

**Research paper**

## **Family Learning Programmes: an investigation of parental perceptions, social capital and social inclusion**

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### **Contextualisation**

The research data reported in this paper were collected as part of a wider evaluation of an intervention programme that aimed to encourage parents to be more involved in their children's education and to re-engage the parents themselves with further education, training or employment. Evaluation is concerned with making causal claims about the impact of a particular programme. In order to do this there needs to be an understanding of the underlying mechanisms and contexts that lead to the resulting outcomes of the intervention or programme (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). Key questions addressed by the overall evaluation are:

- To whom is the programme directed?
- What are the intended outcomes?
- Under what conditions/contexts will the activity produce the desired effects?
- What programme is actually delivered?
- What outcomes result?
- How are they evaluated/measured?
- What is the relative social value of the various outcomes?

Whilst an amount of quantitative data are required to answer these questions, process data are also necessary in order to understand more about the mechanisms involved in achieving the outcomes. This paper focuses on semi-structured interviews conducted with a sample of fifteen of the participating parents as part of the evaluation. Parents were interviewed near the beginning of the programme and again towards the end of the programme. The interviews aimed to explore the changes that took place in the perceptions of parents and the relationship between social capital and social inclusion.

**Abstract:** *This paper reports on interview data collected as part of an evaluation of a Family Learning Programme operating in an inner London Borough that is determined to be multiply deprived (DETR, 2000). The programme aims to build social inclusion and break cycles of disadvantage by developing the way nursery and primary schools engage in partnerships with parents, by developing parents' mathematics and literacy skills and encouraging parents to be more involved in their children's education. The study was therefore concerned to investigate the effects of this on parents in order to understand more about how social inclusion might be promoted. Through particular consideration of this programme, the study begins to explore the relationship between social capital and the promotion of social inclusion. A general theoretical framework for this is presented, with an analysis of the interviews conducted with parents who participated in the programme. Post-programme interviews indicated that parents had an increased sense of efficacy in their parenting abilities and felt more competent in participating in learning activities with their children. There was also more familiarity with the school and parents felt more confident about being in school and talking to teachers about their children. Whilst it is difficult to conclude whether or not the programme achieved their overarching aim of facilitating social inclusion, parents interviewed for this study did feel more able to support their children and some considered the possibility of further education for themselves.*

## Theories of social exclusion

The current UK government has made social exclusion a central issue which dominates all current social policy. The concept of exclusion is related to social inclusion and much of current educational policy in the UK is concerned with the creation of an "inclusive and prosperous society in which everyone has an equal opportunity to fulfil their potential" (DfEE, 2000, p.140), linked to economic prosperity and social cohesion (DfEE, 1997). With other social policy, the thrust of recent initiatives focuses on the empowerment of local communities in order to bring about a "bridging of the gap between the poorest neighbourhoods and rest of Britain" (Cabinet Office, 1998, p.i). The Education Action Zone (EAZ)

initiative is part of a raft of policies for inclusion and aims to raise pupil achievement in schools within specific targeted urban communities. A Zone consists of one or two secondary schools and their feeder primary schools and partnerships with businesses and other local initiatives are an integral part. A focus of the EAZ initiative is on "promoting pupils' achievement and breaking cycles of disadvantage"(DfEE, 2000). This statement signals the assumption that there are intergenerational effects contributing to poor educational achievement in schools and that by facilitating parental involvement in education, parents will be enabled to support their children in achieving academic success. The individual parent is thus viewed as being crucial to the project of inclusion. It is the responsibility of the excluded individual to engage with the objectives of the programme and thus become a member of the 'included'. This individual, it is assumed, will then influence other members of the excluded group and thus enable the inclusion of the wider community. The notion is that by tackling social exclusion at the local level and empowering individuals, communities will change and society will become more inclusive. The concept of social exclusion remains under-theorised, although there is an implication that building 'social capital' within a community is the key to overcoming the exclusion of individuals within that community and within wider society.

Social capital is a difficult concept to define clearly. Different theoretical approaches are apparent in the literature but these positions all have in common the understanding that social capital is a structural resource that is relational, rather than inherent within individuals. However, many currently cited theories of social capital (for example, Coleman, 1988; Coleman, 1990; Putnam et al., 1993; Fukuyama, 1995) fail to address fundamental questions concerning why certain individuals and groups of individuals are distanced from capital (social, cultural and economic) and how they can gain access to these capital resources. The work of Bourdieu attempts to address these questions. The term 'capital' he describes as accumulated labour which allows individuals to appropriate social resources (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Capital can be economic, cultural and social. Social capital is the cumulative social resource that is available to an individual and is linked to that individual being part of a group. An individual who is part of a high status group will be able to accumulate more social resources than an individual who is part of a lower status group. Individuals are located within particular social groups and these compete with each other to maintain and improve their standing and their access to the

various forms of capital. The structures that are created and maintained in this way, therefore, favour some groups over others. Bourdieu's works are instructive when attempting to theorise social capital and exclusion. Most particularly, the notion that social capital must be activated once acquired in order to be converted to other forms of capital is particularly relevant in relation to social exclusion.

To understand more about the dynamic relationship between structures and individuals, Giddens' sociology is helpful. Giddens takes account of individuals' interaction with structures and the changing nature of both structures and institutions. Whereas Bourdieu attributes power to historical hierarchies, Giddens argues that power is a fundamental principle of human agency, despite social position. Giddens (1984) suggests that agents can be actively engaged in structures and can change them by their actions. In the context of the current study, parental perceptions of the efficacy of the Family Learning Programmes have been analysed in order to understand more about these individuals' interactions with the structures of school and pedagogy and their access to social capital.

## **Aims of the study**

The research aimed to investigate the gaining and activating of social capital by parents through participation in Family Learning Programmes operating in an inner-city borough, for the promotion of social inclusion. The study was therefore concerned to research the effects of the programmes that parents' perceived on themselves and their families, in order to understand more about how social capital might be acquired by excluded groups. The research presented here considers whether Family Learning Programmes operating in schools within an inner city EAZ had achieved their stated aims which were to build social inclusion and break cycles of disadvantage. These were to be achieved through the following objectives:

- To develop the way schools engage in partnerships with parents;
- To develop parents' basic skills;
- To encourage parents' involvement in their children's education;

- To improve pupil achievement;
- To develop a range of training and employment progression routes for parents.

It can be inferred that parents' involvement in the education of their young children is viewed as the vehicle for promoting the gaining of social capital both for themselves and for their families.

## **Parental involvement and participation in education**

The implicit rationale behind the Family Learning Programmes is that there is an intergenerational aspect to low educational attainment and there is compelling evidence for this. Hobcraft (1998) used data from the *National Child Development Study* to explore the "extent to which social exclusion and disadvantage is transmitted across generations and across the life-course" (p.iv). Hobcraft (1998) concludes that educational failure is increased by lack of parental interest in schooling, in childhood poverty and by delinquency. In a later study, Hobcraft (2000) again uses the *National Child Development Study* to consider the role that educational achievement has on social exclusion. Hobcraft finds "that educational qualifications show a clear and strong relationship to every single adult measure of disadvantage at ages 23 and 33 for both men and women" (Hobcraft, 2000, p.iv) and that childhood poverty is the clearest predictor of negative adult outcomes. Additionally, the factors that are influential on subsequent disadvantage are low parental interest in schooling, frequent absence from school and low educational test scores.

Cumulative knowledge from existing studies suggests that specific types of parental involvement in education may be important in promoting cognitive development in children, including provision of a stimulating literacy and material environment (Snow et al., 1991), high expectations and moderate levels of parental support and supervision (Kurdek et al, 1995) and participation in joint learning activities at home. Analysis of the data from the *Effective Provision of Pre-school Education* (Sylva et al., 2000) revealed that aspects of the home learning environment had a significant impact on children's cognitive development both at age 3 years plus and again at school entry, even after controlling for the impact of parents' occupation and level of education.

Snow et al., (1991) in their study in the USA explored the ways home and school experiences affected the literacy achievements of primary school age children from families of low socio-economic status. Positive correlations were found between literacy achievement and income, together with only moderate levels of stress and low levels of family conflict. Three major factors were found to have an important impact on achievement. These are: the family's ability to create an organised home environment; the interpersonal relationships within the family and the absence of external stressors. The present study was able to consider parental responses to the first two factors, but not the third.

## The study

Semi-structured interview schedules were constructed to use with parents. One parent schedule was administered near the beginning of the programme and one towards the end of the programme. The pre-programme interview schedule was divided into categories that asked questions about the following:

- Family characteristics;
- Participation in the programme;
- Attitudes to education.

Questions in the category *Family Characteristics* were designed to ascertain parents' socio-economic background, based on the Indices of Deprivation (DETR, 2000) and to look at evidence of adult skills (from NCDS data). Questions in the *Participation in the Programme* section were asked in order to consider whether parents shared the values inherent in the programme. Parents were also asked about the sorts of activities they undertake with their own children for establishing whether these changed over the course of the programme. Lastly, parents were asked about their experiences of education and their current levels of engagement with school to consider whether these changed as a result of participating in the programme. Questions in the post-programme questionnaire attempted to ascertain whether parents had changed their attitudes towards, understandings of or involvement in education and whether they were planning further educational development themselves.

Parents were interviewed in two nursery schools and two primary schools within the EAZ. All four schools were running Family Learning Programmes of twelve weeks' duration. Two sites focused on literacy and two on numeracy programmes. A total of fifteen parents were interviewed near the beginning of the programme and fourteen were interviewed again near the end (one parent was absent). All interviewees were women (there was only one male participant in the projects) and they were volunteers. Additionally, one tutor per programme was interviewed (four in all). The interviews were taped and transcribed. Key themes were identified in the interview texts and were coded accordingly. These themes were then related to the characteristics of families that Eccles and Harold (1996) identified as promoting children's academic achievement.

## **Results and analysis**

Education Action Zones have been established in areas of high deprivation as calculated by 'Indices of Deprivation' (DETR, 2000). These are used to indicate the most deprived areas of the UK and are therefore (within government policy) the localities where individuals are likely to be socially excluded. These indices include both employment and education, skills and training components and EAZs aim to address these particular issues at local level, thus promoting social inclusion. The present small sample of parents was categorised using the National Statistics classification of socio-economic class (NS-SEC) according to the parents' current employment status or previous situation if they were unemployed at the time of interview. Seven of the parents were employed in lower managerial and professional occupations (NS-SEC category 2), whilst one parent was employed in an intermediate occupation (NS-SEC category 3) and four parents in semi-routine occupations (NS-SEC category 6). Three parents had never been in paid employment (NS-SEC category 8). A total of seven parents were not in paid employment at the time of being interviewed. The reason parents cited for not working, in every case, was because they were raising children. The sample is over-represented by parents with an NS-SEC designation of 2. These parents may already have access to social capital and be able to deploy it effectively for their children. Where interventions such as this are voluntary, it may be difficult to encourage parents without access to social capital to attend. However, a significant number of the parents in the sample had never worked or worked in semi-routine occupations (NS-SEC 8 and 6 respectively). Each of the Family Learning Programmes represented by this

sample included a diversity of parents in terms of socio-economic status and ethnicity.

The analysis conducted on the interviews utilised analytical categories derived by Eccles and Harold (1996) in their study, which investigated the characteristics of families, communities and schools that promoted children's academic achievement. Certain family characteristics were found to impact positively on achievement, through parental involvement. These were:

- The social and psychological resources available to parents;
- A belief by parents in their own efficacy;
- Parental perceptions of their child, for example confidence in the child's academic abilities, perceptions of her or his receptivity to help;
- Parental assumptions about their own role in education;
- Parental attitudes towards school;
- Family ethnic, religious and/or cultural identities and the extent to which this identity was supported and respected within the school;
- General socialisation practices within the home.

(Adapted from Eccles and Harold, 1996, p.7-8). Analysis of the interview data used a number of these categories in order to consider in more detail the perceptions of the parents of the effects of the programme.

### ***Increasing the social and psychological resources available to parents***

These data indicate that the groups were mixed in terms of socio-economic and ethnic composition and that a significant percentage of the parents who were participating in these programmes could not be construed as being socially excluded. However, an aspect of the groupings that was appreciated by many parents was their diversity:

Because in this course we mainly talk about our children, ourselves, our past, our future, what we feel like, the feelings we have about situations, things that you know and always done, but forgot about. Different scenarios about what life is really all about. It's also interesting to see that we all come from different backgrounds and it makes you feel you are more lucky than others.

Parents also made reference to the programmes helping them to cope more effectively in the domestic sphere:

Now I'm just getting back on my feet and getting back to where I was - just to back to where I was and just build up so then I can... Like I said to my friend the other day, once I go back to where I was I'll be more confident in my self and more happier, because now I just feel down, because I'm at home.

It could be argued that by attending these programmes, parents were extending their social networks and their support systems. This is recognized as an important resource in the gaining and activating of social capital. Bourdieu (1985) asserts that capital is accumulated as a result of being part of a social group. Lareau (1996) refers to the importance of the social fields in which parents move and the impact these have on their "potential to produce social profits" (p.58). It is Lareau's (1989) contention that social networks are crucial to the activation of social capital. The upper middle-class parents in her study were part of social groupings that enabled the activation of cultural resources and their conversion to social and economic capital. Similarly, Durlauf (2000) argues that membership of a group can influence outcomes and asserts that to promote social inclusion, there will have to be "associational redistribution" (p.22) or a redistribution of group membership. It could be argued that the diversity represented by the groups had the potential to achieve some redistribution and that parents more likely to be isolated from social groups that could provide cultural resources may become part of different social networks that would enable them to access resources for realizing capital. To gain robust evidence on this aspect of social capital and the effects of social networks, further data would have to be collected with individuals over a longer period of time.

### ***Increasing the beliefs of parents in their efficacy***

During the post-programme interviews, many parents made reference to the fact that they felt more able to communicate with their children and interact with them:

When I work with him I have to learn not to override him and steer it too much. It's very difficult for me to do that – let him direct it and stop him from getting bored and following something through from beginning to end without me being the boss. The programme has helped me take a step back and steer him to do it really, rather than me doing it all the time.

It was clear from the reports of the parents interviewed for this study, that they felt the programme had enabled them to be more aware of their own understandings of the parenting role and had supported them in feeling more effective within that role. Reay (1998), in her study, found that many of the working-class women she interviewed were undertaking educational work with their children but that this was "characterized by a lack of knowledge of appropriate education standards and uncertainty and self doubt about their competences as educators" (p.78). It could be argued that projects such as Family Learning Programmes, by enabling parents from disadvantaged social and ethnic groups to gain skills and understandings that will support their children's and their own learning, are allowing these parents to acquire and activate social capital for themselves and their children.

### ***Changes in parents' perceptions about their child's academic abilities, receptivity to help, educational and occupational expectations and aspirations for their child***

Many of the parents reported that the programme had changed their perceptions of their children, in academic as well as other aspects:

Going to art galleries, doing the workshop afterwards. You discover things about your child - the way he behaves, the way he says things, the way he sees things. Even though he's your own child and you spend so much time with him you may not have noticed, because in different situations, children react in different ways.

Some parents were surprised at the sorts of activities their children could enjoy, despite their young age. Parents also reported feeling more confident in allowing their children to take responsibility for their own experiences and for their learning:

The programme has helped me take a step back and steer him to do it really, rather than me doing it all the time. He comes up with ideas and we go along with that.

Parental aspirations for their children were not asked about in this study, although there were clear indications that parents, regardless of socio-economic status and ethnicity, had changed their perceptions of the abilities of their children.

### ***Parents' assumptions about their role in their children's education and the role of educational achievement for their child***

There was an understanding expressed by all parents, regardless of their own educational experiences, that the parental role should include a pedagogic element:

At the moment, where she's at, she can recognize the ABC and recognize the letters but she can't – I'm trying to teach her the phonetic sounds of things and we're finding it quite difficult because she feels she knows what these shapes mean but it's not helping her to work words out and I don't know if I'm approaching it right. So I think it will help me teaching her.

Parents reported during the first interviews that they were already engaged in diverse activities with their children and were aware of the importance of supporting learning through everyday experiences. Towards the end of the programmes, parents reported that they had increased their repertoire of activities, and had understood more about learning experiences that they could engage in with their children:

It's given me some pointers for expanding the things I do, which is always really helpful...It's quite nice for people to give you pointers and it sparks other things off.

During the second interview, many parents said that they had appreciated the aspects of the programme that had taught them how to engage in a pedagogical way with their children and that this had influenced how they interacted with their children:

We do different things now. We still do some of the same things but it's more at a different level. Now instead of just having the numbers to count we've got them written down and he can recognize them now.

Whilst all the parents interviewed had been engaged with their children pedagogically before attending the programme, the programme had increased their skills, competences and understandings of the learning process. Parents who had been involved in the mathematics projects were more likely to comment on subject knowledge within that domain and reported that attending the programme had helped them understand mathematical concepts.

Parents were pleased to be more able to support their children's learning because they shared an understanding that this was an important parental role to fulfil. These parents were also familiar with the school environment and felt comfortable about being there. When these conditions exist, it may be reasonable to engage parents in pedagogy. However, where parents may not share these values, introducing a pedagogy may be inappropriate. It is perhaps significant that all the parents interviewed for this study were able to articulate values and understandings about school and achievement that resonated with the tutors, with the school and with the EAZ itself. Those parents who do not share such understandings will be reluctant to volunteer to participate in Family Learning Programmes and may feel distant from school and learning. Vincent (1996) refers to this as a "dislocation" (p.3) between parents' own cultural frameworks and those of the school. This is manifested by some parents being distant from school. The tutors of the programmes interviewed for this study were aware that this could be a difficulty and wanted parents to understand more about the aims and ethos of the school. This view seems to imply that parents, rather than schools need to overcome this distance. It may be that schools and programmes need to consider their approach to parents in terms of enabling disadvantaged groups to gain and activate social capital through educational achievement.

## **Parents' attitude towards school**

The need for parents to be more closely involved with school and encouraging parental participation in school was a fundamental objective for the Family Learning Programmes, as conceived by the EAZ. Participation in school is viewed as an indicator that parents have a positive attitude towards learning and may lead parents to continue with their own education or take part in training programmes for future employment. Participation by parents in school remained the same throughout the period of the intervention. Nine parents did not participate in school (mainly due to employment or child-rearing commitments) and five parents did participate in a combination of different ways, either helping when the children went on school outings or at school fund raising activities. No parents interviewed for this study participated at the level of governance although one parent's partner was about to start his first term as a governor of the school. All parents reported good relationships with the teachers in the schools and communication with class teachers was not seen as problematic. Conversations with teachers, especially those working in the early years, mainly revolved around social, emotional and welfare issues:

Well every day when I come. Every day I ask about how he behave. She says - He was alright in the morning but in the afternoon he was - he starts you know.

During the second interview some parents reported feeling more confident about approaching teachers:

It has helped – by seeing them on a regular basis and bringing things up that I've been concerned about. I could do that before, but now it is easier.

This sense of "familiarity" (Atkin et al., 1988) that the parents had with the school is important. However, school and community characteristics are also important in encouraging parental participation and involvement. Additionally, parents need to have some flexibility within their working day so that they can attend events at school. Lareau (1996) raises this as an important issue for the parents she studied in communities in the United States. Levels and types of parental participation in schools in these communities were influenced by complex

interacting factors, such as amounts of disposable income, working hours and conditions of employment for parents. These structural factors cannot be addressed by interventions such as Family Learning Programmes. Lareau (1996) indicates that these may affect some groups of parents more than others. Specifically, parents with lower socio-economic status may not be able to spend time participating in school events due to their hours of working. This may also lead to some groups of parents feeling distanced from school and from education in general, as mentioned above. In order for social capital to be more accessible for these groups a more structural approach than an individual Family Learning Programme can provide is required. Eccles and Harold (1996) identified community characteristics that impact on parental involvement in education. These factors include: the amount of cohesion experienced by a community; the amount of social organisation and social networking and access to resources and opportunities (p.8-9). Whilst large government initiatives such as EAZs, Health Action Zones and Sure Start support local interventions targeted at individuals, it will be necessary for individuals to interact with wider, community structures in order to change them. To be able to do this, social actors must exercise power within these structures. According to Giddens (1984) powers of agency are conferred through knowledge of the appropriate social rules. It could be argued that Family Learning Programmes make parents aware of the social rules governing education and may therefore enable individuals to exercise power within that sphere.

### ***Parents' general socialisation practices***

All the parents interviewed for the study were engaged in many activities to enhance their children's learning before they began attending the programme. They were also aware of the kinds of experiences that were appropriate. By participating in the programme, parents perceived that they had increased their competence in pedagogic and in more general parenting areas:

For me, it's nice because I'm doing things with them and I'm able to carry on the same type of things at home. So we make things here when we've been on a trip. We made a puzzle using photographs and made books and games. They bring it out again at a later time and say do you remember when we went to such and such a place. Trying to learn a bit more and extend their knowledge more.

Other parents mentioned that the programme had given them the opportunity to spend time with their children out of the domestic situation, and this was appreciated for the positive effect it had on their relationships at home.

## **Discussion**

It is problematic to ascertain whether the Family Learning Programmes investigated here gave parents access to social capital and had promoted social inclusion for excluded groups because the sample of parents used was small and particular. However, some discussion is offered.

All the parents interviewed for the study understood education to be an important medium by which social and economic capital is gained, regardless of their own socio-economic status. All the parents were providing learning experiences and activities for their children at home, even at the beginning of the programme and understood these activities as contributing to their children's development. Importantly, the programmes enabled parents to extend these activities into more complex pedagogical tasks. Researchers of parental involvement have often been concerned at what they perceive to be 'colonisation' of family homes by schools. Vincent (1996) considers that four roles are available to parents within current structures. These roles are: parent as supporter; parent as consumer; parent as independent from the school and parent as participant in school. She suggests that many parents experience a "dislocation" (p.3) between their own cultural frameworks and those of the school. While this may be true for some parents, the data reported here suggest that the situation is more complex than these categories allow. The women interviewed for this study felt they had a pedagogical role as a parent and the desire to be more competent in this role was a major motivating factor in attending the programme. The post-programme interviews suggested that generally, parents believed that the programme had improved their knowledge and understanding of their children's learning. The parents did not seem to be aware of any contradictions between their role as parents and their role as educators of their children. It may be postulated that their understanding of parenting included an embedded notion of their pedagogical role. It would be difficult to ascertain the reasons for this from the data collected although all the parents, regardless of socio-economic status or their own qualification level, expressed this. It could be argued that parents were being initiated into the

practices and pedagogies of schools, which may be culturally inappropriate. However, parents are also active agents in the structures they operate within and it may be, conversely, that their activity will change the school structures (Giddens, 1984). It is acknowledged that parents may be in a relatively weak position in relation to schools and pedagogical structures, but there is evidence from these data that parents viewed themselves to be more competent as parents having completed the course, and more able to communicate with schools and teachers about their children's learning. The comments made by parents highlighted understandings of the parenting role shared by all parents interviewed. That is, parents felt that they had a mandate not only to educate their children but also to contribute to the overall development of their children. There was also an implicit notion expressed that interpersonal relationships within the family were important and that there should be good communication between family members so that an appropriate atmosphere could be maintained for the good of all individuals within the family structure. An increased sense of efficacy for parents may allow for an increase in the appropriation of social resources and therefore enable the individual to gain and realize social capital. This may be promoted through associational redistribution (Durlauf, 2000) and increased access to different social fields. This access may augment the competency of the individual to operate in different social networks and exercise power within them, thus producing and changing social structures.

## Conclusions

The parents interviewed for this study reported that they and their children had benefited from participating in a Family Learning Programme. Parents had an increased sense of efficacy in their parenting abilities and felt more confident about being in school and talking to teachers about their children. It is not possible to conclude whether or not the programmes achieved their over-arching aim of promoting social inclusion, although parents in this sample felt more able to support their children and some considered the possibility of further education themselves. However, there is more to social inclusion than this. There is evidence that parents in this study perceived themselves to be more effective in their parental role (which included a pedagogical dimension) as a result of participation in the programme. Additionally, parents felt more able to communicate with school and teachers. These aspects, together with the possible achieving of a certain amount of associational redistribution may

increase the parents' ability to gain and activate social capital, although further study in this area would be required.

In the light of this small study, focus for further research could lie in an exploration of the processes of associational redistribution and the affects of group membership on the gaining and activating of social capital and its association with social inclusion. As Titterton (1992) suggests, a related area of study could concern the resilience and adaptability that individuals demonstrate and the internal and external resources which enable social actors to cope with difficult and stressful conditions and situations.

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