

References

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Schools as Partners in the Family Literacy Small Grants Initiative

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In late September 1994 the Basic Skills Agency (formerly ALBSU) commissioned the University of Exeter School of Education to undertake research on their family literacy small grants programme. The small grants programme is an aspect of the agency's four year developmental initiative in family literacy. It funds local initiatives in family literacy which are based upon partnerships between different agencies, for example schools, libraries, social services and charities. A key element in the small grants programmes is the presence of some work with adults alone, children alone and joint adult-child sessions. This article outlines the research which we are conducting on the small grants programmes and highlights some of the issues which have arisen in connection with schools' involvement as partners in family literacy.

Our brief from the Basic Skills Agency, and the purpose of the research, was to provide detailed information on the family literacy small grants programmes and to identify factors within them which might indicate a greater likelihood of success. An additional purpose of the research was to identify practical lessons to be learned from the programmes. There are a number of different kinds of lessons which could be learnt from this initiative. Some are broad and general, such as indications that programmes have been effective in achieving their aims and have offered good value for money to all partners in funding. Other lessons relate to the sorts of growth and development which they are bringing about. We are concerned to identify what factors or principles built into the programmes will help them to work and how these can be repeated or be transferred across contexts. For example, if a primary school wishes to initiate a family literacy programme, or be a partner in one, what factors will need to be taken into ac-

count, what will help to ensure successful adoption within the school and its community? Are the factors the same in all primary schools? What about the ones which are socially, ethnically and linguistically diverse? These are fairly straightforward questions, but without empirically derived evidence, from range of sources, such as that provided by our research, the answers to such questions would remain largely speculative, or anecdotal.

As the initiative is concerned with locally developed programmes of family literacy, the range of provision and partners is wide; in fact the purpose of the initiative is to reflect and support that very diversity. Diversity encompasses geographical area both urban and rural; specific settings and particular target populations of parents and children, for example, fathers, bilingual parents and speakers of languages other than English, Moslem women in purdah. It also includes structural features such as partnership arrangements, management, location and venue, childcare and transport arrangements, the amount of tuition and timing of sessions. Equally, diversity encompasses the educational aspects of programmes, such as content and approach; the pattern of provision for parents, children and joint parent/child work varies considerably across programmes.

Researching the small grants programme

In terms of research, we faced a considerable challenge in relation to the diversity described above; there were no easily comparable programmes or cohorts of parents and children to study. The approach which we took was to draw up a sample of family literacy programmes funded by the Basic Skills Agency which reflected the extent of the diversity but

which also allowed common lessons to be drawn from diversity. A sample of 20 family literacy programmes funded within the small grants initiative was drawn up which represented different geographical areas in England and Wales; the range of partners and venues involved; different approaches and methodologies across the programmes. The sample included programmes in which partners were mainstream education providers such as schools, colleges and community education and also partners who were concerned with the welfare and educational opportunities of children and families but were not directly involved with the provision of education, for example social services, libraries and charities. In the initial stages of the research we spent a substantial amount of time out in the field, getting to know each of the family literacy programmes in our sample, talking to organisers, tutors, other partners and most importantly, to those people participating in the programmes.

Because much of the work in family literacy funded by the small grants initiative was at an exploratory stage, it was not appropriate for us to construct detailed research questions and instruments in advance of the fieldwork. Our initial visits to sites and conversations with what have come to be known as the 'key drivers' in the programmes, indicated that the researchers would need to keep in close contact with the programmes and to develop good relationships with the people involved, both providers and participants. The development of a relationship of trust was particularly critical; as pointed out already, the majority of the programmes were breaking new ground and innovation requires constant evaluation, reflection and adjustment. It required a considerable degree of openness and confidence for family literacy programmes to allow themselves to be the object of research at a time when they were developing in a new area. What has struck us during the course of this research, has been the enthusiasm, openness and accessibility of participants and providers.

Between November 1994 and May 1995, two researchers were engaged in fieldwork; each was responsible for working with particular programmes. We spent time observing the parent, child and joint sessions, interviewing participants, course providers and administrators and collecting documentation on publicity, recruitment, attendance, course planning and evaluation, accreditation of participants' learning. Our aim was to get as full a picture as possible of how the family literacy programmes funded by the small grants initiative were working. At this stage, we were seeking rich and detailed contextual evidence rather than answers to pre-determined questions. A key element was the time which we spent talking to the participants themselves; people told us much about their reasons for joining the family literacy programmes, their hopes, aspirations and sometimes constraints. We kept our interviews flexible,

allowing participants to talk about those aspects of the programme which were meaningful to them, whilst at the same time striking a balance between areas on which we wanted information. Interestingly, participants volunteered information, often of a highly personal nature, for which we would not have asked directly. In many instances these accounts related to the adult participants' perceptions of their own education and attainment; their role in supporting their children's development in literacy and, more generally, in learning; and their relationship with their children's schools. The latter point is of particular interest not only to those schools considering involvement in family literacy, but also more generally to all schools wishing to involve parents more closely.

Schools as partners in family literacy

A considerable number of the sites in our sample were programmes in which a school was an active partner; usually, if not always, providing the venue and some of the staffing. The majority of these were Primary schools covering range of geographical and socio-economic locations. In many cases the primary school was the initiating partner to the programme and in other cases they had joined the partnership, identifying the potential benefits which might be gained from developing family literacy. Some schools which had not been initiating partners became so convinced of the benefits to be gained from supporting family literacy programmes that they took on responsibility for the continuation of family literacy once the initial phase of funding supported by the basic skills agency had come to an end.

The involvement of schools in partnership arrangements brought both benefits and challenges. One potentially important aspect of partnerships between schools and other agencies, which began to emerge at an early stage in our research, was the ways in which each of the partners adapted to the challenge of working with other agencies. Common examples of this were when primary school teachers, particularly early years specialists worked with adult basic education (ABE) tutors; when social workers collaborated with adult basic education tutors and early childhood educators. Partner agencies and institutions often had value systems, priorities and an operational language which were not necessarily understood or shared by those outside their professional group. Many basic assumptions had to be explained and, often, questioned as professionals, volunteers and participants worked together. The initial stages of such partnerships involved a high degree of trust and a focus on the common aim whilst negotiating and establishing working practices.

One example from a programme in our research sample was where adult basic education (ABE) tutors

worked in a school with parents in the morning and in the afternoon worked alongside class teachers supporting the parents and children working together in the afternoon. Both primary school teachers and adult basic educators were highly skilful and confident in their own domain, but felt they were learning new ways of working in relation to family literacy. At first this new context led both ABE tutors and teachers to feel rather less certain and secure in their own skills and expertise. For the ABE tutors it meant working in a different environment, adapting to the contextual norms of a school and negotiating the often implicit rule structures: for example, being called Ms/Mr instead of being addressed by their first names as would be normal in working with adults; negotiating school staffrooms and access to rooms and resources within the school. It also meant negotiating their status within schools: whether they were teachers or helpers in the classroom and what they said to children when asked.

For the class teachers in the primary school, it meant some uncertainty as to their role in relation to the ABE tutor and the children participating in the programme; it also meant another person in their classroom on a regular basis. Over time, in this particular programme the ABE tutors and teachers developed mutual respect and learned from each other. Also, both felt considerably more confident and comfortable in working with a colleague from another phase of the education system. An example from another programme was where an ABE tutor collaborated with a special needs post-holder in a primary school. The teacher, when interviewed by the researchers said that she had gained considerable knowledge of how to relate to parents by working alongside the ABE tutor. She questioned her own previous approach to dealing with parents and suggested that she had treated them less as adult equals than as parents of children in her class. However, it is interesting to note that parent participants interviewed in the programme singled out this particular teacher as being worthy of praise in working with their children and as being accessible to parents. The special needs post-holder identified working with parents and other adults as an area of professional development which she would wish to pursue in the future. The above examples give only brief illustrations of the kind of professional challenges faced in developing partnerships between schools and other agencies; they also give examples of the kinds of professional and institutional development to be gained from such collaboration. Schools involved in family literacy supported by the small grants scheme emphasised the benefits to be gained from a closer relationship with other agencies concerned with education or the welfare of children and understanding of the ways in which their assumptions might not be shared by those not directly involved in primary education.

Hannon (1995), in writing about the development of family literacy in Britain, suggests that there has not yet been genuine meeting of the two main traditions from which family literacy has sprung: early childhood education and adult education. He also expresses a concern that family literacy programmes will be led and defined by adult educators who have little awareness of the specifics of early childhood education. Clearly, Hannon was speculating on what he perceived to be a challenge for family literacy programmes at the time when he was writing. Our research is beginning to indicate that genuine partnerships are being developed within the small grants programmes in which schools, and in particular early childhood educators, take a prominent and often leading role. It will be interesting to see the overall patterns of partnership and collaboration which have been developed within the small grants initiative. Negotiations for the continuation of programmes after the initial phase of funding shows that schools are becoming increasingly proactive in seeking to support and maintain family literacy. There are instances in our study where headteachers have persuaded governors and parent-teacher groups of the importance and value of family literacy to their work with children; in some cases, they have included family literacy in the development plans for their school and have earmarked scarce financial and human resources for the programmes.

Hannon suggests that the alternative to family literacy is '... good literacy oriented early childhood education ... for broad groups of families likely to benefit. It should maximise parental involvement and provide opportunities for adults to develop their literacy if they want to ... Meanwhile schools have much to learn from the ideas and methods being tried with families.' (ibid. 108). What is beginning to emerge from detailed study of family literacy programmes within the Basic Skills Agency's small grants initiative, is not so much that schools are learning from ideas and methods being tried with families, but that schools, in collaboration with adult educators, are directly involved in developing and evaluating those very ideas and methods with families.

Parents and schools in family literacy programmes

Another important way in which the development of family literacy has had an impact on schools – and one in which family literacy differs from parental involvement initiatives – is that parents are in school both as learners and as partners, with teachers, in the education of their children. This complexity has posed a challenge to conventional ways of approaching the role of parents in schools. It is also where Hannon's proposal for an emphasis on good early childhood education which offers potential for parents to develop their own literacy should they so wish is questionable. Good early childhood education, maxi-

missing parental involvement could supplement and complement rather than replace family literacy programmes. A key factor in the success of family literacy programmes may well be that they provide clear and direct opportunities for parents to enhance their own basic skills in literacy as adults, rather than as just parents of young children. A further factor may be that family literacy programmes offer the opportunity for the accreditation of learning during the courses.

The example described above of the primary school special needs teacher who learned new ways of relating to parents as competent adult equals rather than in relation to the children whom she taught highlights the potential gap between schools who wish to encourage parental involvement in the school and in their children's education, but may not always relate to the parents in a way which makes them feel comfortable in the school environment. This is a potentially controversial and sensitive issue; but it is one which was identified by schools themselves during the course of our research. Several schools identified a desire to extend their role in relation to parents and the wider community, but also suggested that they often did not address adequately the real needs and preoccupations of a large number of parents; particularly where those parents had negative perceptions of school, often based upon their own experience as pupils.

Adult participants attending family literacy programmes in schools reported how their children welcomed their presence in school and looked forward to the days when they came in for family literacy sessions. It seemed that children were proud of their parents' participation in family literacy and of their parents working with them in school. As an example, in one programme in our sample, parents made the following observations about their children's attitude to them being in school on a regular basis:

'She's really overwhelmed by this . . . "Mum's coming into school today!" and if I can't come, she's really disappointed.'

'He'd cry if I couldn't make it. I've got a little one and I've got to get someone to mind her. He would cry "I want you to come, I want you to come".'

Parents participating in the programmes frequently told us that they were concerned about their children's progress in school, but had little understanding of what they did there or how they, as parents, might help children at home. There was emphasis on knowing how to support children and feeling confident that what they did at home made a contribution. Parents lack of confidence in feeling that they were able to help their children generally with school and specifically with literacy and language development was noticeable. They often referred to themselves as

having been outside the school's sphere of influence and having little knowledge of how activities in the home related to those of school. Participation in a family literacy programme, having a role in the school in their own right and not only in relation to their children, may have enabled parents to feel as though they were on the inside rather than the outside. One parent who had strongly negative perceptions of her own schooling and previous encounters with her children's schools expressed it thus: 'It's easier when you're that side looking at it, but when you are outside the school gates picking the children up, you can't really do anything about it, can you? Other than argue with the teachers.'

When parents felt they had a clear place within the school as part of the programme, it seemed to enhance their confidence in communicating with teachers and in supporting their children. A critical aspect in the development of this confidence was the quality of the school space allocated to the programme and thus to the parents themselves. A comfortable, central and, in many instances, visible location with access to facilities for refreshments was valued, not only by the teachers and tutors involved in family literacy, but particularly by the parents themselves. This was seemingly a small factor, but it was one which was appreciated by parents and one which made them feel that they were truly welcomed and accepted in the school as adult equals. It was a feature of programmes which required little structural organisation but which necessitated a shift in attitude on the part of both school and parents.

For many of the participants in the programmes studied in our research, family literacy programmes based in schools offered opportunities in relation to their own learning which they would not otherwise have had. It might be argued that schools are not the best place for adult basic education, that they have neither facilities, resources nor expertise to provide education for parents. Nonetheless, the participants whom we interviewed reported that involvement in a family literacy programme based in their children's school enabled them to have access to educational opportunities which they would otherwise not have had. A number of participants in a variety of locations have gone on, or are intending to go on to take more conventional courses in FE and Tertiary Colleges and community education centres. Some of these courses were in basic numeracy and literacy, others in areas such as in childcare and electronics. Obviously, the longer-term progress of participants in school-based family literacy programmes cannot yet be charted, but there are signs that many participants who would not otherwise have felt confident enough, either in their literacy or social skills, may be encouraged to pursue further educational opportunities.

Primary schools were usually easily accessible to those parents without transport, and as several

pointed out, they had to bring their children to school anyway, so it did not entail an extra journey. Equally, where programmes were timed to take place between the start of school and lunchtime, or the beginning of the afternoon and the end of the school day, they fitted in well with the normal routines of domestic life. The only reservation here would be in relation to those parents who had day-time employment and were, therefore, not able to participate. There were a few instances of participants getting jobs during the course of the programme and from then onwards being unable to attend. Generally, though, a school location for family literacy satisfied the needs of parents who were full-time or even part-time carers of young children. For schools thinking of setting up or becoming involved in family literacy programmes it would be worthwhile to consider the childcare needs of participants with children under school age. Crèche facilities present a challenge: they may be expensive to provide where human and spatial resources are scarce. One programme used a group of trainee nursery nurses from the partner FE College to work with pre-school children. The arrangement was supervised by an early childhood educator in the College who was tutor to the course, and provided valuable placement experience for the students. This particular arrangement was in a programme based in a social services family centre, but it had potential for adaptation to other settings.

Conclusion

This article has described the ways in which research on the family literacy programmes has been under-

taken since November, 1994. It has also highlighted some of the key concerns for schools involved or considering involvement in partnerships. We are now at the point of conducting a detailed analysis of our data and will be able to provide more detailed examples of the general issues identified here. Schools may well ask what benefits involvement in family literacy will bring in relation to the children they teach and the parents of those children; and whether the benefits to be gained justify the time and resources required. Obviously, there are no easy answers which can be applied in all contexts and school situations: those schools which have been involved have had many reasons for doing so. The examples offered here provide some illustration of the opportunities, challenges and rewards for schools involved in family literacy programmes.

Reference

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Reading at Home: Does it Matter What Schools Do?

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My main concern in this article is to look at the part played by a school in bringing about success in a parental involvement in reading (PIR) programme. While we may feel intuitively that the role and involvement of the school is bound to make a difference to the outcomes of a PIR programme surprisingly little has been said about this in the PIR literature. I believe this is because we tend to think of parental involvement in terms of what goes on in the home and how what goes on in the home affects a child's performance in school.

This focus is, however, limited in its scope because it deals with only one direction in the link between home and school. It is the link which goes from the school to the home in the sense that its emphasis is on reflecting school practices in home practices. This is the link which is about helping parents to prepare their children to perform well on school tasks.

There is, however, a second link between home and school which goes in the opposite direction. This is the one which goes from the home to the school in