

The benefits of family literacy provision for parents in England

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with parents' experiences and perceptions of being involved in a family literacy (FL) programme. The research, which was conducted from November 2007 to July 2009, involved interviewing 101 parents from 74 FL programmes in England around 12 weeks after they had completed their courses. The aim of these qualitative interviews was to identify any short- and medium-term benefits, and to assess the impact on their lives. Previous evaluations of FL have mainly focused on children's literacy outcomes, and the paper argues that, as insiders and consumers of family literacy programmes, parents have the potential to make vital contributions to policy and practice, including the design of future successful programmes. The paper shows that there is a whole series of benefits for parents, their children, family and schools. Amongst these, parents learn to support their children's learning; they place greater value on education and learning and gain a deeper understanding of school systems; they become more interested in developing their own literacy skills; they form social and supportive networks, which are maintained as their children move through the school; and the programmes give parents opportunities for progression to further education and training.

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Introduction

This paper is concerned with parents' experiences and perceptions of being involved in a family literacy (FL) programme, and the effect it had on their lives. The findings form part of a 20-month project [1], whose main aim was to assess the impact of FL in England on the skills of parents [2] and their children; family relationships; progression and social mobility. The research, which took place from November 2007 to July 2009, was based on a range of FL courses in England involving parents and their children aged between three and seven years of age.

Although the project used mixed methods, this paper specifically focuses on the qualitative research which explored parents' motivations for joining an FL course/programme; the main benefits they gained from the course (including improvements to their own literacy skills, and the knowledge and skills they acquired in learning how to support their children); changes in their involvement in children's schools; and the relationship between FL and parents' continuation in education and/or training and employment. Parents' progress in reading or writing is discussed elsewhere (see Swain et al 2009), and this report also provides a more comprehensive account of the study's sample and methodology..

The majority of evaluations of FL have focused on children's literacy outcomes (see, for example, Whitehurst et al 1994; Wagner et al 2002), and participants' views and experiences (both children's and parents'), and the so-called 'softer' benefits have generally received less attention. Although some studies have reported parents' views (see, for example, Brooks et al 1996; Hannon 1986; Hannon and Jackson 1987; Hannon et al 1991, 2006; Brooks 1998; Hirst 1998; Kirkpatrick 2004; Anderson & Morrison 2007) these generally seem to have been of less interest to policy-makers, and in much of the research about FL, parents have been neglected. However, the authors of this paper argue that parents are key players in FL programmes, not least because the agency they exert in whether they chose to attend or not, and the number enlisting, decide whether or not the programme is viable to run. We contend that research based upon insider insight and situated knowledge has the potential to produce bottom-up evidence (Appleby 2004). As insiders and consumers of the programmes, parents make vital contributions to policy and practice through their evaluations of the programme, but also through their insights on issues such as recruitment and retention. We therefore believe that parents'

perspectives are key to designing future successful FL programmes (Hannon et al 2006), and studying such views adds to understandings that will be useful to policy makers, local authority managers, headteachers, adult literacy teachers, early years teachers, parents and researchers.

Background

The crucial role of parents in supporting and improving their children's literacy development has also been well documented (e.g., Wade and Moore 2000). The earlier parents become involved in their children's literacy activities, the greater the results and the longer lasting the impacts (Mullis et al 2004), and learning in the home learning environment appears to play a central role in the process of literacy acquisition (Cairney 2003).

Although the initial focus of FL (and rationale for policy makers) was to improve children's literacy standards, research began to show that parents with poor literacy skills were exacerbating the educational difficulties of their children, and, furthermore, these negative impacts were not limited to just one lifetime (Desforges & Abouchar 2003; Parsons & Bynner 2007). A key strategy of breaking this 'cycle of disadvantage' developed, which was to target both generations through educational programmes. Recognising that parental education and skills are key determinants of children's attainment, the UK Labour government (in office 1997-2010) saw FL as playing a key role in increasing social inclusion and reducing intergenerational transfer of disadvantage.

FL programmes are targeted at parents living in areas with low levels of socio-economic status (SES) and with relatively low level qualifications, that is, no higher than Level 1, which equates to GCSE [3] grades D-G in British terms, or to Level 2 of the scale used internationally, e.g. in the International Adult Literacy Survey of 1994-98. Provision is free, with crèche (childcare) support (where feasible), and usually close to home. The courses are run in partnership with schools and Children's Centres, and are planned and delivered by 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). A typical FL class lasts for two to three hours, weekly. Programmes generally involve parents and young children aged three to six, and offer separate sessions for parents and children to develop their literacy skills, and joint sessions for parents and children to work together to support the children with literacy activities.

Some researchers argue that FL programmes operate from a deficit model and are full of 'deficit discourse' and 'deficit thinking' (Anderson et al 2010: 41; see also Luke & Luke 2001; Nichols et al 2009; Anderson et al 2008; Rocha-Schmid 2010). They maintain that FL is essentially concerned with promoting and imposing school literacy, and the 'transfer of cultural values from the school to parents and to the children' (Rocha-Schmid 2010: 343). Moreover, there is a one-way transfer (or imposition) of this knowledge, and parents' own knowledge, experiences, home languages and literacy practices are not drawn on enough,

and are rarely used to inform instruction (Auerbach 1989; Reyes & Torres 2007; Rocha-Schmid 2010).

However, as Rocha-Schmid (2010) maintain, there are opponents to this 'needs' model, such as Wolfendale (1996), who sees that informing or 'teaching' parents about the school curriculum and the pedagogical approaches used (in other words, showing them what and how their children learn), is a way of empowering them. Yes, in some ways, parents are being assimilated into the dominant school culture with its values and norms, but the authors of this paper argue that this can be seen as a form of inclusion, acting as a way to demystify what goes on in the classroom, and give parents a set of deeper understandings. Anderson & Morrison (2007), for example, carried out a survey of parents who had been involved in a year-long FL programme with four- and five-year-olds, and found that they felt more comfortable at school, understood the school's expectations better, and were more able to support their children's learning at home. They also felt more confident in their relations with teachers, and had formed social relationships, connections and networks with peers where they could share knowledge and strategies that created a great self-efficacy (Rodriquez-Brown 2004), which middle-class parents take more for granted (Laureau 1987; Anderson & Morrison 2007). In other words, these parents were developing forms of social and cultural capital (concepts developed by Bourdieu 1986), which is a metaphor for assets that allow people to gain greater status and power within society. As we will see, many of these findings were echoed in our research.

Previous evaluations

The crucial importance of the family dimension in the literacy learning of young children and parents has been well documented (see, for example, Brooks et al 1996, 1997, 1999, 2008; Ofsted 2000, 2009; Desforges & Abouchaar 2003; Feinstein et al 2004; Erion 2006; Horne & Haggart 2004; Hodge 2006; Nye et al 2006; Mol et al 2008; Senechal & Young 2008; McElvany & van Steensel 2009; Manz et al 2010; van Steensel et al 2010; Carpentieri et al 2011,) [4]. The meta-analytic evidence indicates that family literacy programmes have a greater impact than most educational interventions. However, Brooks et al's (2008) review concluded that, although there is convincing evidence that parents benefit in their ability to help their children in many ways, and that children's skills also improve, the amount of evidence about parents' skill development (in terms of improved outcomes in reading and/or writing) is much smaller, and less convincing. In conclusion, Brooks et al. argued that research has been unable to provide a definitive answer to whether two-generation FLLN programmes benefit parents as much as children; whether parents in FLLN programmes make better progress than they would in discrete or stand-alone adult literacy (or numeracy) programmes, or whether particular pedagogic approaches to FLLN are more effective than others.

Moreover, there have been few evaluations that have looked at how durable any changes are. The exception to this is the work of Brooks and colleagues who evaluated the Family Literacy Demonstration Programmes which were set up in England and Wales during the mid 1990s. They found that the programmes were associated with statistically significant advances in achievement in literacy for

both parents and children (Brooks et al 1996). In a follow-up study, two years later, all these specific, and many wider, gains were being sustained (Brooks et al 1997).

The study on which this paper is based (Swain et al 2009) was the first national evaluation of FL in England since the Brooks et al. study.

Sample

A total of 42 Local Authorities (LAs) took part in the project, representing 28% of the 152 English LAs. The study evaluated 74 FL programmes across England: 44 (59%) were short courses (30-49 hours) and 30 (41%) were standard courses (60-72 hours). 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. The total number of parents who took part in the evaluation was 583, although not every parent provided data for every strand of the research, and, for example, only 542 were enrolled on the FL courses. Of these, 101 were interviewed approximately three months after their courses finished in the summer term of 2008, and these findings constitute the main part of this paper. A total of 379 parents took a reading assessment at the beginning of the course (Time 1) and again towards the end (Time 2), and 121 parents also took a writing assessment at Time 1 and Time 2. Parents also completed two quantitative surveys in the form of questionnaires: one about parents' perceptions of changes in home literacy activities (N = 230 completed at both time points), the other about parents' perceptions of themselves and their children as learners of literacy (N = 230 completed at both time points). See Swain et al 2009 for the results.

Parents' profile

Parents were asked to provide background information in a short questionnaire (completed during class time), including their sex, ethnic group and first language spoken. They were also asked to state their age at the time of leaving full-time education and their highest qualification awarded in English or literacy in the UK. For this last item they were given the option to say they were unsure. A total of 542 adults enrolled on the 74 courses; 56% of parents (N=236) attended short courses, and 44% (N=182) attended standard courses (there was no information on which type of course the remaining 124 adults enrolled on). The numbers of parents for whom other items of information were available also varied, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 goes around here

Of the 509 parents who completed a demographic profile, 477 (94%) were women, and only 32 (6%) were men. From other demographic information on 408 of the adult participants, we know that 96% (N=392) of that group were parents of children on the programme, and 4% (N=16) were grandparents. 73% (N=374) were white British: the next largest ethnic group was Pakistani (7%, N=34); 78% (N=396) of the parents had English as their first language; and 31

languages other than English were reported as parents' first language, representing a vivid cross-section of the world's languages. Almost half the parents were in their 30s (46%, N=235); 36% (N=153) reported that they had stayed on in education beyond the age of 16; and very few reported having a learning or physical difficulty.

Methods, methodology and limitations of the research

The project employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods, and data were collected by a team of researchers, including adult literacy tutors and early years teachers. Qualitative approaches were used because researchers wanted to explore themes and issues that were salient in the lives of parents and children (and the other main constituents in FL programmes), and uncover their subjective values, beliefs and experiences from their own perspectives. Both methods were used during the same time frame and were built in at the design level rather than at the data level: Creswell & Plano Clark term this design, QUAN (qual) (2007:48). However, although the qualitative data played a relatively subsidiary role within the larger quantitative methodology, the qualitative findings both informed, and were embedded within, the overall conclusions.

Inevitably there are limitations to the research. First, data were collected from parents who stayed to the end of the course, and the study did not investigate the experiences of parents who dropped out, or the reasons they gave for doing so. Second, learner evaluations are notorious for generating positive results, particularly when they are gathered from people whose previous negative experiences of education have led them to have low expectations.

Interviews

The research team tracked 101 parents by telephone around 12 weeks after they had completed their courses with the aim of identifying any short- and medium-term benefits and assessing the impact of their participation in FL provision. A range of methods were used to gather these data, including seven focus group interviews (with between three and nine participants and involving a total of 43 parents), 42 short individual telephone interviews and 16 longer individual telephone interviews. The latter gave parents the chance to expand on any issues and to discuss responses to open questions in greater depth. The interview schedule included a series of pre-determined questions, some open and some closed, and, where appropriate, the number of parents who answered 'yes' and 'no' to the relevant closed question are reported along with the number of interviewees who responded. Because certain issues and themes emerged or developed over the course of the interview cycle, not every parent was asked every question. For a summary of these interviews, see Table 2 below.

Table 2 goes around here

Findings and discussion

Attendance and retention

The average number of learners per course was around nine parents and nine 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%.

Parents' overall evaluation of their course

The vast majority of parents were positive about their experience on FL courses. Although interviewees were not asked specifically for feedback about their tutors, many spontaneously offered comments that were very largely positive, and it was generally recognised that the quality of the tutor or teacher was key to the success and effectiveness of the course. This finding is supported by previous research (see, for example, Swain et al 2005; Coben et al 2007).

Motivations for joining the FL course

A total of 85 parents identified their motivations for joining an FL course. Although motivations were many and diverse, they mostly fell into two main categories. The first was linked to parents' understanding of their children's learning; the second was associated with the parents' own learning and development. Reasons in the first category were largely instrumental, that is parents wanted to learn about how children are taught in order to support them, and research has shown that this is the bait that is commonly used to hook in potential learners (Rose & Atkin 2007). For some interviewees this was a particular concern because they had not been educated in the UK, while others just wanted to update their knowledge:

I wanted to find out about the teaching methods in school, [for example] how sounds are taught. When I was at school things were taught differently.

In terms of their own learning, parents gave a mix of reasons. Personal reasons centred on the wish to gain or refresh skills and knowledge. Very specific goals, such as gaining a qualification or preparing for employment, were rarely mentioned, which is interesting, given the drive by the Labour government at the time, which was to get more parents to take accredited literacy tests in order to meet national targets, and to help parents find employment (see, for example, the two policy documents, *Every Parent Matters* (2007) and *Skills for Life: Changing Lives* (2009)).

The main benefits gained from the programme

A total of 94 interviewees reported gaining some kind of benefit from the FL course, and 89 thought that they had continued to benefit once it had finished. Benefits were also consistent with motivations and included four related areas: improvements in parents' own literacy; personal changes in confidence and self-esteem (including changes in their sense of identity); and a better awareness of how to support their children.

a) Improvements to parents' own literacy skills

Respondents commonly mentioned improvements in their own literacy skills such as reading, writing, grammar and punctuation. A few referred to gaining

qualifications or changing their behaviour, for example, by reading more as a result of improved skills.

[The] literacy course learnt [sic] me how to break words down and read them better, and know how to spell words out. Since the literacy course I have read more myself, things like leaflets properly, things outside. I don't read at home as much. I never used to ... I learnt how to understand the newspaper. I started to [read a book], and then I give up. If I read a book and I read it in my head it didn't sink in, the way I used to read it. But now when I pick a book up it sinks in, because I have learnt to slow down...

b) Personal changes (confidence, self-esteem and identities)

In total, 71 interviewees reported that they had changed as a person since taking the FL course, and 23 said that they had not. Most described personal change in terms of increased confidence in terms of their own literacy skills, their ability to help their children, and improvements in communicating and working with others, including teachers. Increased confidence is the most commonly reported effect from similar relevant research (Schuller et al 2002; Ward and Edwards 2002), and many of those who reported increased self-confidence also referred to the negative effects on their self-confidence of being at home with children and/or not having an outside life. Some interviewees also referred to increases in self-esteem, well-being and motivation.

I think it brought me out of myself a bit more. When we was [sic] talking in groups, and things like that, especially when I didn't know people, I'd go maybe a bit ... I didn't have confidence in meself [sic] because I'd think in my head that it be right, but I wouldn't dare to say it, just in case it wasn't right... and then other people was coming out with answers. And I was sitting there thinking – I thought it was this. And then they'd say – oh no, it is this. And I'd think – oh yeah, I was right. So then that gave me a bit more confidence to say my own opinion. Like, we did a few mock exams and things like that. And I thought – oh I am not as daft as what I thought. You know, things like that.

Some parents were also beginning to take a pride in their studying and identifying themselves as students. The identity of being a student is an important one, and as Rogers (2003) writes, how the adult positions him/herself in the teacher–student relationship will have a fundamental effect on their learning. Part of identity formation comes from people telling each other who they are claiming to be:

I feel a lot more brainier; I didn't know anything before. I say to people, when they say to me – what do you do with yourself? I say I am not at college, but at school, and they say – what are you doing? And I say a [family] numeracy [or literacy] course and they are like – oh, I couldn't do that, I was thick at school. And then I explain how I was and it gives them a bit of encouragement.

In addition, some respondents reported progress in generic skills such as having the confidence to work in groups and learning from and supporting one another, which are commonly observed practices in FL classes.

Just mainly sort of gaining confidence again, talking to adults and not children. Being able to work as a team, as well, because obviously over the weeks we've kind of got to know each other and we do a lot of pairing off in teams, like discussions and so on.

The social aspects of the course, such as meeting other parents, making friends, and forming networks, were also important to some and enabled them to develop social and cultural capital. 'Generic skills' such as working in teams and discussions skills may also contribute to social cohesion.

c) Supporting their children

Indications of improvements in supporting their children were reported as having a better understanding of how their children learn and are taught at school, with some parents referring specifically to learning about, or being reminded of, vocabulary and teaching approaches such as the use of phonics and phonemes.

Learning the words such as phonemes that they use at school. Words sounded really difficult but don't sound so frightening now. Now I understand when the teacher talks about phonemes. I know what they are, rather than a blank look coming over my face.

Others mentioned learning how to develop strategies and activities to help support their children, and gaining a better understanding of how to interact, play or converse with their children.

Since I joined the course I learned how to teach the kids things like how to read to them, how to spend some quality time every day, to stop pushing them so much and learned something from playing.

As a consequence parents felt more confident about supporting their children and, in some cases, had increased the time spent reading with their children or helping them with homework.

I feel now that I'm working with the school, and when he brings home books I can understand the way they want to teach reading. And his reading has come on lovely. Yes, I think it's really helped. Because I was teaching him, initially, in a totally different way. The way that I thought I'd been taught at school, but they teach so differently now, don't they? With the phonics and everything. But I think I was working more against him really, but now I feel like I'm working with him, and with the school.

As well as the open question about benefits, interviewees were asked specifically about whether they did more with their child at home when they were on the FL course. Of the 90 parents who answered this question, 81 said they did and described playing games, making things, singing, reading, spelling and helping

their children with homework. Some parents reported the main change as being in the *quality* of their interactions with their children, rather than the amount of time they spent together. They described setting aside time for playing or learning, applying ideas gained from the course to help their child learn, and using games and daily activities as learning opportunities:

I do think we've always been fairly active, trying to encourage them to do their homework. I suppose it was, yes, finding things, learning new ideas, that actually you can get them reading and writing not by literally sitting them down and saying – right, you must do your homework. It's things like my son loves writing my shopping list for me. Things like that, you can actually bring in the learning side of it at home, without him realising that actually I am testing his spelling, or things like that.

Some also talked about their partners taking more interest in their children and being more involved in their children's learning:

He's [her husband] never really read them stories. He leaves that to me. But I know he's always started writing down the alphabet, and they'd copy, or he writes words and they copy that. He does more, so I'd say that has changed since doing the family learning.

The further benefits of FL programmes are listed below.

Involvement with schools

A total of 61 interviewees felt that since taking a FL course they had become more involved in their child's pre-school or school. Although just over a third (N=34) had not become more involved, some of these explained that they had already had an active role in school prior to the course, or that their association was constrained by jobs or childcare responsibilities, rather than any lack of inclination. A few specifically stated that they would like greater participation.

Of course, just talking to their child's teacher on a more regular basis is important. Anderson and Morrison (2007) call this a greater 'inter-subjectivity' where teachers and parents worked more closely together and therefore developed greater mutual understandings of each other's perspectives and expectations.

Parents who had become more involved, worked as volunteer teaching or classroom assistants, helped on school trips, attended special events such as parents' evenings/mornings and sports days, and/or talked to teachers more:

Continuation in education and training

The interviews suggested that parents were continuing in learning, with over half (N=53) of interviewees reporting that they had been on another course since FL. They had continued to learn on a range of courses designed to contribute to their personal development or their functional or vocational skills. Family numeracy/maths, literacy/English/ESOL and computing/IT were commonly mentioned, and in some instances interviewees referred to the Level (1 or 2) or a

specific qualification. Personal development courses were also popular and included first aid, childcare/child development and parenting. Most of the few who referred to vocational courses were doing teaching or classroom assistant training at the same school, and it important to recognise that this enables them to combine their work with childcare arrangements.

Only a few interviewees specifically identified FL as the reason for them doing further learning. However, choice of courses and the indication that many interviewees were continuing their learning with the same group and tutor suggests that family literacy and/or local provision were important influences. This interpretation is reinforced when the location is taken into account, as many interviewees reported continuing their learning at the same or nearby school.

A total of 81 interviewees said that they were thinking of taking another course. While some had already enrolled, others were at the stage of thinking about continuing learning. The subjects they were interested in followed the same pattern as those mentioned above, and suggest that they continued to be primarily motivated by their parenting role. However, the skills they would develop are also likely to support their employability in the longer term. Employability is discussed below.

Researchers looked at the enabling and constraining factors to continuing in further study and/or training. For most interviewees the ideal provision would be free, based at a local venue, preferably at school/pre-school, have free crèche facilities and run during school hours. Other enabling factors included relevance/interest and knowledge of local provision.

We had somebody come in last week and show us all the different courses that we can do. So we've all put our names down, and we are going to sort it out when we get back after Easter [...] I've put my name down for about half a dozen. Which is things like health and safety, childcare [...] first aid

Barriers, or constraints, largely mirrored enablers, with concerns about cost, distance from home, childcare, and timing of provision being commonly mentioned. There was some indication that interviewees associated these barriers with college-based provision, which was felt to be too remote, and too like an institution of formal learning.

Employment and progression

Over a third of parents (N=33) who responded to the question about employment stated they already had a job before they took the FL course, which means that almost two-thirds (N=58) did not. Most of those who gave their job title seemed to be in relatively low-paid, part-time jobs and had not changed jobs since they finished the FL course. As their motivations for joining a FL course indicate, most of those who did not have a job were not looking for work as they gave primacy to their parental role.

I am not looking for work at the moment; too busy looking after children.

Not looking for a job. I'm a carer to my kids.

At the time of the interviews, the great majority of parents seemed content to seek further opportunities to train or study (particularly within school hours), but were reluctant to seek full time employment until their children were older and well established at school full-time. One potential barrier against parents seeking employment is that some husbands/partners do not want their wives to work. This issue was generally more apparent in inner-city areas, and may also be connected to particular religious attitudes and beliefs.

Another factor to take into account when seeking employment was the need to assess whether the wages would cover the outgoings, including childcare. In some ways, seeking employment was confusing as the Labour government seemed to have two competing agendas: the respect agenda of staying at home and being a good parent and spending time with their children, against the economic agenda which was putting pressure on parents get work. As one FL manager speculated

Some parents have this huge guilt around – I actually do want to be a good parent, but I’m not able to, because I’m not there.

Conclusions and implications for policy

This paper argues that, as major consumers of FL provision, parents’ views need to be listened to carefully, and that they can make a major contribution to policy and practice. The vast majority of parents were positive about their experience of FL programmes and, in interviews, a total of 97% of parents reported gaining some kind of benefit, and 96% thought that they had continued to benefit from attending their FL course three months later. The prime motivation for participating in FL for all parents was to support their children’s learning skills, rather than develop their own literacy skills; they wanted to find out what and how their child was learning at school in order to know how to better support them at home.

Meta-analysis from van Steensel et al. (2010) demonstrates that, although FL programmes are effective in improving children’s and adults’ literacy learning, this is contingent on there being sufficient focus on adult literacy instruction (see also, Anderson et al 2010). Thus parents are a vital ingredient in any FL programme. Indeed, evidence from Carpentieri et al (2011) suggests that long-term gains in child literacy are particularly likely when FL programmes emphasise the importance of providing parents with training not just in educational support skills, but also in socio-emotional support skills (Desforges & Abouchaar 2003; Kağıtçıbaşı et al 2005; Heckman et al 2009).

This paper builds on previous research (e.g., Desforges and Abouchaar 2003) which has also given strong support to the importance of parental support in raising children’s achievement. In many ways, FL is a win-win situation: children’s literacy outcomes improve, and, although further research is needed to ascertain whether parent’s literacy improves as a direct result of their involvement in two-generation FL programmes, this paper has shown that there is a good range of other benefits for parents, their children, family and schools.

For instance: parents learn to support, and play a greater role in, their children's school work, learning and development (particularly at home), and become more capable in their ability to do so; they become more interested in improving their own literacy skills; they begin to place greater value on education and learning; they gain in confidence and self-esteem, and form higher aspirations; they gain an insight into school life and systems, and, as barriers between home and school are broken down, they develop a better working relationship with teaching staff when their children are at a young age and at the beginning of their school life; they develop language and ways of talking together in a way that they do not do at home; they meet each other and form social and supportive networks, which are maintained as their children move through the school; and the programmes give parents opportunities for progression to other taught courses in education and training. These benefits were also recognised by the other constituents involved in FL programmes, namely LA managers, headteachers, literacy tutors and early years teachers. For a fuller account of these viewpoints see Swain et al (2009).

Implications for policy

FL should not be seen as a quick fix, and although the research provided evidence that many of the gains last well beyond the date the course finishes, a strong recommendation from the research is the need for a longitudinal study to investigate longer-term outcomes and progression. A new project could track parents on FL programmes at 6-monthly intervals over a two or three-year period to assess their progression to other forms of study, training and employment

A major implication for policy is that there needs to be better communication to schools of the impact that improving adult literacy skills can have on their children's progress, and of the contribution that adult literacy work can make to closing pupil attainment gaps. The project showed the particular effectiveness of FL where it was embedded in a school's core offer of family and adult learning to parents and received strong support at a senior level in the local authority and within the school. However, consideration needs to be given to whether parents should be encouraged to take national tests only on longer courses, where time taken up with testing has less of an impact on time available for parents' learning. All adult learning providers need to further develop their recruitment strategies in partnership with schools in order to more effectively reach the target learners – parents with low skills.

6,683 words up to here

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Notes

[1] The research was undertaken by the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) with the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) on behalf of the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS). See Swain et al. (2009).

[2] The term 'parents' is used throughout the report to mean mothers, fathers and carers.

[3] General Certificate of Secondary Education, normally taken by school students at the age of 16. Level 1 is regarded as a low grade and Level 2 as a higher or 'good' grade.

[4] Only four countries – Turkey, the Netherlands, the USA and the UK have produced a significant body of quantitative research measuring the effectiveness of family literacy programmes.

Table 1: Parents' background characteristics

Category	Overall sample size for category	Subcategory	Sample size by subcategory	Percentage within main category
Gender	509	Female	477	94
		Male	32	6
Age	496	Under 20	1	<1
		20-29	144	29
		30-39	235	47
		40-49	92	19
		50-59	15	3
		Over 60	9	2
Ethnicity	510	White British	374	73
		White other	8	2
		Black African	16	3
		Black British	11	2
		Black Caribbean	3	1
		Bangladeshi	7	2
		Indian	16	3
		Pakistani	34	7
		Chinese	3	1
		Mixed heritage	4	1
Other	34	7		
First language	506	English	396	78
		Another language	110	22
Learning difficulty	498	Yes	36	7
		No	462	93
Physical difficulty	496	Yes	17	4
		No	479	96
Age of leaving full-time education	414	below 15	20	5
		15	56	13
		16	185	42
		17	53	12
		18	51	12
		19	24	6

		20	13	3
		21+	12	3
Highest qualification in English	438	Level 4+	4	1
		Level 3	15	3
		Level 2	95	19
		Level 1	62	12
		GCSE (Level 1 or 2) *	42	8
		Entry Level	34	7
		No qualification	64	12
		Not sure/no response	194	38

* 42 parents gave the answer 'GCSE' without specifying a grade. Researchers are therefore unable to say whether these qualifications were at Level 1 (grades D-E) or Level 2 (grades A*-C)

Table 2: Methods used to interview parents post FL course

Method	Number of parents involved	Interviewer(s)	Dates
Focus group	43	LA managers and researchers	October 2008-February 2009
Short telephone interviews with individual parents	42	Researchers	March-April 2009
In-depth telephone interviews with individual parents	16	Researchers	October 2008-March 2009
Total	101*		

*This includes three parents who were interviewed both in the focus group and then again in-depth by telephone.