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'I had some additional angel wings'

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‘I had some additional angel wings’: Parents positioned as experts in their children’s education

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‘I had some additional angel wings’: Parents positioned as experts in their children’s education

Abstract

This article provides evidence of the ways in which Family Learning (FL) has offered opportunities for the negotiation of a culturally responsive pedagogy that positions parents as experts. Although our study is small (ten parents and six FL practitioners) its significance lies in its longitudinal perspective and in-depth analysis, which demonstrate that the benefits of learning are dynamic and can transfer across domains (education, family, community) and lead to change in parents’ sense of self and their practices. We find that the approach taken by the FL workers enabled parents to raise their horizons of possibility so that they considered new careers and ways of being. Our symbolic interactionist approach focuses on the opportunity for the negotiation of new identities afforded by these programmes and provides an explanation for their long-term positive consequences. The implications for adult learning for all professionals engaging with parents are the benefits of: forming collaborative relationships between participants and staff; using a ‘funds of knowledge’ pedagogical approach; and developing artifacts that can be shared publically.

Key words: family learning programmes; parental engagement; symbolic interactionist approach; new ways of being

Introduction

This article discusses how participation in family learning programmes can offer parents the opportunity to be seen as experts in their children's education. Family learning (FL) as a means of engaging parents is central to policy throughout the EU because 'when parents engage in educational activities for themselves a series of cultural and educational interactions are promoted within the family' (Directorate-General for Education and Culture (DGEC), 2015, p.11). However, the relationship between schools, parents and families can be challenging. On the one hand, some parents' previous experiences of education, and their cultural and socio-economic background, may create distance from the school 'culture' and 'language'. On the other, some teachers may regard parents as passive and so be reluctant to reach out and engage with them. For these reasons interventions that are led by adult educators are more likely to identify parents as 'people with an important contribution to make ... rather than as "problems" that need to change to the school's way of seeing things' (Tett, 2001, p. 196). Family learning projects from this perspective are more likely to be effective because they are designed to build on families' home cultures and experiences as well as parents' strong motivation to help their children (Carpentieri, 2012).

Internationally, FL serves a variety of purposes but its main function is to improve children's attainment through engaging parents in the life of the school (Anderson & Morrison, 2007; DGEC, 2015; Kağıtçıbaşı, Sunar, & Bekman, 2001; Kirk, Lewis-Moss, Nilsen, & Colvin, 2011). This focus constructs restricted roles that can 'create an increased burden on parents for the academic failure of their children (and their schools)' (Baquedano-López, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013 p. 164). Scottish policy, however, takes a somewhat different view of the role of FL, making it an interesting context for research. Current policy describes FL 'as effective in reaching disadvantaged families and communities to improve their life chances' (Education Scotland, 2018, p. 5) reflecting earlier policies in adult literacies that focus on every citizen having 'the literacies capabilities necessary to bridge the poverty gap, to understand and shape the world that they live in and to enjoy the rich knowledge and benefits that being able to read, write and use numbers can bring' (Scottish

Government, 2011, p. 1).

There is always a difference between policy rhetoric and how policies are interpreted (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010) and the current focus on family learning arises out of the Scottish Government's priorities for schools. These are concerned with 'improving attainment in literacy and numeracy' and closing the attainment gap in achievement between 'the most and least disadvantaged children and young people' (Scottish Government, 2018, p. 4) signalling that they aim to encourage 'a culture of aspirations in adults and children' (Lamb et al., 2009, p. 5). In contrast, the research reported here was designed to investigate the benefits that parents identified for themselves and their children as a result of their participation at a time of earlier, more parent focused, policies for FL. This article also provides new insights into the impact of such programmes over time.

Family learning: outcomes and approaches

Previous research has tended to explore children's achievement as a result of their participation in FL, rather than how it is experienced by parents. Most programmes focus on how parents can provide more child-centred opportunities for learning and develop more effective strategies for tutoring their children (van Steensel, McElvany, Kurvers, & Herppich, 2011). Overall the evidence suggests that FL can help children to be more confident about their learning capacities (Horne & Haggart, 2004) and help improve the relationship between the home and the school through promoting greater sensitivity about a child's socio-cultural conditions. This is because lack of a shared understanding between different cultures 'can have a negative impact on children's literacy learning and their educational opportunities' (Anderson & Morrison, 2007, p. 72). FL has also been shown to help parents to develop the competencies, attitudes and practices needed to create a positive learning environment for the family (Kağıtçıbaşı, Sunar, & Bekman, 2001).

Research on the value of FL to parents shows that opportunities to experience success in learning enables parents to change their literacy, numeracy and communication practices as well as improving their self-confidence and efficacy (Horne & Haggart, 2004; Swain, Brooks & Bosley, 2014; Tett & Maclachlan, 2007). These changed

practices can lead to parents gaining qualifications, ‘progressing on to further learning or vocational qualifications, ...[and] many became more active in their child’s school or in their local community’ (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), 2009, p. 6). Other research has shown that FL can lead to greater insights into how the school system works, a better relationship with teaching staff and a reduction in the sense of fear and alienation parents have felt towards schools (Swain et al., 2014).

The assumptions made about parents can influence programme development and outcomes, for example, an approach based upon a deficit model may assume that participation will help to raise parents’ aspirations for their children. However, research consistently finds that most parents from low-income backgrounds already have high aspirations for their children but do not have the economic or cultural capital to achieve these goals (Kirk, Lewis-Moss, Nilsen, & Colvin, 2011). Rather than emphasizing what parents lack, research suggests that programmes should support parents to fulfil their aspirations and further develop their own expertise as their children’s first educators (Cummings et al., 2012; Gorard, See, & Davies, 2012).

Much of this literature, however, fails to acknowledge that ‘families’ lives are deeply shaped by racial, class, and migrant inequality ...and thus [schools] participate in these inequalities, embracing deficit perspectives instead’ (Baquedano-López et al., 2013, p. 172). A number of authors (e.g. González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Honig et al., 2001) have pointed out that schooling practices are strongly connected to issues of social class, ideology and power resulting in a view that parents should fit into the dominant culture rather than that schools should be engaging with the diversity of parents. For example, Moll (2005, p. 280) argues that there is a focus on ‘how parents can accommodate to the routine of the schooling, [but not on] how they can get the school to accommodate their needs, conditions, and desires.’ To reverse this assumption requires an approach based on a view that all parents and communities have important ‘funds of knowledge’ (González et al., 2005) to contribute to education. This perspective assumes that parents have an equal role to play with teachers in educating their children because it focuses on the resources and practices that parents bring and so builds on, rather than denigrating, their expertise. It uses an ‘inquiry method of teaching’ (González et al., 2005, p. 19) in which participants actively develop their

lived experiences which are therefore validated as legitimate sources of knowledge both inside and outside of school. These experiences include everyday materials, for example a decorated recipe book or ‘craft objects such as book marks...[that] can be found strewn across homes in ways that weave writing in the fabric of the everyday’ (Pahl & Rowsell, 2011, p. 133).

Moreover, when parents can influence the family learning curriculum to make it relevant to their experiences, for example through sharing family narratives with their children, this can provide valuable resources for emotional and social development (Baquedano-López et al, 2013). It also shifts more agency to parents as meaning-makers rather than receivers of expert instruction. Using the ‘funds of knowledge’ approach in FL is more likely to result in positive changes in the sense of self of both parents and children because their knowledge, expertise and skills are recognised and valued. In addition, research (e.g. Feeley, 2014) on the outcomes of participation in adult literacy programmes has demonstrated that this approach increases skills, confidence and self-respect, resulting in participants developing their economic, social and cultural capitals in ways that satisfy their own aspirations.

In summary, there has been little research specifically on the value of FL to parents mainly because the key driver of policy has been on improving the attainment of children by involving parents more strongly in the school. The underpinning assumption has been that parents lack knowledge that the school can provide and confines parents’ roles to receiving ‘school knowledge’ rather than collaborating as equals. In contrast, approaches informed by a ‘funds of knowledge’ perspective are more likely to be experienced positively by parents because their own lived experiences are valued.

There is little literature that both focuses on parents and is also longitudinal making this study an original approach. Moreover, it is based in Scotland where there is a strong focus on parents as people with something to offer the school (Education Scotland, 2018). This specific context allows for the investigation of how parents reflect on their learning from, and experiences of, involvement in FL projects that were based on pedagogical approaches that valued their knowledge, skills and expertise.

Methodology

Our study is framed by symbolic interactionism (SI) because it is concerned with ‘the creation of selves’ (Fine, 1993). However, Stryker noted ‘there is no single orthodoxy which is symbolic interaction theory.’ (1972, p. 435). SI is also a broad church methodologically (Meltzer & Petra, 1972), unified by a focus on the social act as the unit of analysis (Hargreaves, 1986). Fine argued that all interactionists agree that the ‘self is not an object that has inherent meaning, but is a construct that is given meaning through an actor’s choices, mediated by the relationships, situations, and cultures in which she or he is embedded’ (Fine, 1993, p. 71). SI is, therefore, concerned with encounters: joint acts that continue for as long as ‘two or more persons sustain a mutual co-orientation of action and activity’ (Denzin, 1974, p. 270). Our position on the stability of the self is towards the processual (and interpretivist) rather than structural (and positivist) end of the continuum, following Gecas, who wrote: ‘The key feature of the processual interactionist perspective...is its emphasis on the social *situation* as the context in which identities are established and maintained through the process of negotiation’ (1982, p. 1, italics in original). Family learning provides a particular context which affords participants the opportunity for the negotiation of new identities.

The study was based in one local government area in Scotland and was developed in partnership with three FL workers who helped shaped the focus of the research. Three other FL workers operating in the same area were also recruited. All six workers interviewed were women and five were very experienced practitioners. While it would have been preferable to include parents from the outset in the design of the study, finding parents who had been engaged in family learning work between seven and ten years ago proved to be a significant challenge, even with the assistance of the FL workers, as no records were made. Informed by our interest in the construction of identities through interaction in social situations, it was important to interview practitioners and parents who had been involved in the same shared experience. Ultimately a combination of recruitment strategies was used: invitations issued by secondary schools; follow-up of names on the ‘products’ of the groups which the FL workers had facilitated; and ‘snowballing’ (Morgan, 2008). Table 1 provides some background information on the parents who participated in this study.

Table 1: Parents (see separate file)

The FL workers first completed a questionnaire, to elicit basic information about their professional training, and were then interviewed by telephone in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the principles informing their approach. All the parents were interviewed face-to-face about their involvement with family learning, their recollection of any changes they made to their activities with their children, and any changes in their family or themselves which they attributed to participation in FL. In line with the SI approach, a particular focus in interviews was on their recollection of the characteristics of their relationship and interaction with FL practitioners. We asked what they thought they had gained, if anything, from their involvement in FL projects, with respect to their own, or supporting their children's, learning. Across all the interviews we aimed to elicit the meanings that the FL projects had for participants, whatever their role within them.

Consistent with SI we looked for shared understanding of meanings. We were alert both to meanings that all participants attributed to their interactions, but also to how those meanings functioned within the FL/parent relationship. We sought to identify how meanings were changed through interpretations of interactions, and how such shared meanings shaped people's choices (Handberg et al., 2014). The interviews with the parents and practitioners were recorded, transcribed and then anonymised to ensure that individuals could not be identified. We employed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), identifying themes from the literature which were present in the data, paying attention to new themes that arose. We were alert to both the absence of expected themes, and those which might provide 'disconfirming evidence' (Cresswell & Miller, 2000). This method of analysis provides a holistic picture rather than a fragmented view of individual variables. We provide a 'thick' description of the interviews that goes beyond surface experiences as we hope to create 'a sense of verisimilitude, wherein our readers can cognitively and emotively "place" themselves within the research context' (Ponterotto, 2006, p.543). The initial approach to the analysis of data from the FL workers was somewhat different because in addition to interviews they had completed a written set of structured questions, answers to which were entered into Excel and then also analysed thematically. We shared our emerging analysis with participants, to ask whether it made sense to them, as a check on the credibility of our interpretation (Cresswell & Miller, 2000).

Ethical approval for the study was provided by both the University and the relevant local authority. Interviews with parents were conducted in public places of their choosing to ensure that they were on 'home ground', mindful of how power relations between researchers and research participants are constituted (at least in part) by location (Elwood & Martin, 2000). The parental recruitment strategies relied on parents contacting the researchers, or following up information already in the public domain. Conscious of the possibility that the interviewees may welcome the opportunity to renew their relationships, we clarified in advance with all participants whether they were happy to have their contact information shared. The FL workers were made aware that while we would not name them, because of the specific nature of their role someone familiar with their area of practice might be able to identify them. All were happy to participate on that basis.

Inevitably there are limitations to the research. First, data from parents were collected from those who opted to take part and were unlikely to be dissatisfied. Second, learner evaluations are more likely to generate positive results, especially when they are 'gathered from people whose previous negative experiences of education have led them to have low expectations' (Swain et al, 2014, p. 82). Third, there is the possibility of recall bias that represents a threat to the internal validity of studies using self-reported data (Hassan, 2005). Because of these limitations our data comprises the recollections of those who had positive memories of their engagement with FL work. What we can ask is, for those for whom FL was a positive experience, what is it that made it so?

Findings

We first discuss the role of the family learning workers (FLWs), especially their pedagogical approaches, and then detail the changes that parents reported as a result of their participation in the programmes.

Family Learning Workers

The FLWs' main aim was to involve parents and to support them to become more engaged in both their own and their children's learning through, as Katherine described, 'breaking down the barriers between the home and the school'. Morven, who had worked in community education in the city for twenty years, highlighted the need to

work collaboratively and noted that partnerships involved not only schools but also ‘the libraries, museums and other cultural and leisure providers in the city’. The FLWs worked in a range of schools and with parents from different backgrounds so had to be aware of these varied contexts. Louise emphasised the importance of FLW for promoting inclusion ‘so we can widen participation and help to close the attainment gap’. Overall, the purpose of the FLW role was summarised by Katherine as promoting the value of everyday learning opportunities ‘that parents engage with on a daily basis’ while Kirsty underlined that, ‘parents’ needs and interests are central to the learning process’.

All of the FLWs were committed to a ‘funds of knowledge’ approach (González, et al. 2005) that drew on the interests and understandings of the parents. They particularly prioritised ‘bridging the barriers between home and school’ (Louise) through drawing on parents’ stories, craft skills and other knowledges so that they became the experts. One aspect of this was project-based work that involved parents working together with their children to produce an artefact such as a book that they could all share. As Morven pointed out such projects ‘kept parents engaged over time, gave them something to share with their wider community and helped them to see themselves as having lots of skills to offer’. This approach resonates with Pahl and Rowsell’s point that ‘Artifacts give power to meaning makers... particularly learners who feel at the margins of formal schooling’ (2011, p. 134) because it allows the home world to interpenetrate the ‘schooled’ world.

While the commitment of the FLWs to a ‘funds of knowledge’ approach is clear, they felt somewhat constrained in their practice by ‘what the schools and nurseries are interested in us providing’ (Semla). Positive changes in the ways in which schools engaged with parents were identified by Katherine, who, reflecting on her seventeen year’s of practice, noted ‘they are more willing to engage with parents and work collaboratively...’ However Morven found that the attitude of some schools still precluded negotiating the curriculum with parents ‘because for many schools the approach is that “we know best what you need”’. Louise observed that where, in contrast, schools saw ‘the parents as a resource, rather than people that need to be informed about what the school is doing’, a ‘very different atmosphere’ was created. Kirsty felt that where schools did invest the additional time required to negotiate the

curriculum this contributed to a change in the relationship because ‘the parents know that they have had their say’.

Consistent with the ‘funds of knowledge’ approach the FLWs started by finding out from parents what they would like to cover and also what skills they can offer. For Tina this involved ‘showing parents that there are lots of ways in which they support their children and that what happens in the home is important’. However, here again the way that some schools positioned themselves as the ‘experts’ was thought to be unhelpful. Semla, the most recently qualified of the FLWs with two years’ experience, described some schools as ‘very prescriptive about how things should be done especially in supporting reading’. As a result she felt constrained in the range of activities she could introduce to parents because she did not want to create difficulties in her working relationship with schools.

Perhaps to avoid the challenges of engaging with such schools, where there might be little reward for effort, other FLWs carefully selected the schools with which they worked. Katherine said she tended to ‘prioritise the schools/nurseries where the parents are hardest to reach and also those schools that are willing to work with me’. Whereas Morven found that the ‘way in’ for her was to identify teachers who were allies and then ‘they can help you find a way into the school and once parents are engaged then the head teacher will come round’.

In order to help break down the barriers which existed between some schools and their work all of the FLWs had taken part in a variety of strategic groups across the city particularly in-service training events where they promoted examples of their practice. Morven had co-delivered sessions with teachers and thought that as a result ‘they realise that we have different skill sets that enable us to engage with parents in a more effective way’. Katherine also identified contributing to training events for school staff as important and explained ‘all these events have enabled us to help staff to understand the way that we work especially in getting them to focus on thinking about the parent’s perspective rather than that of the nursery or school’.

Overall our findings show that the FLWs shared a common purpose of avoiding a deficit approach to parents by using a ‘funds of knowledge’ pedagogy but that their

activities could be constrained by head-teachers with a school-centric view (Honig, et al., 2001) that assumes that schools are the primary influences on learning in the lives of children. The literature (e.g. Gorard et al., 2012) is clear that supporting parents to fulfil their aspirations and develop their own expertise is beneficial therefore we now turn to our analysis of the interviews with the parents to identify what they gained from their participation and to what they attribute these gains.

Changes reported by parents

The parents reported changes in how they engaged with their children and in their levels of confidence, both as parents but also more generally. Many of the changing practices identified by the parents reflect findings from earlier research. As van Steensel et al. (2011) found, some parents felt they had been given the skills and knowledge they needed to create a learning environment at home and this gave them confidence. Pat observed: 'it gave us ways as well, how to interact and teach our children how to learn. Because when they're that age you don't know if you are pushing them too much or...'.

The importance identified by Nutbrown et al. (2015) of enhancing what happens at home was echoed by Agata, who reported that the activities suggested were things that she could easily incorporate into her home life: 'I had many things at home which were unused. I saw different ways that I could use them with the kids. So we are doing the paper plates, we are cutting them into snowflakes'. For Agata the learning was about recognising and valuing things she could do already, rather than acquiring completely new skills. The intention of the FLWs to promote the value in everyday learning opportunities, is reflected in Agata's account. For the parents, the meaning of these activities shifted from being things to keep the children occupied to learning experiences which were 'giving the children progress, progressing their skills, their development, that kind of thing.' (Pat).

Other parents recalled how participating in FL had changed how they behaved with their children, acting as a catalyst for them to move outside their 'comfort zone' and access local cultural venues such as libraries and museums. For others the change was not so much in what they did but in how they interacted with their children both at home and in the community. Val reported a 'different way of being' with her children, seeing things from their perspective: 'we discussed things with them in a way that we hadn't

before'. For others, FL gave them permission to be with their children, seeing this as a valuable investment, 'they try their best, more enjoy it maybe, when you are participating' (Majda). This suggests a new understanding of how spending time interacting with their children has rich potential to support their child's learning.

As well as changing what they did and how they did it, all of our parent interviewees talked about how their confidence had increased, and how this had led them to take on new challenges. Katy summed this up when she said 'I wouldn't be where I am today if I hadn't met Morven 10 years ago'. For some the change was increased confidence with their children, but for others it had wider repercussions especially for those that were relatively new to the country. They were not only learning about supporting their child's learning but also about doing so in an unfamiliar culture with an alien language. Both Agata and Majda described themselves as having been confident people before they came to the UK, and told how participating in FL had helped them to rediscover this confidence in their new home country. Increasing confidence opened up new possibilities for many of the parents. After participating as a mother in one project Kelly continued to be involved as a helper for subsequent projects; this experience made her think about getting back into work, and that, 'this is something I could possibly do'.

Increased confidence also led to sustained participation in the local community, reflecting a sense of self as having something to contribute. Joyce volunteered first through the local family centre, then school parents' council, and continues to organise the local Sea Cadets. Asked if she would have done these things if she had not become involved in family learning, Joyce replied, 'I don't think so, definitely, it would have been "I'll just go to the shops and back to the house"'.

As suggested by Horne and Haggart (2004) for Pat, Val and Katy family learning was the start of a journey of re-engagement with formal education. At the time of the interviews Pat and Val had both recently graduated from university; both described family learning as the starting point for that journey. Pat described how she felt differently about herself after her engagement with FL: 'I felt more confident. I was confident enough to apply for college. It made me a more confident parent with the girls, it made me more confident in what I could achieve myself'. Similarly, Katy, who

remembered being very unhappy in secondary school, told how her attitudes began to change:

‘I just think my confidence, through going to these groups... I started to see that education ... was probably something that I could go back to as an adult. It just made me see things in a different light. Everything wasn’t awful’.

In summary, all of the parents attributed lasting and significant changes directly to their involvement in FL; all of these involved a changed understanding either of themselves or of what they did with their children. Some began to understand the potential of everyday activities as learning experiences. Others recognised that their interaction with their children played an important role in supporting their child’s learning. All of the parents mentioned a growing confidence, a sense of themselves as capable in new areas of their lives.

Features of family learning that lead to changes

We explored with the parents how participation in FL might explain the changes they experienced and three elements emerged: the task-focused nature of the group, the use of a ‘funds of knowledge’ approach, and the relationship with the FL worker.

When they first engaged with FL all of the participants had different reasons to feel anxious about becoming involved but remarked on the friendliness and openness of the groups in which they participated. Val’s description was representative: ‘It was a proper sense of belonging which I hadn’t really had before then’. The task-focused nature of much of the activity that parents remembered appeared to provide enough structure to give the group a clear beginning and sense of direction, but allowed flexibility for parents to make the project their own and to use their existing skills and knowledge.

Parents described a range of projects that they had been involved with, but a common theme was the production of an ‘output’ that was to be used or viewed outside the group. Examples included: a local directory of children’s services, an ABC picture book of the local area for children, a ‘Chinese dragon’ and a ‘magic carpet’ still on display

in the city's museum. Both Agata and Gamal continue to visit the museum periodically to see these. The experience of having being involved in the creation of something alongside other people, being a part of something, was important:

I brought the booklet with me because it was such a pivotal thing... we were working on something together. So we were part of it, so for example, the ABC, our names are on it. We owned it. So it belonged to us and we belonged as a group. (Val)

They felt trusted with these important tasks, although some remembered being surprised that someone thought they were capable of delivering a 'quality product' at the end.

The FL workers used the 'funds of knowledge' approach and the impact on Val was that she recalled feeling that her skills as a parent were being valued. For Kelly what stood out was that 'she was asking my opinion on things' adding, 'I even taught them to make something once', similarly Kim said 'they used to ask us what we thought. Which was good'. Joyce commented 'I think we all just learned from each other. Katherine was there, if we needed her for anything'. The drawing on existing knowledge and skills described here suggests the negotiation of a shared understanding of themselves as having a valuable contribution to make.

Many parents commented on how they were constantly being encouraged to take on more challenging tasks. For example Gamal said 'all the time Semla stretch my mind. I feel so happy when I went to family learning'. This encouragement to take on new challenges emerged as a key element of the FL workers' practice. Across all the interviews parents reported being supported to extend themselves. For Agata the challenge was speaking publicly in English, she talked about managing to do it and laughed: 'I had some additional angel wings'. Katy gave an insight into the subtle way in which Morven worked when she said 'she brings stuff out of you that you didn't know...it is because of what she does...without doing anything', adding 'she is a really quiet presence but she is a big presence'.

This sense of presence and the nature of the relationships that developed between parents and FL workers is another strong theme in the data. Kim said ‘Family Learning workers speak to you like a person’ whilst Val suggested that ‘[we are] appreciated for our knowledge and skills as...the child’s first educator’. The availability and constancy of the FL workers was very important and several commented on their accessibility: ‘there was something different. ...it was professional but I had Katherine’s number so if there was anything ...’. (Kelly)

We asked all the parents how their relationship with the FL worker compared with their relationship with other professionals. While some recalled one or two teachers whom they felt treated them as equals, these relationships were presented as exceptions. Kelly, talking about school staff, said, ‘I think they forget you’re an adult sometimes’. Kay said the FL workers, ‘listen to you rather than telling you “this is how you do it, this is how you do that”’. Teachers were seen as being too busy to have time to talk and parents missed the opportunity for informal conversation that had been possible for some at earlier stages. Pat felt the amount of interaction she had with teachers decreased rapidly from nursery onwards, and by primary school there was no opportunity to talk to the teacher except at parents’ evenings. Val’s experience was similar; she remembered having limited time with nursery teachers whereas her FL worker offered on-going support and was available for a chat if any problems came up. Implicit in the accounts of our parents was a reluctance to raise issues with teachers. This may reflect social class differences identified by Gillies (2006) who found that while working class parents made a high emotional investment in their child’s education, they were much less likely than middle class parents to identify a problem and initiate contact with the school.

In summary, the factors that contributed to the positive experiences reported by the parents were the group focus on creating an artefacts that could be shared publicly, the use of the ‘funds of knowledge’ pedagogy, and the trusting relationships between the parents and the FL workers. In the next section we analyse this further.

Discussion and conclusion

We first set out to uncover how FL workers conceptualised their pedagogical approaches and our findings are clear that they used a culturally responsive pedagogy that assumes that parents possess assets and so challenged deficit models of instruction. In particular the experience of being treated as an expert was a powerful agent of change for the parents in this study. We have also shown that parents did use the skills and knowledge gained through FL to support their children at home. The benefits of the child-centred approach had been modelled by the FLWs and this had become embedded in family routines so that parents were creating a stimulating learning environment for their children (Save the Children, 2013).

We have also illustrated the changes experienced by parents in a number of ways. One particularly important finding was the impact of what Pahl and Rowsell (2011) call ‘Artifactual Critical Literacy’. We have demonstrated how the use of the resources and practices that parents bring from their homes, which are strongly bound up with place and community, can be utilised in parent/child projects. Participants were proud to demonstrate their skills as ‘experts’ and creating objects such as the ABC picture book or the ‘magic carpet’ meant that these artifacts were available to be shared by the whole community. It also meant that these multimodal literacies enabled the people taking part in the projects to become agentic ‘meaning makers’ through letting in ‘the everyday’ (ibid, p. 134) into the formal school context.

Our longitudinal approach has enabled us to show that the learning and changed understandings that parents attributed to their participation in FL led to sustained changes in behaviour. The increase in the participants’ self-confidence illustrates that learning and its benefits are dynamic in that benefits gained in one domain such as education impact on functioning in other domains, such as family and community (Tett & Maclachlan, 2007). Our research has also shown that participation in FL not only provided a social interaction context in which parents’ renegotiated their sense of self, but also raised their horizons of possibility so that they considered that they could embark on new careers and ways of being.

A symbolic interactionist approach to our analysis suggests the changes in parental practices and in sense of self can be explained by three key factors: the task-focused nature of the group; the funds of knowledge approach; and the relationship between them and the FL workers. A core idea in symbolic interactionism is that individuals are

influenced by their social interactions, and that these depend upon shared meanings (Meltzer & Petra, 1972). Heimer and Matsueda (1994) argue that the self consists of the perceived appraisals and evaluations of others. For them role-taking involves seeing oneself from the perspective of others not only as an individual level process but also linked to the social organization: 'social organization is a configuration of roles or perspectives that constrains the form, content and participants of interaction' (Heimer & Matsueda 1994, p. 368). The social organisation constitutes the 'generalised other' and the more an individual is committed to a particular role in a social group, the more likely it is that that group will act as a 'generalized other'. This highlights the importance of the group-based nature of the family learning work.

The parents in our study experienced the group as a safe space in which they felt comfortable sharing their views. There was a strong sense of common endeavour in the activities and the group is remembered as somewhere they had fun and made lasting friendships. Overall what emerges is a strong sense of belonging. The FLWs also talked about the atmosphere of the group. They understood this as being shaped by their 'funds of knowledge' approach approach, in which parents are seen as a resource, and where an important aim of the work is to hear what parents have to say. On this view, the parents' commitment to the group, and therefore the likelihood of the group acting as a 'generalised other', can be seen as a direct consequence of the approach of the FLW. In a group in which members are understood as a resource that is worth listening to, the members will behave accordingly and begin to view themselves in this way.

The second feature of the parents' experience is the relationship with the FLW, specifically, the image of the parent which is reflected back to them by these practitioners. Gecas (1982) discusses the way in which the appraisal of others can influence self-perception. He notes that there are mediating factors that may affect the extent to which such appraisal is internalised and that the credibility of the person doing the evaluating is significant. Because all the parents held the FLWs in extremely high regard they valued their opinions and were very likely to internalise the reflected positive appraisal from the FLW.

In summary, a symbolic interactionist reading of our data suggests that the combination of role-taking (where that role is a capable person), and the reflected appraisal from the

FLW led to changes in how the parents saw themselves. Once they understood themselves to be capable and experts on their own children, and viewed their day-to-day activities and interactions as potential learning experiences, their practices also changed. They acted as people who could achieve their goals.

This article has addressed the gap in research on the value of family learning to parents that have experienced educational disadvantage. Most research has focused on programmes whose purpose is to educate parents about the working of the school whereas this research has investigated the value to parents themselves of participating in learning. In addition, since our research is with people who were engaged in family learning between 7 and 10 years ago, it offers insights into the sustained changes brought about by their participation and shows that where a ‘funds of knowledge’ approach is taken it has the potential to make a lasting difference to parents’ sense of self and on their practices. The participants’ learning brought an awareness of both how they saw themselves and how others saw them and thus opened up the possibility of positive change. This was brought about through their engagement in new practices, especially those relating to the creation of public artifacts that enabled them to experience new perspectives.

Although this study was small-scale, with self-selecting participants, and set in a particular context, it offers insights into the importance of the ‘funds of knowledge’ pedagogical approaches used in adult learning. Using such approaches enabled parents to see themselves as having ‘additional angel wings’ because their cultural experiences were respected and their views acted upon. This approach to parents’ expertise was also enhanced through the use of artifactual literacies that enabled home-based resources to be publically shared thus bringing the private into the public sphere where its value could be recognised and shared by the wider community. Participants’ own goals were placed at the centre of the learning activities and this created a supportive atmosphere where they were treated with respect within relationships of trust. These pedagogical insights are valuable for all professionals, especially those that wish to engage with the diversity of parents, because they improve relationships between the home and the school through a focus on the resources and practices that parents bring.

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