



Building Communities: Researching Literacy Lives

Teachers as Readers Phase III, 2009-10

External Evaluation

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Contents

	Page
1. Background to the project	3
2. Aims and intended outcomes of the project	4 - 5
3. Aims and methodology for the evaluation	6
4. The conceptual foundation for the project	7
5. Evaluation narrative	10
5.1 Creating and reinforcing the research culture	10 - 11
5.2 A challenging methodology	11
5.3 Personal and professional challenges for teachers	11 - 12
5.4 Barrier breaking and boundary crossing	12 - 13
5.5 Shifting the locus of control: new questions and challenges	13 - 14
5.6 Changing concepts of literacy	15
5.7 Research and development?	15 - 16
5.8 'Awakenings': knowledge, understandings and Identities	17 - 18
5.9 Openings: early signs of developments in curriculum and pedagogy	19 - 20
5.10 Dissemination and influence	20 – 21
6. Challenges arising from the project	22
6.1 Teachers' professional development and identity: selves and mindsets	22
6.2 Shifting the focus of control from schools towards communities: reciprocity and equivalence in knowledge and relationships	22 -23
6.3 Shifting the focus of control in education policy: using funds of professional and personal knowledge	23
6.4 Implications for schools: investing in cultural change	24
6.5 The possibilities of systemic change	25
6.6 New approaches to literacy and learning	25
References	28

1. Background to the project

Building Communities: Researching Literacy Lives is the third phase in a series of research and development projects focussing on Teachers as Readers, funded and sponsored by Esmeé Fairbairn and the United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA). Phase I identified areas of focus for development arising from evidence that most teachers relied on a narrow canon of children's literature and many were not confident readers, while the concept of 'reading' amongst children, families and teachers was often limited to progression through the levels of reading schemes and to measurable attainment in tests. In Phase II, teachers in 5 Local Authorities engaged in action research around their own and their students' development as readers. Evidence collected by the project team and showcased by teachers themselves demonstrated that professional and personal developments, including increased reading and pedagogic repertoires had led to significant improvements in children's attitudes, attainment and achievement. The process and outcomes of the project were widely disseminated, including within the Primary National Strategy. There was advocacy and encouragement for participating teachers to lead training and practical recommendations for curriculum and pedagogy were published, including in UKLA's 'Ideas in practice' series.

The final aim of Phase II, concerning the development of stronger relationships with families and communities to support children's learning, was the most problematic to fulfil. While there were some pockets of development that had made significant impact in this respect, most teachers had concentrated their efforts on classroom and whole school developments and only tenuous connections had generally been made with homes, families and communities. Some blurring of the boundaries between schools and communities was recognised and there were examples of powerful use of children's experience and context including their own research of reading in their families. However, these activities and insights tended to support school-centred developments. It seemed that a cultural shift was required on the part of teachers, involving a change in the perceived and actual locus of control, to recognise knowledge and learning beyond the school. Phase III, with which this evaluation is concerned, therefore concentrated on building on these insights gained and meeting the challenges presented by exploring literacy lives and 'funds of knowledge' (Moll *et al.*, 1992) in families and communities and using these as a resource to support children's learning and literacy development.

2. Aims and intended outcomes of the project

The aims for this Phase III research and development project are summarised as follows:

1. To support teachers as researchers documenting and understanding children's literacy lives
2. To extend understandings about 21st century literacy identities, habits and cultures
3. To create innovative classroom approaches that build on children's literacy lives and foster positive literacy identities.

The intention was also:

4. To develop models of effective working practices that enhance and extend school-community relations and the broader outcomes of the Every Child Matters agenda
5. To build strong, sustainable new partnerships between teachers, families and communities that connect to parents' and families' literacy lives.

It was made clear in the original proposal and documentation that this project, more than previous phases of 'Teachers as Readers', was to be counter-cultural. The intention would be to engender two-way knowledge building and reciprocal, equitable relationships, developing a much more democratic model of literacy learning responsive to culture, community and diversity as opposed to established, prescriptive models where knowledge and expertise is provided by teachers and schools, enrolling families and communities in support.

10 schools in 5 local authorities were selected, most continuing from Phase II but with a notable change to include Lambeth instead of Suffolk in order to represent more diverse, multi-lingual and multi-cultural school catchments. The schools included both rural and urban localities, with some in very challenging social and economic circumstances. Local Authority Co-ordinators continued to lead activity in their areas, while schools already involved from Phase II were partnered with new schools to make use of capital already built. As well as teachers in each school, head teachers were more directly involved than in Phase II and a further development was the involvement of inter-agency partners in each local authority. It was also significant that local authorities and schools were asked to commit not only time and talents but also funding, for example in allowing teachers to come out of school for six National Days.

The process of research and development was tightly structured as in previous phases, with a prescribed schedule of national meetings, extensive materials, tools and guidance for participants, clear expectations about time commitments and documentation including regular local meetings, ongoing research activity and summative reporting each term. Central to this were case studies of individual children, visits to their homes and researching literacy lives together. There was a clear intention to influence classroom and school practices by Term 3. The

core research team underpinned this with another layer of research, each member of the group working closely with a local authority, guided by a planning framework to ensure consistency and comparability. Information and insights gained were fed back into planning and development of the project and the whole process was overseen by an influential steering group. Thus the features and characteristics already found to be effective in Phases I and II were retained while adjustments and additions were made to accommodate the new aims and focus taking the research and development work into new territory.

Intended outcomes were:

1. Models of professional development: how to expand teachers' knowledge about children reading in the home and increased parental involvement
2. Models of parental partnerships connecting to reading lives in the 21st Century
3. Models of inter-agency working, supporting or creating reading communities.

It is important to note that shifts in understanding in the course of the year led to the aims being adjusted conceptually to encompass broader views of literacy where previously, largely due to the emergence of this project from the 'Teachers as Readers' work, the aims tended to focus on the reading dimension of literacy. The aims and outcomes resonated with the contemporary policy context at the time of planning, with emphasis on personalised learning and schools' remit to develop community cohesion during the life of the project, linked to the 'Every Child Matters' agenda (ECM, 2009). The aims and outcomes also reflected current developments in the primary curriculum and broader contemporary understandings about literacy, including the use of digital and multi-modal texts. The political and theoretical groundwork by the project team ensured that the project was well placed to contribute within its educational and social context.

3. Aims and methodology for the evaluation

The external evaluation was commissioned to determine whether the aims of Phase II had been met, to identify effective strategies, practices and processes, explore themes and issues arising and to model and illustrate successful approaches. This included ascertaining the extent of outcomes and impact in the light of national developments and priorities.

The external evaluation was primarily desk-based involving critical and independent consideration of a great wealth and range of evidence gathered by the research processes instigated by the core team, along with teachers' and local authorities' evidence from presentations, portfolios and ongoing documentation. This was triangulated by the external evaluator attending two of the National Days for project participants: 10th February 2010 hosted by Scholastic Publishers and the final event on 30th June 2010 at Friends' House, both at London Euston. These events were highly interactive offering opportunities throughout the day to hear teachers' and other participants' stories and discussions. In the final conference, presentations from individual teachers showcased their activity within and beyond schools and shared their case studies of individual children based on their own ethnographic evidence. The external evaluator also joined a focus group of Local Authority Co-ordinators and inter-agency partners and engaged in informative conversations with representatives of all the participant groups: teachers, Local Authority Co-ordinators, head teachers, inter-agency partners and researchers. Finally the external evaluator was copied into series of emails between Local Authority Co-ordinators and members of the research team, referencing local meetings, discussions and activity which gave insights into the ongoing issues, interests and dilemmas arising in the course of the year and demonstrated the dialogic, methodological and leadership processes at work amongst the team.

The external evaluation was written independently using this evidence, broadly following a narrative style to demonstrate the progress of the project in relation to the original aims followed by comparison and connection with the project team's summative Research Report which is referenced here. The intention here is not to reiterate the contents of the project team's comprehensive analytical report based on triangulation of rich data sets, but to offer an external overview. The main part of the report begins with a discussion of the conceptual foundation for the Phase III project report and then discusses the evidence as it unfolded over the course of the year, using a broadly narrative style in order to represent complex and evolving ideas, knowledge and relationships. The emerging issues as teachers attempted to bridge the worlds of school, family and research communities are explored. Finally, there is a summary of some key messages and further questions that might help to point to ways forward in building on this small scale but significant and timely research and development project.

4. The conceptual foundation for the project

The scholarly work undertaken by the project leaders before and during the project was essential, giving the work a rationale in terms of research evidence and a clear theoretical framework. The literature review in Chapter 3 of the Research Report sets out the concepts and arguments central to the project, which not only informed planning but infused the thinking of the research team. These became embedded in the local work of participants through distributed readings and repeated references in the project literature and at conferences and then emerged through the participants' dialogue, both formally in their presentations and writing and in informal emails and discussions. The project community could be said to have developed its own language over the course of the year, building on Phases I and II and inducting the new participants. As with the previous two phases of Teachers as Readers, the way in which the project leaders achieved this theoretical engagement through gentle insistence, empathy, encouragement, enthusiasm and wit was exemplary. So in a letter to participating teachers before the Easter break in advance of the 5th May conference the Project Director wrote,

“Please read the attached paper from the Luis Moll book we have often referred to – it may feel a little challenging at first – well I found it so – but once you get into the main part about the teachers you’ll feel at home – they did learner visits too. We will be discussing this on the 5th (conference) in relation to your work so do give yourself some time to read it fully – it may be useful to make margin notes where you see connections – as I have on my copy – hence the underlining!”

These two encouraging sentences set up an expectation, indeed a requirement, that participants would read the article, explained the perceived value of the reading, calmed fears, removed teachers' notions of academic hierarchy, introduced humour and humanity and offered practical advice (bordering on academic supervision). Such an approach is difficult to resist and it drew teachers and others into the discourse of an accessible and supportive community. This kind of patient and detailed communication also pervaded the email correspondence with the research team, where nothing appeared to be too much trouble for the project leaders in responding generously to support participants. This generated a rich, enthusiastic discourse through which the wider project team were able to share concerns and discoveries, reinforce values, purposes and shared language, identify strategic opportunities, fathom developments and make meaning within the still developing, multi-layered conceptual framework. Communications were often 'streams of consciousness', but qualified and valued as such, while responses were constructed with care to maintain control of the project and move it forwards. The discussions led some to question their own long-held values and approaches. A Local Authority Co-ordinator wrote this at the end of a long email narrative in which she explored her 'light bulb moments', reflections and some of the ideas and possible developments for schools:

“I’ve been challenged on this project to really examine where my inner beliefs are rooted about how I have approached teaching/training in the past. I think I did some of this unconsciously, but is that good enough when we know the power of doing it consciously?”

This theoretical, values-based framing of the project provided a number of important touchstones for dialogue and interim analysis and to keep the activity on track. It also gave points of triangulation for the analysis as the insights gained and developments achieved could be set within and against this framework. More profoundly, there were clear signs that some of the ideas developed in the academic literature had a significant influence on participating teachers’ and Local Authority Co-ordinators’ understandings and became embodied in the work undertaken. A Local Authority Co-ordinator describes how the readings demanded emotional as well as intellectual engagement and that they ‘came alive’ when returning to them after engaging in the investigative research and dialogue around the visits.

An example of the conceptual development at the heart of the project was the shared understanding amongst project participants, promoted by the project leaders, that building ‘community’ involves attention to equality and relationships, more than changing structures and systems. Linked to this is the notion of the home as a social construct where children are apprentices and active participants and develop their identities, an idea which, once understood and exemplified, can then be applied in school. The examination of concepts of literacy embraced, through the research literature, an ‘ecology’ of multimodal, visual and digital forms with their associated social relationships, habitats and communities. Participants began to explore through their research the ways in which these have profound influence on children’s social identities. This under-scores the need for development of critical literacy at an early age, since there is less control over access and provenance, e.g. of wikis, blogs and other digital forms such as media packages related to toys and television programmes, than over the paper-based texts that would have been available in the past.

Methodologically, the research by teachers mirrored the socially situated approaches to learning suggested for children. Through investigation, observation and dialogue in the social environments of the case study families, teachers uncovered the ways in which the hierarchy of values placed on formal and informal literacy practices from a school-centric perspective could be overturned in home settings, for example in the prevalence of narrative and digital literacy far in advance of that experienced at school. Teachers experienced the fundamental tenet of ‘funds of knowledge’ (Gonzalez *et al.*, 2005; Moll *et al.*, 1992) first hand as they drew on their knowledge as teachers, parents, readers, travellers and learners and through this made connections with families in their ethnographic research.

The project leaders recognised and emphasised ways in which the dominant deficit discourses (Comber and Kamler, 2004) were being challenged by creating ‘pedagogies of reconnection’ with

children's and families' literacy lives, resulting in a conceptual repositioning for teachers and a change of mindset for children and their families. Teachers and Local Authority Coordinators learnt to value 'identity work' (ibid) with children and similar work for themselves, whilst the project leaders recognised the tensions for teachers in positioning themselves between the urgent 'high profile "what works" agenda' and the new, patient ethnographic research in which they became engrossed. A metaphor frequently used amongst project participants was the bringing of 'virtual school bags' to the classroom packed with the children's diverse cultural resources for learning (Thomson, 2002). Parents contributed in new ways to this affective domain of learning, for example with an unexpected hug or a confidence shared, which challenged teachers' traditional notions of both 'professional distance' and 'research objectivity'. Understanding this in theoretical terms gave the project enormous integrity and this conceptual work was critical to the ongoing analysis and dialogue supporting the project, providing an anchor for the diverse, creative and often unpredictable activity and outcomes.

5. Evaluation narrative

5.1 Creating and reinforcing the research culture

In order to achieve the building of a research culture and community the research team and participants, supported by the steering committee, needed to be open to challenge, to let go of their own agendas and to adopt an investigative and learning mindset. It is to the credit of the research team that by careful structuring and confidence building they enabled participants to relinquish preconceptions and school-centric agendas in order to access these funds of knowledge amongst children in their classes.

This less directive approach to research and development meant that the focus and process of the research sometimes became temporarily blurred (or 'woolly' as one teacher described it). This required some careful work within local authority groups underpinned by the series of National Days, so that everyone could share anxieties and be reassured that this difficult boundary crossing, with its associated uncertainties about process and outcome, was a necessary part of the process. The ethnographic stance for the home visits, where data was recorded initially in unstructured narrative was unsettling for many, especially as set within a professional climate that clearly valued quantitative analysis, tracking and progression towards clear outcomes externally specified. However, where structure was introduced by teachers, for example by writing down a series of questions to ask parents, it was found to limit the potential of the visits. Teachers seemed to settle into the observation approach by the second visit and some noted how they found it liberating to be asked to look, listen and learn as opposed to instruct, judge and be judged. They seem to have carried this back into their schools, offering observations about changes in children's attitude, behaviour and body language after a home visit where previously they recognised they would have made judgmental statements that might have been based on assumptions and labels. Local Authority Co-ordinators experienced similar tensions, some confessing that they felt subversive in their attention to a project that was not overtly about raising standards according to the central agenda, but demonstrating their valuing of the approach in their enormous personal commitment to the project. There are no indications that the apparent looseness of structure that is caused by allowing the research to open up new avenues of enquiry and layers of meaning has resulted in a 'soft' project with indeterminate outcomes; one Local Authority Co-ordinator commented that it was the most challenging work she had done in her current local authority role.

The project materials demonstrate the trouble that was taken to provide support for busy teachers new to research or entering new research territory; explanatory letters to teacher participants, sample permission letters for teachers, schools and families, formats for recording information, sets of questions to guide reflection and clear guidance on requirements, all written in accessible language with full appreciation of teachers' professional lives, pre-empting possible

anxieties and questions, but uncompromising in terms of the requirements of the project which had been made clear from the start.

As the project progressed, innovative approaches were used to support participants and underpin discussion. For example a 'word cloud' was shown to capture clearly and instantly the project's 'principles of procedure' (Stenhouse, 1975), the agreed criteria determining validity for the educative process in which everyone was engaged. Words included *'friendly, open-ended, honesty, empathy, relaxed, responsive, non-judgmental...'* (Research Report p.50): positive and reassuring words that created - perhaps even gave permission for - an appropriate culture for this sensitive, complex and exploratory research within and beyond classrooms. Another technique that was used was the creation of an 'asset blanket' where teachers collected together the assets they could draw upon, to which the project leaders added a 'deficit brick wall' so that teachers could share concerns about the barriers they faced. Such metaphors have become enormously powerful devices over the course of the three phases of Teachers as Readers and have become part of the language of participants and their schools (as with 'rivers of reading' and 'book talk' last year). They are deceptively simple and very memorable hooks for reflection, dialogue and learning that are easily applied in different contexts and quickly take people to the heart of the issues that concern and challenge them.

5.2 A challenging methodology

This project was not expected to have the same direct effects on curriculum and pedagogy that would make practical sense to teachers, as the previous project in Teachers as Researchers Phase II, but it was expected that knowledge, understanding and insights would emerge that would contribute richly in the longer term, to challenge policy as well as practice. This was recognised from the start as being much more risky and conceptually challenging, with outcomes being far less certain. It was expected that the project would break new ground in terms of process and in knowledge and understanding. Central to the research process were the teachers as researchers, conducted detailed ethnographic case studies of selected children and entering into communities and families, holding up mirrors to their own perceptions and prejudices. The same understandings would not have been reached if an external research team had visited families and reported back to the teachers, still located comfortably in their schools. The research was as much about teachers' and other participants' reflexivity in exploring changes in their own ideas and understandings shared, as about what they 'found out' through their visits and work with their case study children. Dimensions about which there might have been various assumptions and received wisdom were actually encountered directly and explored first hand.

5.3 Personal and professional challenges for teachers

Many challenges arose in asking each teacher to become not only a researcher (which for many built upon previous Teachers as Readers work) but a particular kind of researcher with an

ethnographic approach, crossing not only the physical boundaries of their schools but also cultural and role boundaries. There was also a strong sense that boundaries were being crossed by asking children to become researchers outside the safe and controlled environments of their classrooms - taking pictures, conducting interviews and drawing parents and families into new kinds of dialogue. This demanded that teachers, Local Authority Co-ordinators and researchers had to grapple with new methodological challenges.

Although exciting, this was not without anxiety and risk and many concerns were expressed by teachers and shared at the National Days. In entering new territory teachers often undertook to pair up with the multi-agency partner, another teacher, an interpreter or Family Liaison Officer. There were three main areas where confidence faltered, each of which the project challenged. One was to do with entering families' environments and interviewing colleagues, in which teachers were out of their locus of control and knowledge but still realised that they had responsibility for saying and doing the 'right things' while on unfamiliar ground. Linked to this was lack of confidence as researchers in terms of knowing what to record from the visits and interviews, not having time to listen and make notes at the same time, and worrying about what to do with all the rich information collected which was narrative and observational in nature; in particular they worried that it might not seem to have obvious structure or validity in a scientific sense. They tended to be enthusiastic in discussion but lacked confidence in writing, perhaps mirroring children's concerns about 'getting it right'. Finally many teachers felt vulnerable at the thought of sharing themselves and their own literacy lives with children and parents and some were not sure of the value of this, feeling that it strayed too far from their previously understood professional stance.

The difficulties of the combination of these concerns should not be underestimated. One teacher spoke about feeling 'physically sick' at the thought of the first family visit, and teachers shared their unease with making themselves vulnerable and sharing of themselves with families outside their own domain of the classroom. They described journeys to children's homes in detail, charting their keenly felt emotions and concerns as they went. They realised that the research, in particular the visiting, was revealing their own prejudices and stereotypical views and questioning their well established ways of working, sometimes leaving them raw and vulnerable with hosts of questions left to answer. At times, they reached an impasse and had to make research decisions, for example when a caretaker simply said in response to the teacher's first question, *'I don't read'*.

5.4 Barrier breaking and boundary crossing

At the same time, teachers crossed barriers into places they might not have foreseen, such as receiving a warm hug from a parent, demanding a personal response when their training and instinct might have been to maintain 'professional distance'. The regular contact with the

support network of co-researchers, Local Authority Co-ordinators, external partners and the project team, along with the materials that prompted reflection and writing to record moments and journeys, were essential to support teachers in making sense of their thoughts and experiences. The Local Authority Co-ordinators and other participants, in turn, needed these connections with the national project so that everyone continued to understand the aims and focus as the project shifted around them within their local contexts, although there was inevitably some variation e.g. in the extent of external partner engagement and some uncertainty and confusion might result where participants joined the project late or could not attend meetings.

However teachers were carried through this challenging process by excitement, enthusiasm and hard work in wishing to make these explorations and learn from them. Some were genuinely surprised by what they encountered, the experiences with families were overwhelmingly positive and they were learning much about themselves as well as their students, including through children's research and through detailed study of the selected children. Parents, in turn, started to report changes in their children and to share more willingly and volunteer information although some, like the teachers, were concerned about whether what they were saying was 'right'. Thus the project started to generate the kind of relational dialogue and exchange of knowledge and ideas that was intended. The locus of control had started to shift, by mid way through the year, away from the mutual disinterest, suspicion and lack of confidence that might be engendered, however subconsciously, by school-centred approaches, towards valuing family and community, mutual dialogue and reciprocal relationships.

In terms of children's understandings and involvement, by mid-way through the year there was also evidence of a shift where children started to become more independent as researchers and learners, as their voices and lives outside school were valued, made visible and brought into school through relationships and dialogue and were beginning to influence the curriculum. Case studies show that children were amazed that their out of school interests were valued, and 'invisible' children became 'three dimensional'. A boy who was interested in countryside pursuits had not thought that he was 'allowed' to write in school about skinning and butchering a rabbit shot for the pot, while a girl was proud to be able to demonstrate her Indian dancing skills in class. This was recognised as *real* personalised learning (Mottram and Hall, 2009), not only for these individuals but for their peers, as learning and experience from children's and families' lives enriched the classroom.

5.5 Shifting the locus of control: new questions and challenges

New questions for schools began to emerge within the project which began to point the way towards tackling some of the issues raised by Teachers as Researchers Phase II regarding cultural and community recognition and involvement, for example

- How does a child from another country, culture and language make sense of the English Education system?
- How can we develop an appropriate curriculum if we don't know the children?

The contrast with current educational culture of targets and hard outcomes was made explicit by the project leaders at the National Days, noting that teachers are trained for 'coverage' of skills and standards, not to take an open-ended stance that changes their own perceptions of themselves. Naturally there is a certain amount of personal and professional disquiet where targets and content are removed, even guilt where teachers are asked to digress from school-centric 'literacy' into their own and their students' literacy lives, to be learners and researchers, to share their lives and model learning as well as 'teach', to concentrate on relationships rather than levels. Teachers were asked to go beyond the series of visits, to offer time and humanity, to give of *themselves*.

At times the interaction was incredibly moving. A four year old child, in talking about her grandfather, expressed empathy for her teacher's loss, in a sensitive and oblique but knowing way. A visiting teacher was shown a dance and invited to stay for a family meal. Teacher and parent conversed as mothers together. These experiences were enriching but they open up many questions for teachers in terms of how much can genuinely be shared and at what cost. It is questionable whether this extent of emotional engagement can be shared with all parents of a primary class; if not it raises question of equity if this is known to be beneficial. For the teachers it has been shown to be valuable but can be exhausting – one commented that the friendship subsequently shown by parents in the playground was 'too much'.

This presented new challenges to the pervading school-centric culture and transmission models recognised in the previous Teachers as Researchers research, even for those not necessarily directly involved, when moving into the domain of children and their families and cultures. A headteacher commented at the February conference,

'...how dare we have created and imposed a curriculum all these years that doesn't have anything to do with the children's lives'.

This kind of influence thus began to extend into other areas of the curriculum and pedagogy, for example through links with other projects within local communities, such as a Community Theatre project, and through Family Liaison officers (FLOs) and other liaison workers such as those with the Portuguese community in Lambeth. Artefacts such as photo-journals helped to communicate through narrative to those not directly involved in the research and family visits. Participants discussed whether this indicated a need for revival of the often maligned 'Show and Tell'.

5.6 Changing concepts of literacy

Mid-way through the year there were signs of a significant development in understanding amongst participants and the project team. Initially, the 'Teachers as Readers' theme was continued into this Phase III project, where notions of literacy tended to be bound up with reading and writing. In this project, the importance of *talk* began to emerge more strongly, not as previously in terms of 'book talk' where teachers and children discussed reading together, but more explicitly as an element of literacy in its own right. While speaking and listening is an established element of the curriculum and talk was always encouraged in interactive work both amongst teachers and with children, this project began to uncover the centrality of oral traditions within families with diverse cultural backgrounds. This was expressed emphatically by parents in such phrases as *'I want her to know where she comes from'*. Where teachers might look around and ask for examples of books and writing on their initial visit to family homes, they began to be inducted into new funds of knowledge, other forms of literacy reliant on the spoken word and the centrality of storying and talk - dialogue and narrative - in families and cultures. This may have been particularly visible in multi-ethnic, multi-lingual communities and where families were in transition, where roots, values and cultures as well as experiences and aspirations were part of children's literacy lives through sustained family narratives, such as that of the grandmother who was telling stories of her childhood in India to her grandchildren in England, on Skype from New York. Interestingly, the verbal research medium of interviews and conversations was mirrored in the narrative medium of literacy lives explored, moving the project's focus away from books and traditional text-based notions of literacy to a broader conceptual frame.

In one local authority this was particularly highlighted as participants noted that speaking and listening in the curriculum tends to derive from reading and writing where approaches are school-centric, creating a disjunction with the storytelling and dialogue that is habitual in families, a natural part of people's lives, cultures and communities. Children's lived and told experience did not relate easily to speaking and listening exercises set by their teachers; the literacy practices were completely different. Rich examples of the complexity of literacy lives were shared at conferences. One school recognised that several distinct communities existed in a single long road and that individual children and families were acutely aware of this. The challenge was to work out what this meant in relation to literacy lives and how it could become a resource for learning.

5.7 Research and development?

Towards the third term of the project a few tensions began to surface in the correspondence amongst the project team regarding the extent to which teachers could be expected to make any changes to their curriculum and classroom practice in response to what they had learnt. Teachers

had shared their initial anxieties about the lack of clear intended outcomes, and it was most important to them, as well as in terms of the project aims, that there was something practical to show for their participation. Furthermore, schools had contributed financially on the basis that the project supported both research and development. Still, some felt that attempting any classroom or school change within this timescale could be unrealistic. While acknowledging concerns and views, the Project Director steered the dialogue back to the initial aims which clearly included practical implications for the curriculum, while the research team gave similar guidance and reassurance to the Local Authority Co-ordinators. Considerable work was being done within local groups and at National Days, through the project's structure, to hold together the disparate activity and ensure that the values and principles underpinning the project were understood and adhered to. This included inviting head teachers to the national meetings, while researchers visiting the schools reinforced the messages and aims of the project.

It was recognised that teachers were along a continuum of enthusiasm and confidence, knowledge and skill and that the most progress was likely to be made by 'energy givers' as opposed to 'energy takers', while the project as a whole was building a critical mass of evidence and activity. This was in danger of reinforcing an asset / deficit view of teachers. However in hindsight some commented that it was important that this range of individuals and organisations was involved, in order to demonstrate the extent to which the ideas and approaches could be more widely applicable. The case studies in the research report demonstrate the subtle but profound changes that teachers underwent through continued commitment to the project despite their misgivings. Eventually, it was by no means the most positive and committed participants who changed and learnt the most, as demonstrated by powerful case studies in the Research Report.

At the same time as teachers were encouraged to introduce visible practical developments, it was acknowledged that cultural change both for individuals and for organisations takes time and tends to be achieved through subtle changes in understanding and gradual pedagogic and positional shifts. This was therefore seen not as the culmination of development but as the initiation or continuation of longer term, sustainable change. As the Research Report suggests. this was less about introducing new systems and processes to enhance the school's work and more about negotiating new meanings at the boundaries of school, seeing interfaces with the community not as political borders but as learning assets (after Wenger, 1988). It was clear that the greatest impact was likely to be seen where head teachers and schools were most supportive and were planning strategically to direct time, energy and funding towards implementing some of the ideas and recommendations from teacher participants' work.

5.8 'Awakenings': knowledge, understandings and identities

The final 'Building Communities: Researching Literacy Lives' conference was held on 30th June 2010 and included parallel presentations by participating teachers, following a detailed framework to support their planning and to ensure that required elements were included. The presentations and discussions demonstrated many examples of 'awakenings' (Miron and Lauria in Greenan and Dieckmann, 2004) as teachers spoke of how through exploring new concepts they had reconstructed knowledge and identity, enabling them to envisage and plan for alternative approaches. Clearly transformative learning had taken place, resulting in altered perspectives, understandings and visions of selves, relationships, power and positioning (O'Sullivan, 2003). This arose in particular from the home visits: one teacher said *'I am blown away by the amount of information I've gained'*. A number of features triggered changes in mindset.

Seeing children learning effectively in their homes was revelatory. Teachers had observed their students 'on task' for long periods on games and projects they were passionate about, 'bouncing off the furniture' with ideas within role play and engaging in study independent of school, such as attending Mosque School every evening or researching a book on their chosen topic of interest with Mum. Religious activity was significant and social, involving literacy (reading, speaking and singing) in different languages. Teachers began to notice similar funds of knowledge in school, such as the boy newly arrived in the country who taught his peers to play cricket using his own language – the language became immaterial which led to a discussion about whether language barriers are created later in life. In other case studies teachers noticed the amount of responsibility, choice and autonomy children had in their literacy and learning and the amount of support that family members gave to one another. Children were hearing siblings read, helping their parents with English, testing parents studying for qualifications and setting up digital communications for the household as well as pursuing their own projects and interests.

Relationships with families were sometimes difficult initially, making teachers feel awkward and intrusive, while a few parents panicked and manoeuvred situations so that both of them could attend, or sought the support of a translator who would be a trusted ally. However parents were usually warm and respectful once trust had been won on both sides and were willing to share stories and confidences. One teacher was 'fit to burst' as sisters performed Indian dance for her and invited her to stay for a meal. Teachers who felt they had achieved 'acceptance' learnt that this could be triggered by revealing of themselves. Professional distance and maintenance of school-home power hierarchies did not work in this context; once trust was built it led parents to approach school more willingly and seek the teachers out.

Children's reactions to being selected for case study were sometimes unexpected, for example it might elicit jealous responses from peers but greater self-confidence and even pride in sharing

their family and community. Interestingly some children were selected on the basis of prior knowledge that was then challenged in the course of the research. Generally the longer term result was more openness and confidence in the relationships, interactions and activity at school. Selections of children were sometimes made in order to address issues of behaviour and underachievement, giving valuable insights to enable teachers to understand and support the children.

Through the 'interruptions' to daily routine (Ainscow *et al.*, 2006) created by investigation and reflection, teachers acknowledged that they learnt to challenge their own, and eventually colleagues', deficit views, particularly of low income and EAL families who were previously assumed to offer less educational support. This included a family who had little furniture but had put a nail in the wall to hang book bags ready for school, parents who displayed all the child's certificates since nursery proudly on the walls, a mother who had sacrificed her desire to return home in order for her children to succeed through an English education and parents making time to study themselves within busy lives.

Similarly teachers had discovered many subconscious influences and undercurrents that seemed to be affecting children's identities, motivation and self-confidence: one mother undermined her daughter, another saved to provide books for the family; one family exerted pressure to achieve while another was distinctly 'laissez faire' with children left to find their own level of motivation and achievement. Religion was often an important dimension of family literacy. Some families explored every opportunity to learn English together, other children were battling against the chips on their parents' shoulders from negative educational experiences, or competing with brighter, older siblings. This led to questions for teachers about whether families' struggles for literacy and the subtle forces at work are genuinely understood and valued; clearly the insights gained through case studies and family visits helped in this respect, but for only the small number of selected children, leaving most children's literacy lives tantalisingly unexplored.

Some teachers anticipating the presentations were concerned that their case studies were less interesting or even boring compared with those who came from different cultures and traditions outside the UK, suggesting another kind of deficit view. However, teachers' presentations demonstrated that cultures are always interesting and diverse and that each child and each family is differently complex and fascinating. The juxtaposition of the teacher's individual and family culture with the children's gives further permutations for discussion and analysis. It is interesting that multiculturalism here is not concerned with nationality or ethnicity, but with diverse individuals within overlapping and intermingling communities. Teachers have discovered through their research that this is infinitely complex, that it changes over time and that cultures and connections can be influenced by individuals, including not only parents and children but also themselves.

5.9 Openings: early signs of developments in curriculum and pedagogy

Back in school, teachers had started working with children in new ways. One established a student research group, a 'special bunch of enthusiasts' who have become 'life researchers' and share their thoughts and reflections with the whole class. They 'cannot stop finding out' and it has affected the whole class. The teacher reported at the final National Day,

"The project's changed my life. Next year I want to start off like this., teachers should start with knowing their pupils. I aimed at the sun, my arrow might not have reached it but it flew much further and wider than it would have done with my previous expectations before the project started."

Another teacher told how her relationship with a case study child had altered dramatically as she grew to understand his home environment and preferences, surrounded by books with no television. She can now guide him to select the most appropriate books at school. The previously 'invisible' boy who never visited the book corner has 'gone up two groups' as a result of increased confidence with the teacher. The teachers reflected, *"We can't get the best out of children unless we understand their literacy lives"*. Where they had grown in understanding this raised some serious questions for the schools, for example having seen the varied use of technology in homes, one teacher described the ICT provision in her school as 'demeaning'.

In general, teachers and researchers reported an opening up of the curriculum, with more interactive and responsive pedagogy giving children more choice. In the process they learnt even more, for example children were able to introduce a whole new vocabulary when their role play area was turned into a building site, based on conversations with fathers in the trade. Certain practical triggers were significant, such as the memory boxes from which 'so much writing' came. Teachers often reported that children changed in behaviour as they were personally and individually valued and relationships developed: they changed body language, became confident, talked more, shared more. Teachers also contributed to this openness in the sharing of themselves; half of the participants noted this as the most significant aspect of the project – instead of 'the teacher' that they thought Ofsted expected them to present, they felt they could confidently be themselves.

A transition was also shown for head teachers who at the start of the project often felt that they ('the school') knew their children well. This was conditioned by the current demands for statistics and socio-economic information about the catchment as head teachers tended to describe families and communities in those terms. A telling table in the Research Report shows how nearly all activity with families was geared towards bringing parents in to support the school and instructing them about school methods. Statements are phrased in terms of 'we want to get

them to...’, indicating that power resides firmly with the school. Here, parents’ funds of knowledge are not remotely recognised and families are clearly referred to in deficit terms. Towards the end of the year the lack of knowledge of the people and families in those communities had generally been recognised and in many of the schools progress had been made and bridges built, principally through the teachers’ visits and subsequent building on these relationships. Practical changes were already having positive effects, for example introducing a café style parents evening with comfortable chairs and groupings to encourage parents to talk to one another as well as with teachers.

Schools were able to demonstrate by the end of the year how they had built on the project teachers’ research and understanding. One school was involving the Family Liaison Officer in meeting families and opening up relationships while each class teacher was encouraged to plan some learning visits (with classes covered by the head teacher) and will be fully supported in this by buddying with teachers who have already conducted visits. They have realised that there is a greater depth of ‘knowing’ that can be achieved where, significantly, teachers’ knowledge of the children had previously been considered to be good. The head teacher commented that the professional development of staff participating in the Building Communities project had been ‘stunning’ and had raised levels of professionalism and enthusiasm, while Ofsted had recognised the progress made in community cohesion.

It has been recognised that this aspect of the project is difficult to ‘sell’ where it has not been experienced and has unspecified outcomes which are not tied to the measures for which schools are held accountable. While the local authorities have amassed convincing evidence of profound impact on children’s learning, professional development and organisational improvement, it is the kind of evidence that is difficult to quantify. As the narrative above shows, it is often anecdotal, qualitative and based on observation and professional judgement. Where schools are already convinced and committed, they will continue and extend the work, with head teachers commenting that they can work creatively with budgets to achieve the things that they value. The concern is how to scaffold and sustain similar work with new schools within a climate of local authority cuts when a vital element has been the tightly structured organisation in which research team, Local Authority Co-ordinators, Head teachers, teachers and selected children all played vital roles.

5.10 Dissemination and influence

Internal dissemination has been continual within the project structure through the many opportunities provided for dialogue within local groups, with the researchers linked to each local authority, with inter-agency partners and amongst participants on National Days, culminating in the ‘parallel’ presentations at the final event. These were another source of anxiety for some teachers, who wondered whether what they had found was significant, whether their evidence

was valid, whether the details that mattered to them were as valuable to others and whether their presentations would do justice to their projects in comparison with others. In fact there was much inspiration in their presentations and their collective evidence of the value and impact of the project in their schools and on their lives was compelling.

The difficulty in communicating the learning from this project is that most participants have agreed it is only fully understood when 'lived'. While teachers might make passionate presentations and demonstrate personal commitment, their colleagues might not see how they themselves could apply the ideas and practices. Would they all be expected to become ethnographic researchers? There is a suggestion that there remains an enormous gulf between those who have participated and those who are interested but would need appropriate support in order to apply the understandings and knowledge shared.

The project leaders and researchers with the influential steering committee have ensured strategic and comprehensive dissemination of the analysis and outcomes from the project, including through UKLA and the Primary National Strategy which is now in its last stages. Further dissemination has been undertaken in the five participating local authorities, for example through head teachers' conferences, but it is of considerable concern that most of the Local Authority Co-ordinators are now no longer in post and many of the established channels and structures for sustaining and building upon the work are being dismantled. Individual schools, however, have committed to further development of the ideas and approaches initiated by the project. It remains to be seen whether the apparent policy emphasis on 'The Importance of Teaching' (DfE, 2010) offers opportunities for greater school and teacher autonomy and whether there will be scope for this kind of development across the boundaries between schools, families and communities, but this is likely to rely on head teachers' funding decisions. Gradual shifts of the locus of control may be possible towards a less school-centric approach even as the curriculum appears to be tightening and narrowing, but this will take imagination and strong school leadership as the local authority support is likely to be less intensive and less clearly defined. While 'academic' dissemination will continue, the ways in which the project team will engage on a national basis are more difficult to envisage in a climate of uncertainty and financial austerity. Nevertheless, there is a momentum and commitment amongst the project team and steering committee that is unlikely to be extinguished.

6. Challenges arising from the project

This project, even more than its predecessors in the 'Teachers as Readers' series, has challenged a wide range of established notions that are embedded in our education system. An attempt is made to summarise some of these challenges below.

6.1 Teachers' professional development and identity: selves and mindsets

The analysis of project evidence challenges our concepts of teacher professionalism and identity, raising questions about the content and process of initial teacher education and continuing professional development. Teachers have

- developed their identities as readers, learners and researchers
- realised their power in shaping ideas about the nature of literacy learning
- begun to share control of learning with children and families
- learnt alongside children, finding that learning is about ourselves and our identities
- started to view literacy as a rich tapestry rather than a ladder of levels
- broadened ideas about literacy far beyond school-centred reading and writing
- recognised real assets and challenged perceived deficits in children's and families' learning and literacy.

6.2 Shifting the locus of control from schools towards communities: reciprocity and equivalence in knowledge and relationships

The project has also highlighted the following ideas which present a significant and convincing challenge to the current hegemony of education; cultural change will be needed in order for schools to take these ideas into account.

- Teachers' diverse funds of knowledge, cultures and experiences are an essential resource for literacy and learning.
- Teachers' and head teachers' school-centric concepts of learning and literacy, in response to policy emphasis, have inculcated deep seated and inappropriate assumptions, sometimes prejudices, leading to unhelpful or ineffective approaches that must be challenged in order to meet learners' needs and engage families and communities genuinely in supporting children rather than 'school'.
- It is more helpful to focus on making small but significant adjustments to accommodate the assets that learners bring, rather than concentrating on deficits that must be addressed by wholesale approaches to raise standards.
- A co-constructed curriculum engages teachers, learners and families; children can take teachers into new textual territories and uncover hidden literacy, but teachers are likely to need help to embrace this through curriculum and pedagogy.

- Our concept of literacy should take account of the equivalence of talk, dialogue and narrative with reading and writing.
- Learning and literacy are normally socially constructed for both children and adults.
- Our concept of professional development should recognise the importance of travelling together supported by dialogue, allowing space for sharing triumphs, passions, experiences and insights and also questions, uncertainties, disagreements, lack of knowledge and confidence and changes of mindset.
- Relationships as well as structures and processes have a central function in pedagogy and these relationships are reciprocal.
- Attention should be paid to the levels of responsibility, autonomy, choice and agency that children have at school compared with at home.
- Communities and cultures are diverse, changing and 'ours' rather than homogeneous, static and 'theirs'.

6.3 Shifting the locus of control in education policy: using funds of professional and personal knowledge

The project evidence demonstrates that professionals in schools and local authorities have been bound by top-down approaches within the National Strategies (telling, training, showing, having the answers) for which they are accountable in terms of standards, levels, outcomes and impact against national and international benchmarks. They are concerned about getting things 'right', are encouraged to be risk-averse and are conditioned to make judgements. This project has shown that professionals' humanity, passion and intellectual understanding contribute enormously to children's learning once they are given 'permission' to value and develop these aspects.

The learning from this project suggests that

- New emphases are required in initial training and continuing professional development for teachers, focussing on the rights of children to be the starting point for the curriculum as opposed to focussing on their rights to access the curriculum.
- More enlightened approaches to external accountability are needed to enable leadership of learning, open and investigative mindsets and recognition of diverse funds of knowledge.
- New understandings should be assimilated for government and school leaders in terms of knowing and working with local communities, families and cultures; this requires new language and emphasis to bridge the disjunction between children's experiences at home and school.

- Cultural shift is achieved through small moments of insight, through individual conversations, realisations and nudges of understanding, not through national reform and centralised approaches to school improvement.
- Consideration needs to be given to how this kind of work might be communicated, supported and embedded across large numbers of schools without the intensity of project activity with which teachers engaged directly in the Building Communities: Researching Literacy Lives project.

6.4 Implications for schools: investing in cultural change

If schools are to introduce this mindset in the development of curriculum and pedagogy, there are some practical issues to address for schools with limited budgets:

1. Development of relationships and co-constructed learning needs collaborative time and space for teachers and support staff, for teachers with students and for teachers with families.
2. All those working in schools need to be aware of and prepared for the emotional implications of bringing teachers' and children's lives into school and into their learning; this may demand new levels of emotional literacy.
3. New professional protocols may be needed to safeguard teachers, children and families where boundaries of place and space are crossed and blurred and mutual activity is taking place, including ethical governance of teachers' activity such as home visits and case studies of individual children.
4. Practical adjustments can enable schools to build bridges with families, for example by reorganising furniture; enabling parents to make connections in the playground; using display space to communicate messages about literacies and cultures; valuing and using parents' knowledge in *their* areas of expertise.
5. Involvement of outside agencies may be valuable but needs careful planning and investment of time. It may not lead to quantifiable outcomes.
6. Too much emphasis on teachers may neglect valuable 'insider' knowledge, for example of teaching assistants who live within the community. The inclusive approaches suggested, which have tended here to involve teachers, parents and children, might valuably involve all members of the school and wider communities
7. Open-ended, child-centred learning demands flexibility, for example a unit of work might be an indeterminate length depending on the extent of children's engagement.
8. Engagement and support of head teachers and senior staff is crucial if this work is to develop beyond a finite project into changing the school's culture sustainably.
9. Preconceived notions and assumptions about children's and families' literacy should be replaced by evidence-based development of broader views legitimising different forms of literacy, in particular oral and narrative forms. This needs continual investment.

10. Deficit views and statements about children, families and communities should be robustly challenged.

6.5 The possibilities of systemic change

It is important to recognise that challenging a deficit view of education is difficult because it is counter-cultural to the current political agenda of standards, targets and testing, perpetuated by successive governments, which requires children to be as good as, or better than, national and international benchmarks.

This report is concluded at a time when research impact is continually under scrutiny and schools are in something of a 'policy vacuum' with the Rose (2009) and Alexander (2009) recommendations on personalised and localised approaches to the primary curriculum removed from websites in favour of a return to the National Strategies in the short term (see Research Report p.27). In this context, the 'Building Communities: Researching Literacy Lives' project has developed with teachers, schools and local authorities vital counter-cultural ideas that position the teacher as learner and researcher, shift the locus of control away from schools, embrace current multimodal concepts of literacy and challenge the deficit discourse.

The project leaders still envisage the possibilities for co-authorship and co-ownership of the curriculum, even while working within a pervading performativity culture. The evidence from each local authority, embodied most powerfully in teachers' presentations and portfolios, demonstrates how these ideas have started to gain credence through investigation and enactment within this project, driven by participants' convictions of their value and authenticity to support children's literacy and learning.

6.6 New approaches to literacy and learning

The 'Building Communities: Researching Literacy Lives' project has clearly met its aims. Teachers have developed remarkable skills of observation and reflexivity as ethnographers documenting and understanding selected children's literacy lives, which has extended their own and the research team's understandings about 21st century literacy identities, habits and cultures, with profound messages for academics, policymakers and local authorities. Innovative approaches in classrooms and schools have begun to develop, although still in the early stages. New relationships have been established but it is important to note that it is personalised and individual communication and contact that have been prominent rather than the establishment of formal systems, structures and partnerships. There is a danger in modelling new practices and approaches by extrapolating from incremental changes taking place in unique classroom settings. The conviction amongst many participants that the learning needs to be 'lived' to be understood places barriers in the way of widespread adoption of these approaches. Still, the potential for

engaging more teachers and schools in the philosophy of this project could be realised more fully by

- collecting examples and stories for publication
- collaborative approaches in which teachers lead and mentor each other through processes of discovery
- involving people other than teachers in making connections (e.g. Family Liaison Officers, local support workers from different agencies, teaching assistants)
- employing different media such as film to communicate insights about families and communities to wider professional audiences
- instigating communications and connections from families and communities as well as schools, for example through community projects, institutions and agencies.

There is a new purpose for school in recognising and using the opportunities and rich resources residing in children's, families', teachers' and others' literacies. This needs to accommodate the new entrants in the nursery school most of whom do not speak English; the many children whose digital literacy is far more advanced than that of their teachers and parents; the boy who corresponds with his father in Nigeria by email while testing his Mum for her police exams; the girl who has had Roald Dahl read to her from the cradle; the boy whose Dad writes maths problems for him to solve; the boy who loves Dr. Who; the siblings who hear each other, and their mother, read. Instead of promoting school-centric views of improvement, where schools reach outwards to draw families and communities in to support the school's purposes, where school has a monopoly on learning, the evidence from this project suggests that it is valuable to explore and build upon teachers', families' and children's individual and collective knowledge, experiences and resources in order to initiate new learning and nourish, sustain and evaluate learning that is *already happening*.

This requires new strategic emphasis that places the locus of control in communities, where schools work with families in shared spaces, with participants as co-learners, using a wider range of cultural resources to support literacy and learning. This supports the small steps and awakenings of teachers who may be shaking off a dependency culture epitomised by one teacher's previous reliance on 'downloads' of standardised lessons and schemes of work. The project evidence suggests that teachers are required to explore new professional territory, reposition themselves and develop new professional identities to make this work in day to day practice, while the pervading external judgements are against targets, standards and monitoring schedules in line with National Strategies. They cannot enter this new territory without the understanding and advocacy of school leaders and the advice, support and critical friendship from the local authority and other agencies.

Teachers have always been challenged to develop lessons, schemes of work and the curriculum to make learning engaging and relevant, but this project's evidence shows that often this has been based on their own perceptions of popular culture, their own established views of what is of value and importance, assumptions about children's interests and approaches to learning and deficit models of learning, all conditioned by a policy agenda of standards and performativity. This project has encouraged a more balanced, inclusive and potentially more powerful approach, where the lives and literacies of teachers, children and families become *part of* the curriculum. So far this has only been explored for young children. Extrapolation of these ideas into secondary and further education is beyond the scope of this analysis but is a focus for vital future work.

To achieve this, all participants – children, teachers, parents and others - must be learners. They have to let go of their preconceptions, share control, take risks, give of themselves and open themselves up to learning with and from one another. This will not happen unless they are given the authority and support to value relationships, people and communities above standards, targets and levels of attainment; selves over statistics; being alongside knowing. This requires education policy that encourages school structures and cultures of openness and trust within communities. It requires professional development that is less directive and judgmental against criteria and competences, enabling teachers to be leaders, learners, investigators, thinkers and developers. This is not about training and implementation but about living and learning. This project has shown the importance of challenging deficit views not only of children but also of teachers, schools, families and communities where we have seen that rich untapped resources and funds of knowledge reside.

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