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Literacy and community: developing a primary curriculum through partnerships

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Literacy and community

This book starts with large ambitions. Getting to grips with big concepts like 'literacy' and 'community' may seem to be a tricky task. 'Literacy' itself is a slippery term: does it include more than reading and writing? Of course, because the basis for these must be speaking and listening. Does it involve more than books? Of course, because of the many different forms of text - on paper and on screen - that permeate our everyday lives. So literacy is about texts of all kinds and the ways in which children learn to read and understand them. But also and how they forge their literate identities through their preferences and experiences. And what about 'community'? Does that mean within the school or outside it? The district, or different groups of people living in the area, nation or world? And should it be 'community' or 'communities'? What is clear is that any definition of community should include a sense of shared values, even if there are differences, and some kind of social cohesion. Schools are in a key position to become the hub for social cohesion within the areas they serve - to bring home and school closer together and to develop shared aims for the children who inhabit both. Similarly, classrooms have the potential to encapsulate all the elements of harmonious diversity which are features of successful communities, to recognise what each member of the group can contribute and to build on that. However, there are often mis-matches between the ideal and the reality and sometimes a view that homes are deficient in the values that schools want to promote (Cremin *et al.*, 2011; Comber, 2007; Comber and Kamler, 2004).

Much work on the relationship between home and school has highlighted a need for greater two-way traffic between the two (Muschamp *et al.*, 2007; Marsh, 2003). Traditionally, schools have seen parents as the recipients of information about 'how we teach your children' or 'what we expect of you and your children', although there's nothing necessarily wrong with that. What is missing is a reciprocal question or two about what 'funds of knowledge' (Gonzalez *et. al.*, 2005) the children might bring to school, what kinds of social and cultural capital they draw on from their home and community experience. The research project *Building Communities: Researching Literacy Lives* concluded that:

> …if children are not to experience a potentially debilitating gap between literacy and learning inside and outside school, then the profession needs to re-conceptualise literacy to build on children's everyday literacy experiences and funds of knowledge. (Cremin *et al.*, 2011: 4)

At the same time, the report called for schools and teachers to take a good look at their assumptions and perceptions about homes and families in order to create a more productive relationship between the two (see Table 1).

Expectations and the curriculum

According to Kress:

> *One of the major problems for young people in schools [is] the gap between the expectations that they bring from their world and the expectations that exist in the school from a former world.*
> (Kress, 2005: 294)

This book explores expectations: teachers' expectations of what young learners can and cannot do; children's expectations of what school might offer in relation to their identities outside the classroom; parents' expectations of how school will foster their children's abilities. And, of course, government's expectations of what ought to be going on in schools. The Expert Panel advising the government on the National Curriculum (DfE, 2011) sees a distinction between a school curriculum and a national one. Most particularly, the panel urges that schools should design a school curriculum that best meets the needs of their pupils in their localities:

> There are a number of components of a broad and balanced school curriculum that should be developed on the basis of local or school-level decision making, rather than prescribed national Programmes of Study. (DfE, 2011: 6)

The expectation here, then, is that schools should have the freedom to design and construct a curriculum for their own purposes that will best suit the school and wider community that they serve. But this freedom carries responsibility to consider just what the needs of the children and their families might be. New (in

Schools and teachers with more school-centric perspectives and orientations tend to…	Schools and teachers with more open/less school-centric perspectives and orientations tend to…
Be framed by the standards performance-based agenda	Challenge the standards agenda and work to a set of broader outcomes
Measure literacy attainment through performance in standardised tests	See standard literacy tests as part of a wider set of literacy achievements and interests
Conceive of learning as school-based	Recognise that learning happens in multiple contexts in and out of school
Focus on school literacy	Focus on school and everyday literacies
Provide families with information about school literacy	Find out about children's everyday literacy practices and funds of knowledge
Legitimate what the system recognises alone	Value and legitimate students' out-of-school experience
Construct one-way traffic between school and home	Foster and value two-way traffic between home and school
Teach the National Curriculum	Tailor the National Curriculum in responsive ways and draw on children's funds of knowledge
Focus on teaching	Focus on teaching and learning
Retain professional distance and more hierarchical positions	Build close professional and more equivalent teacher-parent-child relationships

Table 1: A conceptualisation of school positioning in relation to parents and families (Cremin *et al.*, 2011: 3)

2012) Ofsted guidance emphasises the importance of 'promoting the engagement of parents and carers in their children's learning' (Ofsted, 2011: 20) and engaging the school community as a whole. In other words, schools and teachers are being urged to see the bigger picture of what a school curriculum can offer children's learning, and external and internal evaluation requires schools to consider how they provide for the diversity of the school population. This requires some confidence to be flexible and open to the opportunities offered by partnerships.

The contributors to *Literacy and community: developing a primary curriculum through partnerships* offer a view of that wider horizon, seeing, for example, that literacy means more than may be traditionally conceived and that children's community and cultural experience can be the starting point for building learning. The book is based on a commitment to a culturally inclusive approach to literacy teaching and learning which reflects the language(s) and cultures of the community and wider society and includes the experiences of pupils, parents and community members, seeing partnership as essential [1]. Covering a range of topics and presenting case studies of classroom, whole school and local authority projects, contributions are drawn from a range of school environments in metropolitan boroughs, suburban and rural settings, describing collaborations which see children, family members, carers, teachers and other members of the school community as partners in furthering children's achievements. Threading throughout the chapters is a belief that the individual child's knowledge and experience can be fruitfully harvested through a school curriculum which looks outward, valuing the contributions of families and local communities, as well as inward to the creation of a vigorous and thriving school community.

Notes
[1] With thanks to Jane Bednall and the Newham EMA team for sharing their framework for a culturally inclusive approach.