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Building communities: teachers researching literacy lives

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Abstract
In the light of wide recognition that the traffic between home and school is traditionally one-way, this paper reports on a year-long project which was deliberately counter-cultural and involved teachers researching children's everyday literacy practices and 'funds of knowledge' (Gonza´lez et al., 2005). The project sought to explore whether and in what ways teachers, positioned as researchers, developed new understandings which challenged their assumptions about children and families, and the extent to which any new understandings about the learners' literacy lives had consequences with regard to the curriculum and home-school relations. Eighteen primary teachers from ten schools in five local authorities in England were involved; this article focuses on two of the practitioners' experiences. Drawing on data from interviews, transcripts of their Learner Visits to homes, data analysis meetings with the teachers and the practitioners' portfolios, it is argued that the project challenged teachers' perceptions and beliefs about children and families, prompting dispositional shifts and new understandings of difference and diversity. It also reveals that creating responsive curricula that connect to the lived social realities of the children represented a considerable professional challenge. The paper highlights the affordances of collaborative research partnerships, and suggests that considerable time, space and support is needed in order for teachers to appreciate and understand children's and families' funds of knowledge and blur the boundaries between home and school.

Keywords: teachers as researchers, diversity, funds of knowledge, home-school relations; everyday literacy lives.

Introduction
Whilst the influence of home is widely recognised as a significant feature in the development of children's literacy and learning (Heath, 1983; Nutbrown et al., 2005), research suggests that the traffic between home and school is traditionally one-way and that the emphasis on parental involvement in schooling, is often at the expense of developing better home- school relations (Feiler et al., 2006; Hughes and Kwok, 2007). Such relations, shaped by historically set roles and positions of unequal power can disadvantage certain families and communities (Lareau, 2000). Tveit's (2009) study of the texts from the National Parents' Committee for Primary and Lower Secondary Education in Norway for example, showed that relationships between families and schools have often been characterised by a 'schoolcentric' continuum with parents from low-income or minority ethnic groups generally seen to be deficient (2009:90).

Furthermore, home-school literacy relationships may be framed around limited notions of school literacy. Despite the reality of living in this 'new media age' (Kress, 2003) and professional recognition that literacy practices are changing, institutional conceptions of literacy arguably remain somewhat print-oriented and book-bound; teachers' practices continue to foreground traditional notions of reading and writing (Hasset, 2006; Marsh, 2003a; Yeo, 2007). Additionally, as many have argued, the language of schooling tends to be focused on purportedly simple notions of measurable attainment. Whilst this language not unreasonably relates to a desire for school improvement, it has, Mottram and Hall, (2009) assert, had a homogenising effect and resulted in children's literacy development being 'discussed according to levels and descriptors, rather than in the context of the child's home and family history' (2009:109). This is likely to sideline children's out-of-school experiences, the literacy learning they do at home and the involvement of their parents.

International research studies reveal that in order to support school literacy, the primary phase profession tends to denote what families are expected to do to support school literacy and rarely recognises or builds upon parental support for wider literacy learning in homes and communities (Brain and Reed, 2003; Cairney, 2003; Comber and Kamler, 2004). In England, despite the fact that successive governments have espoused the value of home-school partnerships, the Cambridge Primary Review's survey of parental involvement notes:

> The policy rhetoric speaks of a changing relationship between parents and schools, but the reality may be somewhat different, there is little evidence of real change. (Muschamp et al., 2007:14)

Teachers, Muschamp et al argue, need to establish new links between home and school, links which build on the practices and understandings that already exist in homes and communities; they state that 'research as to *how* this can happen would be helpful'.(2007:5) (our emphasis). Similarly, based on their US research, Hughes and Kwok (2007) argue that it is crucial that the profession explores strategies for enabling teachers to make personal connections with parents and children, since in their view the relationship between parents and teachers, alongside that between pupils and teachers, is the fulcrum of the home-school interface.

The project *Building Communities*: *Researching Literacy Lives*, the key findings of which are reported upon in this paper, responded to these calls for action. With funding from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the United Kingdom Literacy Association, (UKLA) the project team of five mostly university- based researchers, worked alongside five Local Authority Co-ordinators (LACs) (mainly local authority literacy consultants) and eighteen primary phase teachers from ten schools in England. The team sought to support the teachers as researchers, to help them explore their implicit assumptions about children and parents, develop an understanding of the cultural, linguistic and social assets children bring with them from home, and utilise the children's home knowledge and tools for thinking in school. Premised upon diversity and difference, the project required a shift in mindset, openness to learning and a willingness to change and challenge existing perspectives, positions and agendas on the part of all those involved: the teachers, head teachers, LACs and university-based researchers. All were positioned as learners within the project's remit and organisation.

Literacy and difference
In this work, the university-based researchers took a social practice approach to literacy. This recognises the situated nature of literacy practices in a range of contexts, including, for example: the home, the school, the workplace and the community (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Gregory and Williams, 2000). This understanding eschews the notion of an autonomous model of literacy (Street, 1984) that sees literacy as a set of decontextualised skills (as frequently found in prescribed school curricula), and asserts the existence of multiple literacies that are localised and everyday, situated in the context of their use. Taking such a contextual view of literacy raises questions about the value afforded different literacy practices in schools, homes and communities and highlights the importance of the beliefs and attitudes that teachers, parents and others hold about these practices.

Arguably 'taken for granted' assumptions about different children's ability to achieve in literacy and in schooling remain widespread. These conceive of some families, particularly minority ethnic groups and white working class, as lacking; they are not widely credited as having valuable literacy experiences. Such notions are likely to lower teachers' expectations of different groups of learners. This deficit view appears not only to be dismissive of difference, but perceives difference as difficult, challenging and thus problematic. Yet as Meek (1991: 29) argued 'difference is at the heart of what it means to be literate'. Based on ethnographic research in the United States, Heath (1983) identified the cause of the under-achievement of some minority groups as related to the mismatch between the way language is used in linguistically and culturally diverse families and the way it is used in schools/ the system. Cairney's (2003) Australian work reinforces this, highlighting that differences in school literacy achievements often relate to students' 'lack of familiarity with the literacy practices of schooling and schools' failure to recognise and build on the literacy practices children bring with them from home' (2003:89). Additionally, as Volk (2004) argues, an oversimplification of the continuities and discontinuities in home-school relations may lead teachers to 'approach children's learning at home with a school-based model of valued learning interactions and, as a result, judge homes to be deficient when their expectations are not met' (2004:37).

In discussing the 'circularity and persistence of deficit discourses' Comber and Kamler (2004) question how:

> ...as a teaching profession, we can move out of this dead end, while also addressing wider challenges of ageing teacher populations, increasingly culturally diverse student populations and more overt divisions between the affluent working class and the poor. The teaching profession at present, lacks serious mechanisms for change. (2004:293-4)

By perceiving difference and diversity as strengths and people as individuals not as homogenous groups, the *Building Communities* project hoped to challenge the deficit model of education. It built explicitly upon the work of Luis Moll and his colleagues who offer an alternative perspective on this issue (González, Moll and Amanti, 2005; Moll et al., 1992; 1993; Moll and Cammarota, 2010, Moll and Greenberg, 1990). Their work reveals that the variations across families can be seen as a resource rather than 'a set of determinants of literacy success' (Cairney, 2003:89). In these studies, teachers, working with anthropological researchers, visited the homes of working class Hispanic families in Tucson Arizona. The children of these families were commonly considered 'disadvantaged' as their families were perceived as unable to provide the richly engaging environments offered by other more 'advantaged' families. Moll's research showed that in reality the families and communities contained extensive 'funds of knowledge' (1992:132) developed over time and that this knowledge was a rich resource used by children as part of their learning. Our own work sought to help teachers find out about and build on the potentially diverse funds of knowledge in their own school community contexts. The project thus involved schools stepping away from existing parental participation strategies and encouraged teachers to investigate children's and families' funds of knowledge and explore the consequences for classroom practice and for fostering alternative home-school relations.

Research design and structure
The project was underpinned by a set of core values and principles related to community construction: reciprocity and interaction, equivalence and diversity which had emerged from an earlier study on building communities of readers within and beyond school (Cremin et al, 2008, 2009). Consequently, a multi-layered research and development study was designed, which sought to support teachers' understanding of difference through their involvement as researchers of children's funds of knowledge and to document their experiences. Specifically, the team sought to explore whether and in what ways the teachers, positioned as researchers, developed new understandings which challenged their assumptions about children and families, and the extent to which any new understandings about the learners' literacy lives had consequences with regard to the curriculum and/or home-school relations. In contrast with much school-based action research, with which some of the teachers were familiar, the project utilised a less structured more open, qualitative ethnographic approach (Denzin, 1997; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Central to the project's design were the Learner Visits undertaken by the teachers to homes or other contexts outside school, the frequency and timing of these was flexible, arguably reflecting the 'selective intermittent' ethnographic time mode described by Jeffrey and Troman (2004).

In England, whilst home visiting has long been endorsed (Hurst and Joseph,1998), there is limited evidence about its use, although it has been found to be successful in targeting high-risk families and is recommended as a 'tool to improve child outcomes' (C4EO, 2009:3). In the project, the team chose to coin the term Learner Visits, to highlight that the teachers in these contexts were not positioning themselves as holders of knowledge about a child's literacy, but as learners and researchers with an 'ethnographic eye' (Gonzales et al., 2005). Re-positioned, they were encouraged to 'capture and record the voices of lived experience' and to 'contextualize experience', (Jeffrey and Troman, 2004:536). In order to understand the young people's practices and positions, the teacher researchers sought to adopt an emic perspective (Schieffelin and Cochran Smith, 1984), and to find out, to listen, to remain open and to learn without judging.

They were supported in this process though professional development activities, both locally and nationally (the six National Day gatherings included all the teachers, head teachers, the five LACs and partners from local agencies working with each authority, e.g. colleagues from the Minority Communities Achievement Service, the Special Educational Needs Service, the Library Service). At National Days critical issues such as perspective, reflexivity, insider-outsider stance (Conteh et al, 2005) ethics, data collection and interpretive analysis were all examined and related international research papers read and discussed (Comber and Kamler, 2004; Marsh, 2003b; Moll et al., 1992; Mottram and Hall, 2009). In this way opportunities for all involved to reflect, debate, critique and challenge their thinking were woven into the National Days. Practically the work was organised across a school year: in terms one and two, the teachers worked with children to explore their literacy lives beyond school and they considered their own literacy histories and shared their home literacy practices with their classes. In term two, the teachers also undertook Learner Visits and sought to analyse their new knowledge and understanding with support from their linked researcher. In term three, they were challenged to build on this in the context of their classroom practice and home-school relations.

The project's research design was influenced by Moll's (1992) seminal study, but differed in several significant respects. For example, the teachers in the English study undertook the Learner Visits on their own (though some chose to visit in pairs), they were not accompanied by university researchers as in Moll's research; this was in order to foster a model for possible future use and because the team were committed to a co-participative design which was more fully engaged the actual users of the research. Additionally, a wide range of families from different socio-economic backgrounds were visited in five areas in England, not just those traditionally seen to be marginalised. Furthermore, the English project uniquely sought to explore the children's funds of knowledge – their lived experience – with particular attention to their literacy lives in the 21st century. Finally, in contrast to Moll's study, the new project placed increased emphasis on the importance of teachers sharing their own literacy lives and funds of knowledge with children and families.

Sample selection
A 'snowball sampling' approach was used for the recruitment of participants, with the UKLA publicising the opportunity; five local authorities Barking and Dagenham, Birmingham, Lambeth, Kent, and Medway were recruited and LACs appointed in

each. These local co-ordinators used agreed criteria to seek the involvement of two schools. Significantly, the schools had to have identified a need and commitment to finding new ways of building relationships with parents and families and had to be prepared to engage in research as a way of developing professional learning communities and moving the school forward. Eight primary schools and two infant schools were selected by the LACs with numbers on roll varying from 119 to 600. Three were predominantly comprised of White British children; four were predominantly comprised of either: Portuguese, Pakistani, Polish, or Turkish and Somali children; the remaining three had a very mixed intake in terms of ethnicity and the number of languages spoken. The head teachers in each school sought two volunteer teachers who in turn selected three case study children. The reasons for selection were diverse. Of the 44 children, 18 spoke English as an additional language, with 13 different first languages covered, this was a factor cited, in addition to concern about literacy progress, as well as the teachers' knowledge or perceptions of family circumstances (e.g. new arrivals to the country). Cognisant of ethical issues, (the BERA 2004 guidelines were used), each teacher approached the children's families to ask permission to make Learner Visits to the home or a 'neutral' location outside school. The families were informed about the project and the purpose of the visits, and the majority gave their consent to being visited and to their anonymised views being used as research evidence. No pressure was put on the families to take part, they did not have to give reasons for choosing not to participate and two families declined. One family, whilst comfortable with meeting, declined to allow the digital tape recorder to be used, although field notes were accepted. All the teachers recruited and visited at least two families, several visited three and some visited each family several times.

Data collection and analysis
Each university-based researcher was assigned to a local authority for the purposes of data collection and initial analysis. The methods employed included:
- A series of semi-structured interviews (Three each with teachers, headteachers, LACs and agency partners).
- Learner Visit 'debrief' meetings (One per teacher following visits). During these the teachers selected episodes from the transcripts to analyse and interpret with the support of the university-based researchers;
- Teachers' Learner Visit conversations with families;
- Teachers' Professional Learning Journey Portfolios. These included a wide range of documentation, some focused on the case study children e.g. observations, notes from conversations and some focused on the teacher, e.g. reflective journals, literacy histories, related teaching materials;
- National Day proformas and other written evidence. This involved the teachers in e.g. considering their expectations prior to undertaking Learner Visits, summarising their insights from Learner Visits;
- Teachers' PowerPoint presentations and researchers' notes made during the teachers' presentations at the final National Day;
- Researchers' field notes made during National Day meetings

In addition, the LACs' ongoing progress reports (five each across the year) and reflective journals as well as email correspondence and notes made at local meetings were a source of research evidence, with the LACs' consent. Thus the project was multi-layered in terms of research activity with evidence being gathered by the

teachers and the wider research team. This layering and ongoing reflective approach meant that the team could explore their own, the teachers' and the LACs' developing roles as researchers within a discursive frame. Analysis of the research evidence was cumulative and inductive; each university-based researcher worked independently using the iterative process of categorical analysis (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996) to draw out patterns and themes from their assigned local authority /schools context across the year. Each focused on one LAC, two head teachers, and four teachers and drew across this dataset to identify questions, patterns and themes. These were discussed and debated by the wider team with constant feedback from the data informing the ongoing analysis. Additionally, in order to afford 'thick descriptions' which Geertz, describes as 'our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to' (1973: 9), one teacher from each school was studied in more depth (10 in all). For these teachers, the debrief meetings were also transcribed and their portfolios and other written evidence were subject to closer scrutiny. To support the trustworthiness of the findings, the themes and case accounts were read and re-read by an independent researcher and adjustments and new categories created and debated where appropriate.

The patterns across the data, made manifest by individual teachers in their different contexts included: concerns about being a researcher, a shift in perceptions, a wider knowledge base about children and families and a degree of curriculum reconstruction. However, the project represented a significant challenge and the degree to which teachers' assumptions and perceptions shifted and their practice developed varied considerably. Nonetheless, all the practitioners came to adopt new dispositions - that 'matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions' that influence practice (Bourdieu, 1977:83). For the purposes of exploring these dispositional shifts, illuminative vignettes from two of the ten teachers' case studied are offered with reference to one of their case study children. Whilst unique, Sophie and Katy's lived experiences in the project were broadly representative of the project teachers' experiences; they commenced the project with very limited knowledge of the children (this focused mainly on their academic abilities and awareness of their behaviour) and of the families and the communities in which the children lived. Following the visits this expanded significantly, as did their understanding of the families' role in supporting the young learners.

Sophie, an experienced practitioner of 15 years worked in a small rural school with a mainly White British population and a community comprised of both middle and working class families. She taught a small class of fifteen 10-11 year olds. Katy, who was relatively new to the profession having taught for four years, worked in a large town school with a very mixed ethnic population that was predominantly working class. She was teaching a large class of thirty 9-10 years olds. Whilst Katy lived on the edge of the town in which her school was situated, Sophie and all the remaining teachers on the project lived outside the communities in which they worked. In what follows, the teachers', children's and parents' names are all pseudonyms.

Sophie learns about Jo
Early in the project Sophie noted in her journal that her school probably appeared to 'impose ways of working on the parents and families'. She also raised this concern in the initial interview and expressed discomfort regarding the impending Learner Visits. Despite years of experience, Sophie had never visited a pupil's home, and said she felt

'physically sick at the thought of it'. She also worried about her research role and sought re-assurance at every step, requesting exemplar questions and sleeping badly the night before the first visit. In terms of her knowledge of Jo, one of the case study children in her class, after eight weeks of term, she observed 'he's quite a challenge behaviourally', he 'has yet to finish a book or anything really', 'it's excuse, excuse, excuse, his homework's almost never done'. She knew that Jo played rugby locally where her own sons played and also noted that he was not a high achiever in maths or literacy.

Due to the behaviour difficulties which Jo and his younger siblings presented, Sophie perceived that his home life would be 'quite chaotic'. Another member of staff expressed a similarly 'judgemental' stance when she heard Sophie was due to visit the family, 'It'll be a free for all probably – I bet they do what they want at home'. Sophie knew Jo's dad was working in Nigeria and thought his mum was a housewife with time on her hands:

> 'The perception is, she drops them off - this is not just mine but other teachers as well. Lady of leisure, always in her PE kit, track suit, sports kit, always going off running or to the gym, you know. She never comes to any of the children's assemblies and often doesn't seem to know what's going on because she doesn't read the newsletter. She drops them off and swans about and isn't interested in their education. It seems a bit harsh but that's how it seems' (Initial interview).

Her view, influenced by other teachers' perceptions and her own observations, reflects a form of deficit discourse about Jo and his family. Additionally, she expressed frustration with his mother's lack of involvement in the school given she was perceived to be in a position to attend assemblies or support school trips.

The Learner Visits were to disprove many of these preconceptions. On the afternoon of the first visit, Sophie drove Jo and his siblings home after school; they lived in a nearby town. She noted that Jo appeared surprised at the mess in her car and that he sat in the front seat confidently giving directions, choosing the long way home and talking animatedly throughout. Sophie, still worried about the visit, felt the journey helped her relax though 'when I got out of the car I suddenly felt very unsure again- I wondered what she (his mum) was expecting'.

Sophie described being warmly welcomed by Nikki, Jo's mother and whilst expecting 'chaos, energy, manicness' found a sense of purpose and calm prevailed. The children settled quickly onto a Lego computer game, whilst Nikki made a cup of tea and told Sophie she was training part-time on Wednesdays (the assembly day) and Saturdays to join the police force. Listening afterwards, Sophie became aware of the demands upon this mother, who had 'begged' her husband to move the family, but was now living in an unknown area, studying for a new career, travelling long distances to her training and taking her children to and from school and clubs, as well as visiting her parents in the north of England and running the household. In the debrief meeting Sophie commented 'she must be run ragged, I know I would be'.

This new knowledge about Nikki as a unique person with her own commitments and challenges, prompted a degree of empathy for her and convinced Sophie that her

previous 'knowledge' about this 'lady of leisure' was erroneous. Two days later, Nikki sought Sophie out in school to thank her for coming; she had clearly valued their conversation. The second visit was arranged in half term at Nikki's request, home phone numbers were exchanged and Sophie felt more comfortable:

> 'I actually took time to sit back, and I don't think I would have done that, well I didn't do it the first time because I just wanted to get the experience over and done with. This time … I wanted to know more. I wanted to find out, I wanted to be open rather than 'I'll do the motions'.

When Sophie mentioned that she had been nervous about visiting, Nikki declared: 'I feel like that when I come up for parents' evening, I get panicky before I come up thinking "oh I don't like doing this on my own, what are they going to say this time?' This was one of the critical moments that Sophie selected to discuss with her linked researcher; she perceived it confirmed a gradual shift in their relationship, 'we were both honest with one another I suppose, and I think I began to see where she was coming from'. Sophie described the second visit which was much longer as 'more of a chat, person to person, much more relaxed'. She found out more about Jo's life and literacy practices at home.

Jo talked enthusiastically to his teacher about his Playstation and computer games; naming Guitar Hero, Lego Star Wars, Rachet and Clank, Revenge of the Sith and Phantom as favourites, alongside Little Big Planet which he played simultaneously online with friends. Nikki and Sophie shared a sense of distance from Jo's passion. His mother refused to let him purchase gun games and said she never played on the Wii or computer herself and Sophie shared her concerns about her own children's computer use. Jo also proudly showed his sketchbooks to his teacher who was amazed at the level of detail; his drawings were connected to computer games and his favourite movies. Reflecting on the transcript, Sophie realised that at home when drawing or playing computer games Jo, who 'never finished anything' in school appeared to set himself goals, exercise considerable agency and concentrate for extended periods. Additionally, Sophie found that he had several, mostly older local friends from Scouts and rugby, although none attended the school. She was struck by the assurance of this ten year old and the demands of sustaining his many roles in his family and friendship groups at home, in the community and in school.

In both visits, Sophie observed Jo offering sensitive support to his siblings and undertaking a range of household tasks, like walking the dogs and helping his sister and mother respectively with their homework and coursework. She found Nikki relied upon him for digital support; he sorted out her new mobile phone, taught her to use it and, dependent on signal strength, set up email or Skype and the webcam for the family to communicate with their father. He also uploaded family photographs to a shared site, although personally preferred to text his dad. In this way, Jo played an active role in the household supporting his mum and siblings. Sophie was surprised at this, and that he undertook these responsibilities with ease, expertise and without complaint.

In seeking to connect to these and other insights about Jo and other children's home literacy learning in school, Sophie reported 'loosening the reins' and offering more opportunities for independent child-led activities and collaborative work in class.

However, she expressed considerably less assurance about developing classroom practice that focused on the production and consumption of digital texts which she now thought was essential to 'recognise and extend their skills', commenting 'I'm not a digital phobic or anything, but I'm just not sure how to build on all this'. As a consequence Sophie expressed guilt and frustration; her recognition of the breadth of children's everyday digital practices prompted her to observe that the school's ICT provision was 'way too low level…almost demeaning', but she was unsure how to make it more relevant and demanding and felt 'held back' by the standards agenda. In relation to fostering home-school relations, after the Learner Visits, Sophie noted that she found herself going onto the playground more, seeking conversations with parents, rather than remaining inside and letting them come to her. She was also instrumental in altering the school's parents' evenings which became less formal, staff were no longer positioned behind desks, armchairs were provided for parents and teachers, and staff were asked to 'listen first, to find out'. As Sophie commented 'we've tried to make it less of a 'them and us' and more of a 'we're all in it together' set up'. Whether the parent-teacher discourse altered in any way due to this re-configuration is not known, though the strategy suggests a potentially more dialogic approach was being sought.

Katy learns about Rachita
In the autumn term, in seeking to find out more about children's home literacy practices, Katy invited her class to create 'Literacy Rivers', extensions of the collage-like 'reading rivers' described by Cliff-Hodges (2010) depicting their literacy practices over a weekend. Katy acknowledged she was 'astonished by the diversity' these reflected:

> I hadn't really thought about it before and I guess if I'm honest I didn't think many of them really read or wrote much at home, there is never anything much in their contact books. But there is masses in their rivers, so many examples, so many different kinds of literacy, hidden literacy really. I'm not sure I'd have seen all this as literacy before. It's certainly different from school literacy. (Katy, reflective log 1:5)

Later, Katy chose to case study Rachita whose collage showed she mostly read magazines in her mother tongue. Katy noted 'I realise I don't know anything much about her really, … she's so compliant, she somehow slips under the radar'. In school, this nine year old appeared to her teacher neither to excel academically nor to represent a challenge behaviourally, but assiduously and quietly attended to her work. Katy knew her literacy levels and targets and perceived she showed 'the beginnings of a flair for literacy, particularly story writing and she loves reading'. In many ways Rachita seemed to position herself, or was positioned in school as an 'invisible child' in Pye's (1995) terms, a child who sought not to be noticed. Katy recorded in her log that she found Rachita 'hard to get to know', 'very quiet and self contained'.

Like Sophie, Katy was concerned about undertaking Learner Visits, she worried that parents would 'see it as an intrusion', and 'feel obliged'. So she was surprised when Rachita's parents readily agreed. She had only met them once when discussing Rachita's progress at parents' evening, and noted they 'seemed focused on how hard she worked'. She had not seen them at assemblies or any Christmas events and assumed, correctly as it turned out, that they both worked. On her visit to their home after school, Katy was honoured to find that Rachita's father had taken time off work

and her mother had exchanged a shift with another nurse; they both worked in a local hospital and clearly viewed the arrival of their daughter's teacher with pleasure. All the family gathered: Rachita, her sister and both her parents. Katy was also told an uncle sent his apologies.

Katy established that they had arrived in the UK from India some five years earlier and after two moves had settled in the local community. They had emigrated in order to 'give the girls new opportunities and improve their education', although both parents had been disappointed by what they perceived to be a lack of focus on the core skills and limited homework in England. Through finding out about Rachita's home life, Katy began to consider whether her pleasure in reading was influenced by the tradition of oral storytelling in her extended family; she was told that Rachita frequently asked her mother to tell her stories of India and their life there. Additionally, her grandmother, told traditional Indian tales to the girls on Skype. As well as magazines and comics, Rachita also read books in Malayalam and was being encouraged by her parents to read the Bible in Malayalam and to write Malayalam. She often watched TV in Hindi with English subtitles and enjoyed playing the computer game Simms. Katy also found that Rachita often wrote stories at home 'so I can revise things we do in school'.

On her second visit, after Rachita's family had shared some memories and photos of their life in India, her mother asked Katy if she had ever visited the country. Whilst she had not, a close friend had gone to live in Kerala and Katy found herself talking about her own hopes and plans, both those from her own childhood and as a potential mother. In commenting on this extract from the transcript which Katy selected to revisit, she noted 'it was here where it took off really, perhaps because I'd opened up too'. Later, Katy and the family listened to music, and the sisters spontaneously chose to dress up and perform two Indian dances for her in the living room, about which she observed:

> It had a huge impact on me watching them dance and listening to the music, Rachita was so elegant, so graceful and they were so proud. It made me think where in class is there ever an opportunity for her to shine like this, to come out of the closet? (Learner Visit debrief)

Katy was invited to stay to supper; by the time she left she had been with the family for well over two hours, 'I felt so at home and we just kept chatting, they're lovely, so generous, it wasn't awkward at all'. The two visits prompted Katy to develop a new respect and admiration for Rachita and her family's cultural practices; at nine years old she was a competent bilingual and in the context of her own home demonstrated considerable assurance. Katy came to appreciate the high expectations and hopes of Rachita's parents and noted a sense of a close knit family unit was evident. In summarising her insights, she observed that the children were extensively supported at home and that they lived a full family life; alongside extra home study in Maths and English (led by her parents) and Indian dance classes, they attended church together and met up regularly with the extended family.

This busy social home life in which Katy saw Rachita took an active part, contrasted with her teacher's experience of her in school, although following the visits Katy felt Rachita's assurance in class subtly shifted. Katy commented that she now understood what underpinned Rachita's assiduous work ethic and had new knowledge about her

parents' values and educational aspirations for their daughter. The headteacher observed that undertaking the visits had a marked effect on Katy, who she perceived had previously lacked the confidence to initiate conversations with parents on a casual basis but was becoming 'more open and relaxed with them now'. In relation to the curriculum, Katy encouraged Rachita to share her talent for dancing in class and sought to carve out personal spaces for all the children to share their interests and practices, although this was framed as a special and arguably separate activity, a form of 'show and tell' that did not interface with the prescribed curriculum.

Discussion

For Sophie and Katy and the majority of the project teachers, the Learner Visits enabled them to develop new understandings about children's literacy practices; they came to appreciate more about the young people's capacities, desires and interests in the world beyond school. Arguably, they also came to see that in all the families visited, literacy surrounded the children's activities and despite its diversity and contextual variety, it was part of the fabric of family life. Both Sophie and Katy noted that the parents supported the children's literacy learning in various ways. In line with McNaughton's (1995) categories, these included: activities in which children practised particular forms of literacy at their parents' behest, joint activities and 'ambient activities' that occurred as part of the everyday routines of family life. In addition, extending this categorisation, the teachers observed that Jo and Rachita and the four other learners whose homes they visited, engaged in self- initiated independent literacy activities in which there was a lack of intervention on the part of their parents. Frequently, though not always, these activities appeared to be related to their extensive engagement in popular culture and digital technologies. In such contexts, the young people were very knowledgeable and demonstrated a high degree of volition and decision making.

During the Learner Visits Sophie and Katy also found, in common with their colleagues on the project, that when they shared something of themselves, parents seemed to open up and connections were made more easily, perhaps due to the alignment of their own funds of knowledge as adults (Andrews et al, 2005). For example, Sophie shared maternal concerns about her children's involvement in new technologies and Katy talked of her personal aspirations as a potential mother. Additionally, their assumptions and perceptions about families were challenged and both the teachers perceived that their relationships with these and other children's parents and families began to alter; personal and professional boundaries appeared to blur as Sophie stepped more frequently onto the playground to talk and Katy developed the assurance to initiate informal conversations with parents.

However, both teachers found it a considerable challenge to translate their new understanding and appreciation of the children's and families' funds of knowledge into shifts in the curriculum. Arguably their dispositions altered (Bourdieu, 1977) but their attempts to create responsively aligned curricula were somewhat limited. Sophie felt she did not have the expertise to encompass the children's multiple digital competencies and perhaps, whilst recognising their technological skills, saw these as inferior or in opposition to academic literacy. If this is the case, research suggests she is not alone in experiencing such dilemmas (Marsh, 2003a, 2005). Katy, potentially overwhelmed by the diversity with which she was faced (she visited three homes from a class of thirty), chose to offer children personal sharing time, but did not seek to

redesign the curriculum as a whole. Working in England where successive governments have framed not only the content but the process of the literacy curriculum in recent years (DfES, 2006), perhaps Katy and Sophie's volition and agency as curriculum developers has also been side-lined. It should be acknowledged however that creating pedagogies which connect to children's 'virtual school bags' (Thomson, 2002) and everyday lives is a challenging, complex and long term task. It is likely that perceived institutional constraints and the tight time frame of the project further militated against these teachers developing more radical curriculum redesigns. However, the data indicate that the Learner Visits had consequences for their perceptions and expectations of children and families, thus fostering dispositional shifts, and that both practitioners had begun to 'turn-around' (Comber and Kamler, 2005) to the children; they had observed them in different contexts and begun to see them through alternative lenses.

Conclusion
This research offers new insights about the ways in which local knowledge and understanding about the children and their families can be developed at the primary phase. The project, albeit small scale, demonstrates that through teachers increased openness to children's everyday literacy practices and their re-positioning as researchers undertaking Learner Visits, they can come to challenge deficit discourses and widen their knowledge and appreciation of difference. It further demonstrates that through considering parental perspectives and sharing something of their own histories and practices, teachers can build new relationships based on increased reciprocity and interaction with children and families, and that their new knowledge may enable them to make connections between children's different cultural, social and linguistic experiences as they move between home and school

However, whilst the project challenged existing understandings of what is valued in schools as appropriate knowledge about learners and literacy in the 21st century, and looked beyond schools to consider what children bring, it is not simply a question of teachers appropriating children's lived experience in the classroom. This may cut across nationally prescribed pedagogies and may be problematic for teachers positioned within accountability cultures that pay negligible attention to children's and families' knowledge and practices. Such work is further complicated by teachers' deeply held beliefs, perceptions and attitudes. It indicates that considerable time, space and sustained support is needed in order for teachers to examine their habits and assumptions, investigate children's everyday literacy practices and begin to create 'pedagogies of re-connection' (Comber and Kamler, 2004).

This project differed from other research in this area by positioning teachers as solely responsible for the data collection relating to the children and families, it also involved a novel combination of co-participant teacher researchers, university-based researchers and local authority co-ordinators working together with head teachers. Hill (2010:336) claims that "partnerships between academics and teacher researchers can be rigorous, systematic and generate new knowledge as each partner negotiates and creatively engages with 'theoretical' and 'practical' knowledge" enriching each other's' understandings through the multiple perspectives shared and interrogated. There was evidence of this, although in the context of markedly reduced local authority provision in England and a new national curriculum, potentially framed

around disciplinary knowledge, such professional exploration and collaboration about the assets children bring to school is unlikely to be foregrounded in the short term.

Nonetheless as Kincheloe (2003) argues, teachers' active involvement as researchers can be empowering and may help them resist the dominant discourses of successive governments and question the high profile 'what works' agenda. Significantly, in this study, the teacher researchers adopted an ethnographic stance, underpinned by a commitment to openness, lack of judgement and reflexivity. Whilst demanding, this stance was arguably pivotal in the development of the teachers' dispositional shifts. Compared to more limited forms of practitioner research in which teachers' may simply trial new practices in the safe boundaries of their classrooms (Somekh, 2006), such a stance may have the potential to afford more nuanced insights. The issue of teachers' researcher positioning deserves continued exploration and suggests that new spaces for teachers to explore possibilities for shared enquiry, knowledge-building, communication and action are needed. Another recommendation from this work is that schools, teachers and student teachers are supported to examine the ways in which they view children, parents and communities as homogenous or heterogeneous groups. This may reveal a need to investigate children's and families' funds of knowledge, such that young people's home knowledge and tools for thinking are recognised and built upon in school and teachers are able to broker new, more equitable and less schoolcentric relationships with parents and communities.

Acknowledgements

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