Teachers Researching Literacy Lives

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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). Furthermore, despite wide recognition of the impact of new technologies and the work of the New London Group (Street, 1984), 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). Such conceptualisations may sideline children's out-of-school experiences, their home literacy learning and the involvement of their families and communities.

Furthermore, international research indicates that the primary 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). In England, Mottram and Hall (2009) suggest that the language of schooling tends to focus on purportedly simple notions of measurable attainment, often connected to the school improvement agenda. They consider that this has 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). Whilst successive English governments have espoused the value of home-school partnerships, Muschamp et al., (2007) argue that new links between home and school need to be established, links that build on the practices and understandings that already exist in homes and communities. Additionally, Hughes and Kwok (2007) suggest that new strategies for enabling teachers to make personal connections with parents and children are needed.

The project *Building Communities*: *Researching Literacy Lives*, which is the focus of this chapter sought to develop such strategies and understandings. Funded by 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 English schools. The team sought to: support the teachers as researchers; help them explore their implicit assumptions about children and parents; develop an understanding of the cultural, linguistic and social assets children bring from home; and build new relationships with parents and children. The project was the third phase of work which in Phase I *Teachers as Readers,* examined 1200 primary teachers' knowledge and use of children's literature (Cremin et al, 2008a,b). In Phase II, *Teachers as Readers: Building Communities of Readers,* the team focused on widening teachers' knowledge of literature and other texts in order to develop reading for pleasure. During this phase, 45 teachers from five local authorities began to find out more about the realities of children's reading lives and new relationships were brokered, though relatively few stretched beyond the

classroom. Those teachers that began to blur the boundaries between home and school and came to recognise the diverse nature of reading in the 21st century, made a marked impact children's conceptions of reading and on their growth as readers (Cremin et al, 2008c,2009).

The Phase III project built upon these insights and sought to position teachers as researchers in order to develop their understanding about the uses and meanings of literacy in the children's homes and communities. In recognising the socially situated nature of literacy practices and the existence of multiple local literacies, (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Gregory and Williams, 2000), the project raised questions from the outset about the value afforded different literacy practices in schools, homes and communities and highlighted 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. However, as studies have shown the cause of the under-achievement of some minority groups is 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 (Heath, 1983) and differences in school literacy achievements often relate to the inability of schools to recognise or build on the children's home literacy practices (Comber and Kamler, 2004; Thompson and Hall, 2008). In particular the work of Luis Moll who challenged the persistence of the deficit model of education was built upon in this study. This work revealed that families and communities contain extensive 'funds of knowledge' - their lived experience - and that this rich resource is used by children as part of their learning (Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti, 2005; Moll et al., 1992; Moll and Cammarota, 2010).

Research design and structure
The *Building Communities* project explored 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 and Lincoln, 2000). Central to the design were Learner Visits undertaken by the teachers to homes or other contexts outside school. In Moll et al's (1992) original study, teachers had visited the homes of working class Hispanic families in Tucson Arizona with anthropological researchers. In the current study, the teachers visited on their own (or sometimes in pairs) as the research team were committed to exploring potentially sustainable ways of working for schools.

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 this project, the term Learner Visits was chosen to highlight the teachers' repositioning as learners and researchers with an 'ethnographic eye' (Gonzales et al., 2005). They were encouraged to find out, to listen, to remain open and to learn

without judging, to 'capture and record the voices of lived experience' and to 'contextualize experience' (Jeffrey and Troman, 2004:536).

The teachers were supported in this process through professional development activities, both local and national (the six National Day gatherings included all the teachers, head teachers, the five LACs and partners from local agencies). Issues such as perspective, reflexivity, insider-outsider stance, ethics, data collection and interpretive analysis were all examined and related research read and discussed (Comber and Kamler, 2004; Marsh, 2003b; Moll et al., 1992; Mottram and Hall, 2009). In this and other ways opportunities for all involved to reflect, debate and critique their thinking were afforded. 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 consider and share their own literacy histories and current practices with their classes. In term two, the teachers also undertook Learner Visits and worked 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.

Project members

The recruitment of participants involved a 'snowball sampling' approach 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 who had identified a need and commitment to find new ways of building relationships with parents/families and were prepared to engage in research as a way of developing professional learning. Eight primary schools and two infant schools were selected by the LACs with numbers on roll varying from 119 to 600. Four were predominantly comprised of either: Portuguese, Pakistani, Polish, or Turkish and Somali children; three were predominantly comprised of White British 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 one of the selection factors cited by the teachers, in addition to concern about literacy progress and knowledge or perceptions of family circumstances (e.g. new arrivals to the country). Cognisant of ethical issues, each teacher approached the children's families to ask permission to make Learner Visits to the home or a 'neutral' location and to record their conversations. All the teachers recruited and visited at least two families; 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: semi-structured interviews with teachers, headteachers, LACs and agency partners; Visit 'debrief' meetings with the support of the university-based researchers; Learner Visit transcripts of conversations with families; teachers' Professional Learning Journey Portfolios 'National Day' proformas and other written evidence; Teachers' PowerPoint presentations; researchers' field notes made at the National Days. In addition, the LACs' progress reports, journals, emails and notes made at local meetings were examined. Thus the project was multi-layered in terms of research

activity with evidence being gathered by the teachers and the wider research team. Analysis of the evidence was cumulative and inductive; patterns and themes were drawn from each local authority /schools context across the year and were debated by the team with feedback from the data informing the ongoing analysis. Additionally, one teacher from each school was studied in more depth (10 in all).

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' perceptions shifted and their practice altered 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 teachers are offered with reference to one of their case study children. Whilst unique, Sophie and Katy's experiences were broadly representative of the wider group; 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 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 teaching, worked in a large town school with a predominantly working class mixed ethnic population.. She was teaching a 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. All the teachers', children's and parents' names are pseudonyms.

Sophie case studies Jo
Early in the project Sophie, who commented that the school might be 'impos(ing) ways of working on the parents and families', expressed discomfort about the impending Learner Visits. Despite years of experience she had never visited a pupil's home and felt 'physically sick at the thought of it'. She 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, 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 Jo played rugby and that he was not a high achiever academically.

Perhaps due to his behaviour, Sophie perceived his home life would be 'quite chaotic', another staff member also expressed such a view when commenting to Sophie, '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 … 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).

Additionally, she expressed frustration with his mother's lack of involvement in the school given she was perceived to be in a position to offer support. Her view arguably reflects a form of deficit discourse about Jo and his family.

The Learner Visits were to disprove many of her preconceptions. On the afternoon of the first visit, Sophie drove Jo and his siblings home after school where she was warmly welcomed by Nikki, Jo's mother. Sophie found a sense of purpose and calm prevailed; the children settled quickly onto a computer game whilst Nikki explained she was training part-time as a police officer. Sophie became aware of the demands upon this mother, who in studying for a new career, was travelling long distances to her training, taking her children to and from school/clubs and running the household. As Sophie later 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 empathy 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. At the second visit, 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 her initial nerves, 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?" ' Sophie perceived this was a critical moment of realisation for both of them, 'we were both honest with one another I suppose, and I think I began to see where she was coming from'. The longer second visit as she felt 'more of a chat, person to person, much more relaxed'. She also found out more about Jo's life and literacy practices at home.

Jo talked enthusiastically to his teacher about his favourite Playstation and computer games (Guitar Hero, Lego Star Wars, Rachet and Clank, Revenge of the Sith and Phantom) and proudly shared his sketchbooks of drawings connected to these and current movies. Nikki and Sophie shared a sense of distance from Jo's computer game 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. However, 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, she learnt that he had several mostly older friends from Scouts and rugby. In both visits, Sophie observed Jo offering support to his siblings and undertaking household tasks like walking the dogs, she also found his mum relied upon him for digital support; he had taught her how to use her new mobile

and regularly set up email or Skype for the family to communicate with 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 insights about Jo's and other children's home literacy learning, Sophie reported 'loosening the reins' in school and offering more opportunities for independent child-led activities and collaborative work. However, she was considerably less assured about developing practice that connected to the production and consumption of digital texts, 'I'm not a digital phobic or anything, but I'm just not sure how to build on all this'. She perceived the school's ICT provision was 'way too low level...almost demeaning', but was unsure how to make it more 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 assuming they would come to her. She was also instrumental in altering the school's parents' evenings in which staff, no longer positioned behind desks, sat in armchairs as did the parents, as she 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 more dialogic approach was being sought.

Katy case studies Rachita
In seeking to find out more about children's home literacy practices, Katy invited her class to create 'Literacy Rivers', based on the idea of 'reading rivers' (Cliff-Hodges, 2010) and 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 different kinds of literacy, hidden literacy really. (Katy, reflective log 1:5)

Rachita's collage suggested she read magazines in her mother tongue which prompted Katy to observe 'I realise I don't know anything much about her really, she's so compliant, she somehow slips under the radar'. Katy knew her literacy levels and targets and felt she showed 'the beginnings of a flair for literacy, particularly story writing', but she recorded that Rachita was 'hard to get to know', 'very quiet and self contained'. Arguably Rachita positioned herself or was positioned as an 'invisible child' (Pye, 1995) in school.

Like Sophie, Katy was concerned about undertaking Learner Visits, she worried that parents would 'see it as an intrusion' or 'feel obliged', so was surprised when Rachita's parents readily agreed. She had only met them once at parents' evening, where she felt they seemed mainly interested in how hard their daughter worked. Katy was honoured to find that Rachita's father had taken time off work for the visit and her mother had exchanged a shift with another nurse. Katy established that they had arrived in the UK from India some five years earlier and after two moves had settled locally. They had emigrated in order to 'give the girls new opportunities and improve their education', although had been disappointed by what they perceived to be a lack of focus on skills and limited homework. Katy recognised there was a tradition of oral

storytelling in her family; Rachita frequently asked her mother to tell her stories of India, and her grandmother retold traditional tales on Skype. As well as magazines and comics, Rachita also read books in Malayalam and was being encouraged to read the Bible and write in Malayalam. She watched TV in Hindi with English subtitles and enjoyed playing the computer game Simms. Katy also found that Rachita 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, Katy found herself talking about her own hopes and plans as a potential mother. In commenting on this extract, 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 performed Indian dances 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 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 their close knit family unit and noted the children were extensively supported; in addition to extra home study in Maths and English (led by their 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 realised Rachita took an active part, contrasted with her experience of her in school. Following the visits Katy felt she understood what underpinned her assiduous work ethic and noted that Rachita's assurance in class subtly shifted. The headteacher also observed that undertaking the visits had a marked effect on Katy, who she perceived had previously lacked the confidence to initiate conversations with parents 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 she set aside time for all the children to share their interests, 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 home literacy practices and begin to appreciate their capacities, desires and interests in the world beyond school. Arguably, they also came to see that in all the families visited literacy in all its diversity and contextual variety was part of the fabric of family life. Both Sophie and Katy noted that parents supported the children's literacy learning in various ways, including: 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 (McNaughton, 1995). They also noticed that Jo,

Rachita and the 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.

In common with their colleagues, Sophie and Katy additionally noticed 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 (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 perceived that their relationships with these and other children's parents and families began to alter; personal and professional boundaries blurred as Sophie stepped more frequently onto the playground to talk and Katy developed the assurance to initiate conversations with parents.

However, both teachers found it a considerable challenge to translate their new understanding into shifts in the curriculum; whilst their dispositions altered, arguably their attempts to create responsively aligned curricula were limited. Sophie felt she did not have the expertise to encompass the children's digital competencies and perhaps saw these as inferior to academic literacy. If this is the case, research suggests she is not alone (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 (DfES, 2006), perhaps Katy and Sophie's volition and agency as curriculum developers has been side-lined. It should be acknowledged however that creating pedagogies which connect to children's everyday lives and 'virtual school bags' (Thomson, 2002) is a complex long term task. It is likely that perceived institutional constraints and the project's time frame further militated against these teachers redesigning the curriculum more radically. Nonetheless, 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 began to see them through alternative lenses.

Conclusion
This research offers new insights about the ways in which local knowledge and understanding about children and families can be developed at the primary phase. Albeit small scale, the project demonstrates that through teachers increased openness to children's everyday literacy practices, their re-positioning as researchers and the Learner Visits, they came 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 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

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. However 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 practitioners positioned within accountability cultures. Such work is further complicated by teachers' deeply held beliefs, perceptions and attitudes. The project 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 the area in that it involved a 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 reduced local authority provision in England and a new national curriculum, (potentially framed around disciplinary knowledge), such professional exploration of the assets children bring to school is unlikely to be foregrounded, at least in the short term.

Nonetheless as Kincheloe (2003) argues, teachers' active involvement as researchers can be empowering, 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 project suggests that new spaces for teachers to explore possibilities for shared enquiry, knowledge-building and action are needed. Another recommendation 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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