it.*

However, although the research concluded that the accreditation built into FL courses has been generally regarded as a positive policy by the vast majority of FL's constituents, it needs to be pointed out that the parents we spoke to were those who had enrolled on the programme and we are not able to know how many potential parents were put off by the need to take a test. Thus, we are unable to conclude whether national tests have a positive or negative effect on recruitment.

Findings showed that 56% of the parents reported gaining a formal qualification on short courses and 71% on standard courses, which suggests that longer programmes were able to devote more course time to practising for, and sitting, tests. The authors of this paper argue that the introduction of national tests has changed the culture of FL and moved away from its original core purpose, i.e., improving children's literacy outcomes by giving parents strategies to support their children's literacy. This could mean that, out of a 30 hour course, comprising of 10 one-hour adult sessions<sup>7</sup>, two sessions were taken up with parents practising past test papers, and one would be put aside to sit the test itself. However, there is always a trade-off, and the research project recommended that consideration should be given by policy-makers as to whether learners should only take national tests on longer, standard, courses, where time taken up with testing has less of an impact on the time available to parents' learning about ways to support their children and improving their own literacy knowledge and skills. After all, it can be argued that, in the majority of cases, testing was only measuring what learners already knew.

## B. Parents

The main issues concerning parents were around some of them being over-qualified to attend; a lack of learners with relatively low, or without, qualifications; and the general absence of men.

### *Over-qualified learners*

Only around a fifth of the parents in the project reported that they had no qualifications or qualifications at Entry level, and so were underrepresented, in the sense that they are a

primary target group for FL courses. At least 23% of parents (N=114) reported having qualifications in English at Level 2 (IALS Level 3) or above, including 15 at Level 3 (A-Level or equivalent; IALS Level 4), and four at Level 4 or above (higher education)<sup>8</sup>. Although researchers were unable to draw firm conclusions about the levels at which parents were assessed in initial diagnostic tests at the beginning of their courses (not least because different examinations test different areas of literacy), it is likely that many of these parents would have been assessed at a lower level. It seems important, though, that FL programmes collect additional data on parents' English and literacy levels at the start of courses, in order to confirm that FL is reaching its target groups of Level 1 or below. It needs to be pointed out, though, that some of the qualifications were taken a long time ago in the form of O Levels or other qualifications equivalent to L2, and there was undoubtedly some skills fade.

Sometimes an LA manager/coordinator would accept a parent with higher qualifications if that extra body prevented the class from starting by not achieving the minimum number. As one LA Manager also pointed out, 'It's a very small percentage' and he used his discretion on a case-by-case basis:

*If we excluded all those parents it might have a knock on effect, a detrimental effect on your relationships with the school, and also with the parent body, because, you know, it is going to be somebody's friend – how come she can do it and I can't? You know? But, having said all that we are able to do that only because we get such a big percentage of parents with low levels of skills, few qualifications, from areas of high socio economic deprivation, in other words, that tick all the boxes. So we get very high percentages of those, I think that gives us, as a manager, then, I think it's sensible to take that decision to be inclusive, to use your discretion on a case by case basis.*

Another LA manager pointed out that these parents and their children still benefited, and as the main conclusion of the research was that the

<sup>7</sup> From a course of 30 hours, 10 hours were designated as parents-only; 10 hours were children-only and 10 hours were joint sessions.

<sup>8</sup> However, it is important to point out that this information was collected through a self-report questionnaire and 48% of the sample were either not sure or provided no response.

key benefit of attending FL courses for parents was to find out how their children are taught at school in order to better support them at home, then the authors suggest that policy-makers may wish to be a little more flexible.

One tutor also explained the rationale for including parents who had qualifications in literacy at Level 2 or above: for her, it was an issue of inclusion.

*We don't select parents, we don't advertise to particular parents, we've always advertised to everybody otherwise they feel picked on and identified, ....most of the parents that we get, if not all, will be people who need the programme. On that last course I had a couple of Level 2 parents, but even they, if you did a spiky profile of their literacy skills, would have significant gaps in some areas*

Moreover, although recruitment practices may run counter to policy, classroom observations indicated that better educated parents helped and encouraged their less well educated peers, rather than caused any divisions. Furthermore, they were equally willing to work on the same activities.

#### *A lack of Entry Level learners*

In some ways, an equally pressing concern was the relatively low numbers of Entry Level learners, or learners who held no formal qualifications. Although there is no suggestion that the relatively high proportion of learners who held qualifications above Level 1 squeezed out these learners, the fact remains is that these are the very parents that FL programmes should be targeting, and yet they only represented 19% of the total numbers across the 74 programmes. The project did not have the time or resources to pursue this matter further, but breaking down barriers and widening participation are clearly themes that need to be at the forefront of the FL agenda. Certainly the LA managers, tutors, headteachers and early years teachers knew that they had to do better, although few had any solutions. The authors speculate that it is likely to be a mixture of reasons but may be, at least partly, connected to issues around people who have had poor educational experiences which have resulted in the development of negative attitudes to schooling, and which are further complicated by them viewing schools as essentially middle class

institutions. However, this is an area that requires further research.

#### *Too few men*

Research consistently shows that FL classes are predominantly female spaces (Brooks et al, 1996; Ofsted, 2000, 2009; Borg & Mayo, 2001; Goldman, 2005; Hannon et al, 2006; Anderson et al, 2010), and the need to engage fathers still represents a major challenge across all FL programmes. Indeed, Anderson et al. (2010) point out that FL should, perhaps, be referred to as 'woman's literacy' as they make up the vast majority of the participants. It is therefore not surprising that improving engagement with fathers represents a major challenge across all FL programmes. The findings in this project show that male participation was low, at 6% on average across all courses, which corresponds exactly to the figure Rose & Atkin (2007) found when they interviewed 48 learners in programme across England, Ireland and Malta. Three barriers to engaging with fathers in FL emerged during interviews with LA managers, including limited access to provision, traditional roles and responsibilities and female environments.

Some interviewees discussed the difficulties that working fathers and non-resident fathers may have in accessing FL provision as most programmes run during school hours. A number also said that some of their family groups see the mother as the primary carer and father as the main breadwinner. One LA manager told us:

*It's a cultural thing as well, because the kind of groups we've got ... the men are quite happy to go out and work, and they want their wives or partners to be totally dedicated to bringing up the children...*

Most interviewees mentioned that the vast majority of tutors, teachers and practitioners in early years settings and FL are female, which might lead some fathers to think that learning is a female activity.

To use the words of two of LA managers:

*I just think if you go on the playground, quite often most of the people in the morning, dropping kids off, would be mums. Most of the teachers in the school will be women, most of the classroom assistants will be women. So, in terms of the staff and the people who turn up, they*

*are quite sort of female orientated. I don't think they try and exclude men; it is just the actual presence, the numbers.*

*I think there is a danger that some of the school venues and Children's Centres can appear a bit feminised. I think that's particularly so of Children's Centres actually, even though Children's Centres are actually doing a lot of work around things like Dads groups, when you actually walk into a children's centre you've got posters about breastfeeding...*

These findings further confirm the work of Macleod (2008) who interviewed fathers who had begun and then discontinued attending FL programmes, and also linked their reasons to gender issues: that is, they felt the intimidated by what they regarded as a feminised environment, which, they perceived, threatened their masculine identities<sup>9</sup>.

While some LA managers said they were running 'fathers-only' courses, and these had been successful in attracting men, others felt that this was a form of segregation and did not seem appropriate to the ethos of FL.

*And what I would say is, when you do get fellas taking part, quite often it's very positive, not only for the fella, but for the other members of the group.*

### **C. Schools**

The main issues and themes that arose under the headings of 'school' (where almost all the programmes took place) were around poor accommodation (including noise and space); pressures on schools to release children (resulting in children's session being too short, and sometimes not matching up with the adult provision); and the competing agendas between schools and LAs. Some programmes also suffered from poor quality resources and limited access to ICT.

<sup>9</sup> The only country to have tackled this issue systematically is Turkey, where mixed-gender FL classes would be culturally unacceptable anyway. Instead, the Mother-Child Education Foundation has developed separate programmes for fathers; these are less numerous to date than mothers' programmes but, where they exist, are well attended (Koçak, 2004).

#### *Poor accommodation*

The physical and cultural environment where FL classes are held is of crucial importance to the success and effectiveness of the provision, a point that was forcefully made by tutors, LA managers and headteachers. Out of the 12 settings visited, researchers rated adult accommodation as being 'good' eight times (or two-thirds), 'adequate' once, and 'poor' three times. The children-only sessions were not visited on a sufficient number of occasions to make a meaningful judgement.

An example of 'good' accommodation is given in the text below:

*The classroom is very well resourced. It is a dedicated room for family literacy and numeracy and there is a sink and tea and coffee making facilities. The parents are able to come here before and after sessions and most of them have their lunch together here. This all helps to create a relaxed, informal atmosphere. The chairs are 'upper junior' size (for 9- to 11-year-olds), which are not too small and uncomfortable. There is a portable whiteboard and a selection of about 50 children's and 50 adults' books on two shelves, which parents are allowed to sign for and take home each week.  
(field notes 1: An example of a well resourced family literacy classroom)*

However, on other occasions, there were difficulties or challenges associated with (1) excessive noise, caused by a number of reasons such as parents accompanied by noisy babies, and (2) teaching and learning occurring in generally unsuitable spaces such as school staffrooms and canteens/dining halls.

#### *Excessive noise*

In one class the crèche was situated within a small classroom, which was about 12 square metres (4m x 3m). At one stage, there were 14 people in this space: three crèche workers, three babies, three parent learners (including one with a baby on her lap), a teacher, a support teacher, the researcher and a family literacy manager. The noise of the crèche was very loud and made teaching extremely difficult. The teacher coped brilliantly and told the researcher, 'You just have to get on with it'. Nevertheless, the noise was a persistent and obvious barrier to good teaching and learning (see field note 2).

*The noise level is still high and now Parent 2 is bottle-feeding her child, which she has on her lap, in order to try and keep him quiet. Parent 1 perseveres and carries on reading. The story is about her childhood, and, in particular, her school days. Parent 2's baby is crying loudly. (Field notes 2: An example of a noisy family literacy class.)*

#### *Teaching in unsuitable spaces*

Not only did researchers see classes taught in classrooms that included a crèche, some found schools were not always able to provide dedicated rooms, and so teachers and learners had to adapt to different spaces on different occasions such as canteens/dining halls, which became particularly noisy as lunchtime approached. In one of the sessions observed, the parents-only session was taught in the staffroom, which was not an appropriate or acceptable space, and which became so noisy when a group of midday assistants held a meeting before lunch that the FL session had to be abandoned.

In some settings, parents were also often required to sit on very small chairs, which were used by reception-age or Year 1 pupils. These were obviously very uncomfortable for adults, and this could become particularly acute when they were engaged in writing activities, including taking national tests.

An important point to make is that space was more likely to be at a premium in successful schools where rolls are rising, and researchers only saw dedicated rooms for FL in schools with falling rolls. The situation posed a dilemma for LA managers and tutors: did the LA have a 'bottom line' and refuse to run a course where accommodation was deemed as being 'inappropriate', or did the LA attempt to do all it could to get the course up and running because it was better to have some FL provision rather than nothing? One tutor told researchers that she would do her very best to hold the course, as long as the room was safe. However, an LA manager said that, although he recognised that schools could find the physical accommodation difficult, he had a bottom line of not sanctioning a course if the school was unable to provide dedicated teaching rooms for both parents and children.

#### *Schools being reluctant to release children, particularly for standard courses*

Another theme that emerged came from conversations and e-mail communications, with and from LA managers/coordinators, which alerted researchers to the fact that some headteachers were becoming increasingly unwilling to release children for longer programmes because they worried that they would miss out on too much learning. Schools were caught up in and subject to the contemporary neoliberal policy agenda that prioritises the performance indicators of 'higher standards' and 'rates of achievement', and, feeling accountable to parents, governors, LAs and governments (Ball, 2003), so they felt the need to ensure that children did not miss out on class lessons that could, potentially, impact on and compromise SATs results. Another related issue that emerged was that some schools were also reluctant to release children, particularly when FL provision clashed with literacy and/or numeracy hours, or when they did so, the session was shorter than the time scheduled in the FL programme<sup>10</sup>.

#### *Adult and children session not always matching up*

The fact that some sessions did not always match for the joint meeting of the parents with their children is connected to the issues immediately above. However, another reason was linked to when adults were working, or practising for their end-of-course national tests.

#### *Competing agendas between schools and LAs*

One of the difficulties of FL programmes that the research uncovered (Swain et al, 2009) was the competing and conflicting demands, or agendas, between the FL programme policy-makers (in the form of government and local authorities and the Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs), which have to meet national and local priorities, and the schools, where the majority of the programme are set. This can be seen in the kind of parents each area of the provision is attempting to attract. The former are interested in particular parents with low SES, with qualifications below Level 1, not only because they are part of the inclusion agenda, but also because they can

<sup>10</sup> One way around this is to schedule family literacy courses in the afternoon (most literacy hours take place in the mornings), although this will often reduce the potential time from three to two hours.



contribute to national targets by gaining accredited national tests. In addition, adult literacy teachers are working to build on parents' motivation to help their children as a springboard from which to develop adult skills. However, as we have seen, the schools' agenda is largely shaped by the twin discourses of 'higher standards' and 'rates of achievement', and they therefore want benefits that will enhance the school's effectiveness. Schools want any parent (irrespective or not whether they have a qualification in literacy at Level 1 or above) who has a child in the school who is struggling with literacy, and they see FL programmes as an effective way of raising pupil attainment, as well as a way of building stronger links between home and school by bringing the more disaffected parents into the school culture and improving parent-teacher relations.

#### **D. Family literacy tutors and early years teachers**

##### *Insufficient time for planning*

The main issue surrounding the literacy tutors and the early years teachers was around planning. The research found that the level of information sharing, including planning, could present problems, and this was likely to be more of an issue in some rural areas. Planning between tutors and teachers is key to successful practice, but only some of the practitioners reported that this time was built into the overall programme and funded for.

Tutors and early years practitioners required time for both medium- and short-term planning. This necessitated meeting before the course started to joint plan a scheme of work for the whole programme, and, ideally, they should also be meeting before the session to check what each other was doing so that it matched up in the joint or combined session. If a physical meeting was not possible, tutors and teachers needed to at least be in contact by telephone and/or e-mail. In practice, researchers found that some meetings for medium and short term planning were not always happening.

##### **Factors that enable successful family literacy provision**

Many of the issues discussed above can be seen as either barriers, or constraining factors, which

militate against effective FL provision, or at least make it more difficult to achieve. However, the research team also delineated a number of key factors or features of provision, which researchers concluded enable successful or effective FL provision to take place, or at least make it more likely. They are organised under the same four headings of FL programmes/courses; parents; schools, and FL tutors and teachers.

Effective FL provision is likely to occur when there is/are:

##### *FL programmes/courses*

- strong leadership, with LA managers who have a strong educational background and are able to understand school structures, and headteachers who support FL and recognised its benefits and the role of parents in children's learning;
- the use of parent support or liaison officers who understand local parental concerns and issues to recruit parents. Also, where there is the involvement of past and present parents from FL courses who act as 'learning champions' to attract other parents, and who can interpret flyers and leaflets into first languages if needed;
- the embedding of provision as part of a wider family and adult learning programme, including a mixture of short, 'taster' courses for parents who may be daunted by the commitment required to attend longer courses, which have a greater chance of maximising change and progression;
- a flexible approach taken by LAs to FL, including a willingness to maintain programmes when adult enrolments are low in order to keep schools engaged and allow interest in provision to grow;
- provision by LAs that shows clear routes of progression which are signposted towards further educational courses (e.g. family numeracy) and training;
- a strong relationships between LAs and schools and where LAs employ staff who are patient, persistent and flexible in building relationships with schools; and also where LAs develop partnerships with colleges that enable access to good quality adult literacy tutors;

##### *Parents*

- a commitment and regular attendance from parents who form good relationships and support each other. Where there are adult literacy tutors who are encouraged to set up learner peer support groups, which continue working together once the course has finished;
- parents who use the class activities with their children at home each week to support their children's learning;

*Schools*

- celebration assemblies are held by schools so that children can see their parents gaining qualifications;
- funds for schools to buy supply cover so that school staff can be involved in FL recruitment, planning and delivery;
- the provision of crèches during FL sessions, which have a significant impact on parents' ability to successfully complete their course. Further, not having to incur any cost for FL courses is a major factor in parents' enrolment;
- the use of local, convenient and familiar venues for courses, appropriately furnished for FL sessions, and with high quality resources and materials (e.g. laminating machines and access to ICT);
- schools which have a specially designated space for FL in the main school building, and parents are able to continue their studies in the same building or in premises which are nearby;

*Tutors and teachers*

- the involvement of adult literacy tutors and early years teaching staff who are well-qualified and committed to FL, who have a good working partnership, and who are able to form positive relationships with learners;
- paid time is built into the programme for planning between adult literacy tutors and early years teachers, both for medium-term and short-term objectives, so that they can work together in the joint session;
- practitioners recognise that parents and children were likely to have many different understandings and cultural norms. They need to start from where the parents and children are in terms of their understandings of literacy and their literacy skills;
- parents-only sessions are linked directly to the school curriculum and include information for parents on how, as well as what, children are taught in school.

**Conclusions**

The project on which this paper is based evaluated the impact of FL in England and found considerable benefits for parents, children and schools. The paper has delineated and discussed a number of key issues that recurred throughout the research. These were around recruitment, national tests, the educational profile of the parents, accommodation, the tension between the agendas of schools and LAs and lack of opportunities for planning, and the authors argue that these need

to be taken seriously by future policy makers who are interested in designing new FL programmes.

The hook that is used to enrol many parents was their children but, once they had overcome their initial anxieties, many parents began to enjoy learning and wanted to improve their own skills. Parents learned about how their children were taught and become better able to support their child's learning at home. Parents became more closely involved with the school and relations with staff improved. Parents and children enjoyed their experience of learning together, and many of the gains lasted well beyond the date the course finishes.

In many ways FL is a win-win situation, and throughout the project researchers either heard about, or observed, many examples from the list above that enabled good and effective FL practice. And yet things can always be better, and much of the success is often achieved despite quite challenging circumstances. Funding is not always sufficient and from 2011 is no longer ring-fenced specifically for family learning<sup>11</sup>. The expansion of the LSC menu of family programmes over recent years has not been matched by an equivalent increase in overall funding. This necessarily means that funding for each type of programme, including FL, is spread thinner. Moreover, as we have seen, accommodation is often still poor.

FL was particularly effective where it was embedded in a school's core offer of family and adult learning to parents. In some cases this was accompanied by a specially designated family room, which allowed for good quality resources including ICT and permanent displays of families' work. The present funding arrangements work against permanent rolling programmes of FL in schools as providers strive to cover high demand on limited budgets, and these problems were often particularly acute in smaller schools.

At its inception in the mid 1990's, FL was seen as a soft tool to engage parents with no formal qualifications in learning while supporting their children. Over the years, its emphasis has shifted, and it is now seen as an important factor in delivering targets, i.e. national qualifications at Entry level 3 and Levels 1 and 2. It is important to

<sup>11</sup> Funding for family learning currently comes from within the Adult Safeguard, although, from 2011, the elements of the Safeguard were no longer ring-fenced. The present government is undertaking a review of 'Informal Adult and Community Learning', and this opens things up for how the Safeguard will be spent from 2012/13.

ensure that, as well as continuing to do this, FL is also able to attract learners at Entry levels 1 and 2 and continues to offer learning in relaxed and innovative ways to an often totally turned-off group of non-learners, but out of which comes huge enjoyment, great camaraderie, some literacy improvement and often the confidence and interest to carry on learning.

Most importantly, FL should not be seen as a quick fix. Although FL may help to break the

generational cycle of deprivation this may take much longer than policy makers would like, and as Rose & Atkin (2005) point out, it may be not until the current generation of children become parents and educators themselves that the real benefits of these programmes will be seen.

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