Early Literacy
Work with Families
An Overview of the Real Project

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Outline

• A brief summary of the REAL Project
• The REAL Project programme
• Children’s views of family literacy
• Parents’ views of the REAL Project
• Teachers’ views of family literacy
• Outcomes for children
A brief summary of the REAL Project

• The REAL (Raising Early Achievement in Literacy) Project began in 1995 in Sheffield, and brought together the University, the Local Education Authority and many Sheffield schools to promote family literacy work with parents of preschool children.
Raising Early Achievement in Literacy (REAL) Project

Preschool family literacy programme.
Low intensity long-duration.
Offered to parents in disadvantaged areas.
Some families bilingual (9%)
Parents of 3-year-olds invited to join programme for 12-18 months before school entry.
REAL Project aims:

• To develop methods of working with parents to promote the literacy development of preschool children (particularly those likely to have difficulties in the early years of school).

• To meet some of the literacy and educational needs of the parents so involved.

• To ensure the *feasibility* of methods developed
• To assess the effectiveness of the methods in improving children's literacy development at school entry and afterwards.

• To disseminate effective methods to practitioners and to equip them with new skills.

• To inform policy makers about the effectiveness and implications of new practices
Research methods

• Practitioner reflections
• Analysis of activity records
• Post-programme interviews of parents
• Post-programme interviews of children
• Randomised control trial to determine effects on children’s literacy (N=176)
The families

• Originally, a sample of 176 families with three-year-olds had been drawn at random from the waiting lists of 11 schools in areas of social and economic disadvantage in the city.
• All schools were in areas (electoral wards) above the national median on the government’s index of multiple deprivation and five were in the most deprived 2% of such areas nationally.

• At each of the eleven schools 16 children aged around three-and-a-half were drawn at random from preschool waiting lists (virtually all families in the areas were on such lists).
• All but 9 families were white mono-lingual.
• All families agreed to participate in a University research study on the understanding that half of them, selected entirely at random, would be invited to join a preschool family literacy programme with the remainder serving as a control group.
• The literacy skills of all children were assessed before and after the programme.
• There were eight children in each school in each group.
• Both groups of families co-operated fully in the study and programme take-up was very high.
• Attrition in the two groups over the 18-month period of the programme was less than 10%.

• Two families from the programme group and three from the control group were lost to the study.
Programme, based on ORIM framework, consisted of

- Home visits by programme teachers
- Provision of literacy resources
- Centre-based group activities
- Special events (e.g. group library visit)
- Postal communication
- Optional, literacy-related adult education for parents
- Teachers given half a day per week to work with a group of 8 families
The REAL Project programme

• The REAL Project used the ORIM framework which identifies four key roles for parents whereby they can provide Opportunities, Recognition, Interaction and a Model of literacy for each strand of early literacy.

• The framework also distinguishes various strands of early literacy (environmental print, books, early writing and key aspects of oral language).
The ORIM Framework

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Children’s views of family literacy

- Two groups of children were studied: the children in the family literacy programme, (the ‘programme group’), and the group of children who had not participated in the family literacy programme (the ‘control group’).

- The programme group consisted of 77 children (33 girls, 44 boys) and the control group consisted of 71 children (31 girls, 40 boys).

- In the programme group there were 9 (out of 78) lone-parents, in the control group 14 (out of 71) families had lone parents, all mothers.
Curtis
Curtis – age 5. Full time in Reception for 5 weeks, and prior to that had attended the nursery class in the school, full-time. Curtis lived with his mother, father and younger brother Neil. The family had been involved in the REAL project since Curtis was three and a half years old.

• Curtis told us that he wrote at school ‘with Miss Waters’
• He said he wrote with his mother too, telling us: ‘I wrote loads of things with my mum and once I wrote loads on my own – even one big page’
• Curtis said that he read with: ‘my mum and Neil, at night and sometimes in the afternoon, that’s when I go to my caravan on holiday to Skegness but that one was old and I’m at a new one now’
• The book Curtis said he liked a lot was ‘about Action Man’.
• Curtis talked about print in the neighbourhood ‘outside on signs, on posters, on crisp packets. When there is some writing at home on lolly sticks – I can read it and it might be a joke on’.
• He told us that his favourite rhyme was ‘Twinkle Twinkle’ which he said he sang with his brother Neil ‘and Nannan when she comes up’
Beatrice age 5y 3m. Reception class, full time for six weeks, and prior to that had attended the nursery class in the same school. Beatrice lived with her mother, father and sister and had been part of the REAL project since Beatrice was three and a half years old.

- Beatrice said she wrote: ‘at school and at home… with my mummy, my daddy and my sister and on my own’
- That she read: ‘with my teacher, my daddy and my mummy. A bit at home. I read at school for my teacher’
- Beatrice did not give the title of her favourite book but said that she had one that she liked a lot ‘about Christmas and Jesus’
- Thinking about examples of print, Beatrice said: ‘on boxes and numbers on houses, doors, and on trousers and on letters’
- Beatrice told us that her favourite nursery rhyme was ‘Twinkle, twinkle’ and that she sang rhymes with ‘my daddy and mummy … at home and school, but with my daddy really.’
• Virtually all of these young children were from poor areas of a northern English city, where (according to national reports) school measures of literacy were low, as were parallel expectations of parental involvement in school literacy.

• However, contrary to those expectations, the children reported that they did engage in reading and writing at home.
• A greater proportion of children in the programme group mentioned that they wrote, read and said rhymes at home but the differences were not statistically significant.
‘Who do you write with?’

• ‘By myself, mummy watches me and helps me a little bit’
• ‘I wrote loads of things with my mum and once I wrote loads by my own – even one big page’
• ‘My mummy, she doesn’t know how to write so I help her out’
• Sometimes on my own, my mummy, dad, friends, sister and brother’
• ‘My nannan when my mum goes to the pub’
‘Who do you read with?’

• ‘Daddy and mummy’
• ‘Upstairs with my sister Emma’
• ‘My brother, Alex, my little brother’
• ‘My teacher’
• ‘Mummy at bedtime’
• ‘I’ve got a big story book with Snow White in it and on my video and my mum and me Nanan reads it me’
‘Do you have a favourite book?’

- Tom Kitten, The Dream, Thomas the Tank Engine, Butterflies, Three little pigs, Humpty Dumpty, Go, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Mickey Mouse, Spot, Jack and Jill, Peter the Tractor, We’re going on a Bear Hunt, Teddy Bears’ Picnic, Bugs Life.
‘Who do you sing or say rhymes with’?

- ‘Mummy, daddy, brother and Jakey the dog’
- ‘Emma, my sister, my big brother Joe’
- ‘My teacher, Mrs Hatton’
- ‘My grandad’
- ‘Teachers and everybody’
- ‘Nanan Shirley, Grandad One’
- ‘Neil does and Nanan when she comes up’
‘Can you think of anywhere [else] where you see words?’

• Print in school was mentioned by some 27% of control group children: ‘teddy words’, ‘words on drawers’ ‘labels on coat pegs’ being typical examples of such print.
• ‘Tesco’
• ‘At the shops, my big brother lifts me up’
• ‘On your credit card’
• ‘On a newspaper’
• ‘MacDonald’s’
What can we learn from young children to help us improve family literacy programmes?

• **All** children do some literacy at home.
• **Fathers** are involved in literacy at home.
• **Boys** are involved in literacy at home.
• A programme **can** make some difference to family literacy
Parents’ views of the REAL Project

1. *Would parents take up the invitation to participate in a family literacy programme, and to what extent?*

2. *What were parents’ views of the programme?*

3. *What changes, if any, would the programme make to parents’ family literacy practices?*
• ‘I thought if it would help Bridget, I’d like to be part of it’

• ‘I grabbed at the chance to take part and I’m really glad I did.’
‘Karen and her dad used the playdough we had used to make her name into a plaque. We had left it to go hard; dad had varnished it and stuck it on a piece of wood (already stained), put a cord at the back, and it was hanging on her bedroom door! She proudly showed it to me when I went in!’
• ‘I’m struggling to keep this family going although mum obviously thinks the project is important. I tried to explain the importance of her involvement. I also spent a lot of time in general chat; mum rarely goes out. The scrapbook disappeared when the family went into the refuge; it has turned up with very little in it.’
• ‘Mum is expecting a baby and has not been well. She said she has not done anything towards literacy with Jack since my last visit.’

• ‘Justin and family moved house during the summer and mum has been completely absorbed in decorating. No evidence of literacy activities.’
• ‘We’ve all enjoyed what we’ve done, it didn’t feel like ‘work’. Time’s really flown by!’

• ‘I’ve loved being able to spend quality time to do these things with him, like painting, drawing and playing games. It’s just sort of opened my mind that there are things you can do with them apart from sitting watching videos.’
• ‘It’s been a big help actually. I do think Alan has learned a lot. It makes parents aware of the things they can do with children, because to be honest, especially when you have your first child, you’re a little bit unsure.’

• ‘I definitely think Julian’s had an advantage, because it’s shown us which direction to go into and it seems to have worked. It’s given me that closer link with school and it makes Julian happy doing it. It feels like he’s achieved something.’
• ‘It was a nice little stepping stone between home and school.’

• ‘To me it were like helping her to learn, but not like learning in school.’

• ‘It’s brought her on a lot.’

• ‘I think it’s helped her get ahead, she’s more advanced than her classmates.’

• ‘Within two months of starting the project he came on great.’
‘What did you think about the project teacher visiting you at home?’

- ‘Fine’
- ‘Brilliant’
- ‘A friend!’
- ‘Very caring’
- ‘I’m sad it’s over’
Teachers’ views of family literacy

• It really made me refocus on what family agendas are, which was in some ways quite separate to school agendas and I think it made me more open about home situations
Time

• … it was the length of the time we were able to work with the parents so you didn’t feel you needed to rush things which you often do on a lot of projects that are ten weeks long and you feel you have to leap straight into it.
• … the parents, as time went on, they got more and more into it and in the end, they were quite sad to finish it. Certainly a lot of them were, I think they would have liked it to have carried on …
Relationships

• I think relationships were the key factor, that was the bedrock of it really.

• We had to build good relationships with them and trust, most important those two things.
Home visiting

- Home visiting was the factor.
- I think the successful part was the home visiting part of it; I don’t think it would have been successful if it would have meant having parents coming into school for meetings, not for my group anyway.
• I think it’s the consistency. They liked the fact that they knew you were coming and it was the same person coming in, and you built up a sort of trust

• I had to be really flexible and non-judgmental about anything.
Teachers’ attitudes, knowledge and skills

- Teachers had a clear sense of what they brought to the collaboration with parents – the attitudes, knowledge and skills which they judged to be crucial for such work.
Teachers presented a consistent message about:

- the importance of a **positive attitude** towards parents’ roles in early literacy development;
- **having time** to do the work; professional development to support their increasing knowledge of literacy development;
- **skills** to work alongside parents in parents’ own homes;
- **teamwork and networking** as factors contributing to their own increased professional confidence.
Mesures of children’s development

• Sheffield Early Literacy Development Profile (SELDP) – Nutbrown (1997)

• British Picture Vocabulary Scale – Revised (BPVS – II)

• Letter recognition – Clay (1985)

• School Literacy Attainment at Seven – total of KS1 literacy assessments
Main findings

- High take-up, low drop-out
- Parents and teachers very positive
- Low take-up of optional adult education component
- 10% of adults gained accreditation
- Significant effect on children’s literacy
- Effects varied for different groups
Effect size varied for groups
REAL Project - implications

- Families value a family literacy programme
- Positive impact on children’s literacy
- Not all parents want ‘two-generation’ programme
- Effects vary for different sub-groups
Preschool family literacy programmes - a means of reducing inequalities?

- Programmes can play a part in reducing literacy inequalities
- Need to be realistic about extent of reduction (slight but better than increase)
- Programmes better for some groups than others
- Programmes could be integral, optional component of preschool provision