TACTYC Research Briefing

Parental engagement through a personalised literacy programme

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Background

Evidence from an evaluation of a National Literacy parental engagement project (Early Words Together) conducted by Coventry University (Wood et al, 2015) indicated that most parents (65.7% of participants) reported feeling more confident about sharing books with their children after the project than they did before participating in it. The implication is that prior to the project they had lower levels of confidence. The project aimed to enable family engagement in young children's communication, language and literacy development through the support of peer volunteers and a series of six one-and-a-half-hour sessions. The evaluation also includes evidence from parents who reported finding it difficult to communicate and interact with their children before the project. This paper reports on a project with parents of pre-school age children in a rural toddler group. Discussions with the parents led the researcher to believe that many did not feel empowered to contribute in any substantial way to their children's pre-school literacy education [the word 'parents' refers to the primary care-giver throughout].

Before the project started, using focus group discussions, questionnaires and ad hoc comments that were recorded in a weekly log, parents expressed a lack of confidence in supporting their children's pre-school learning. For example: not feeling 'qualified' to help with reading; not knowing 'how it fits with phonics learning'; not knowing 'how to encourage reading'; not knowing 'what to do if their child asks about letters'; not knowing 'if it is ok to encourage second language learning'. Following participation in this project the confidence levels and attitudes towards helping their children with early literacy development, reported by parents had become more positive. One parent expressed a contrary view; she had prior experience with young children and explaining that she had a degree in Early Childhood Studies. This suggests that feelings of 'empowerment' may be related to educational experience. This view has been evidenced in a survey of 1,300 parents of children under five indicating that

parent's educational status is related to their confidence in supporting their children's literacy experiences (Knowland and Formby, 2016).

The Hypothesis

The hypothesis underpinning this project was that by involving parents in the choice of words selected and training them to be the programme deliverers, they would feel confident about supporting their children's learning without having to be an expert, and the children would begin their literacy journey in a happy, safe, non-pressured environment.

Research Questions

- Can parents feel empowered to support their child's learning through direct training in a specific area of literacy learning?
- Can specific training encourage engagement in pre-school learning for parents, children and families?

Theoretical Framework

There are two theoretical constructs for this research. The first relates to the engagement of parents in pre-school learning. As noted earlier, there is evidence in the literature that some parents lack confidence in supporting their children at this stage of literacy development. There is also evidence indicating that parental engagement in pre-school children's learning can be enhanced (Wood et al, 2015). Parents, as experts of their own children, are best placed to recognise the moment of opportunity to engage their child in literacy activities. By giving parents a specific focus for interaction with their children they may develop confidence to support their child's learning prior to them attending a formal setting.

The second theoretical construct relates to the chosen focus for interaction. Models of reading proposed by theorists such as Frith (2001) and Ehri (2005) suggest an initial stage or phase during which children can recognise familiar whole words that have personal relevance such as their own name. Frith (1985) refers to this first stage as logographic; that it involves the recognition of symbols representing a known object or person. Ehri (2005) refers to a first phase, called pre-alphabetic, during which

children recognise whole words as a single shape, by looking at the outline of words, without forming any letter-sound connections. Both of these models acknowledge that pre-school children can recognise, and distinguish between, select groups of words.

Methodology

This research was conducted using a phenomenographic approach, looking at qualitative differences in outcomes (Marton, 1986). This included looking at the behaviours and beliefs of the participants; describing the way participants experienced the processes involved in the project, with an emphasis on description. Phenomenography aims to describe the range of similar and different ways participants experience phenomena. The intention is not to focus on individual experiences but on representing collective experiences. The final outcome consists of categories of description that summarise varying conceptions.

Data collection methods included focus groups, questionnaires, learning journals, video transcripts and a weekly log of parent's comments with a small purposive sample. Data, in the form of perceptions, has been sorted into specific categories of description and are related to each other by way of hierarchically inclusive relationships (see Figure 1). The results reported represent a collective analysis of individual experiences. Analysis is whole-group oriented since all data is analysed together with the aim of identifying possible group conceptions of experience rather than individual experiences. This phenomenographical approach describes the range of similar and different ways the participants experienced the process by gathering and representing collective meaning.

Participants

The researcher was invited by the leader of a weekly toddler group to give a brief presentation to all the parents, outlining the aims of the project in terms of literacy outcomes, and anticipated commitment in terms of time. This was followed by a question and answer session. Eight families volunteered to participate. One family had a Ukranian mother, another family had an Indian mother, the rest of the sample were white British. One mother was in work and the child was often brought by the father. Five children had younger siblings and were the eldest; the other three had elder

siblings and were the youngest. The children ranged in age from 1 year 9 months to 4 years and 2 months. Three mothers gave birth to babies during the project; one family suffered bereavement and two families moved house. These factors are likely to have had an impact on their perceived outcomes.

Ethical considerations

Written agreement for participation was sought at the outset. Parents were made aware that they could leave the project at any time and that agreement to participate in the project was not binding in any way. Along with details of age, parents were requested to provide a code name for use when referring to the children to maintain anonymity. The researcher only worked with the adults and never directly with the children. The adults received the training and were given the resources when they came to the toddler group to meet with other parents in a non-threatening shared environment. All the activities were deployed within the home environment. The researcher made a number of home visits at the request of several of parents to make videos of their children – with an agreement that these would not be shared without specific permission and never on the internet. These were very informal occasions and the researcher felt that these parents welcomed the opportunity to have a visitor and share their observations of their child's development.

Method

Parents were asked to provide the researcher with twenty-four personalised words plus photographs, in blocks of six words over a period of eight to twelve weeks (the youngest children took longer). These were made into large cards and gradually introduced to the children through game-based activities lasting only a few minutes per day at most. The parents were given an initial training session in how to use the words, how to make games, and were given printed guidance to which they could refer. They were also given a dedicated email address for rapid support and feedback. Once the children had a bank of more than twelve words, these were contextualised in a bound personalised book illustrated with the photographs provided by the parents for them to keep.

Children who progressed beyond this stage were introduced to a few high frequency connectives ('the' 'this' 'is' 'and') and began learning a non-personalised vocabulary to enable them to read simple purpose-written picture books. The project ran for seven months initially with regular weekly meetings; six of the original eight families have requested that the project continue. The remaining two children were older at the start of the project; one has transferred into Reception class and the other into full-time pre-school.

Data was collected continuously in the form of a weekly log. This included questions and comments from parents during meetings at the toddler group and from emails. In addition, detailed records of each child's words were kept, including a record of when they had first received them and when they had first recognised them in a game. These details were recorded by the researcher and separately by the parents in a 'learning journal' provided by the researcher.

Interviews and focus groups were based around a set of carefully formulated questions to try to elicit a description of each participant's experiences of the project. There was also a free discussion opportunity intended to draw out perceptions of the project that were not influenced by leading questions. An audio recording was made of the discussion and transcribed. Two sets of questionnaires were used, at six months and nine months. The first questionnaire focussed on process and the second on perceived outcomes.

Parents were also requested to make audio or video recordings of their children interacting with the materials/activities. Nine separate videos were submitted and transcribed in detail. The transcripts from all sources were compiled into a single document. A first analysis sought to determine categories to describe how the project was perceived to have had an impact. Four categories emerged in relation to the original research questions and two further categories emerged relating directly to the learning activities. The categories are described as conceptions and are shown in Figure 1 as they relate to each other in a hierarchical relationship.
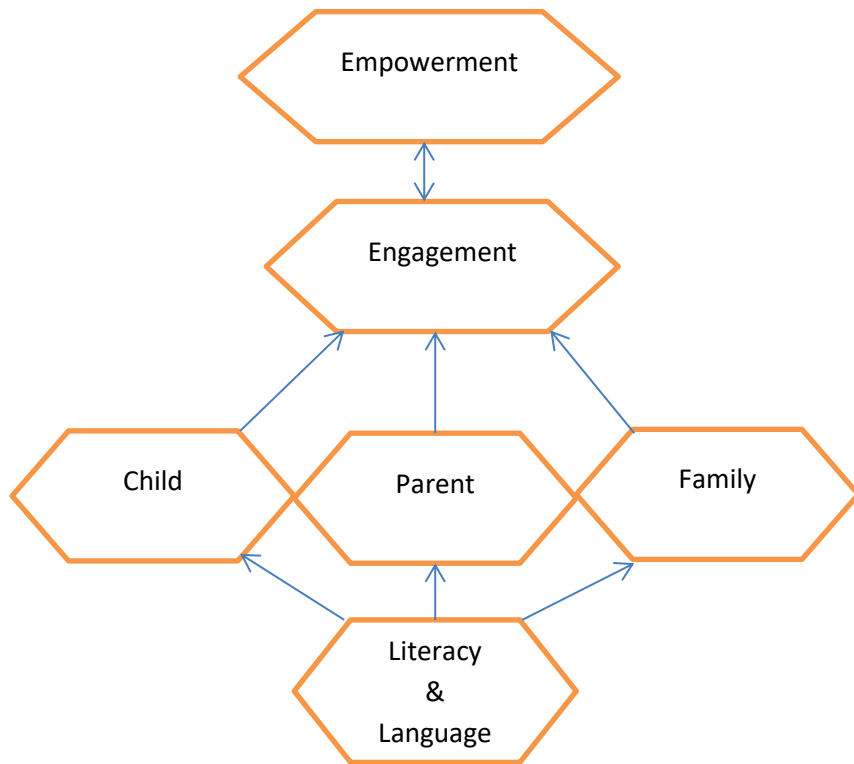
Fig. 1 Categories of data for analysis

Results

Within each category (language and literacy were separated), following further analysis, four areas of focus emerged and were identified. The dimensions of variations within each category that were identified were perceptions of: content (concerned with the materials and activities); confidence (feelings of success, enjoyment and anticipation); knowledge (how to use materials); and skills (the specific knowledge for literacy and language). The products of this analysis are the outcome space detailed below in Table 1. The rows indicate the categories that the project was conceived to have impacted on. The columns represent the four main variations of focus within each category. Conceptions of the benefits of the project are paired with the focus of variation. Following Table 1, each of these conceptions is described in brief with illustrative quotations from transcripts from interviews, focus groups, audio/video recordings, learning journals and questionnaires. Parents have been given a number code. Quotations are listed under the headings representing each focus of variation: content, confidence, knowledge and skills.

Table 1
Outcome Space

Conceptions	Focus			
Project conceived as…	Content	Confidence (& enjoyment)	Knowledge	Skills
Empowering	Knowing what they could use	Confidence in doing something with their child	Knowing how to support their children's literacy development	Knowing the detail of how to help support literacy and language skills
Engaging Parents	Using personalised words and images	Parents enjoying doing the activities	Knowing that they can do something that they can see is effective	Excitement about the opportunity to support their child's reading progress
Engaging Child	Playing games and interacting	Children enjoying doing the activities	Knowing words that have personalised meaning	Interest in learning to read – write and interest in environmental print
Engaging Family	Joining in with games	Confidence to get involved	Knowing not to test, knowing how to play the games	Pride in their child's literacy achievements
Teaching activity	Learning to recognise words	Confidence in approach to using words and books	Knowing what words to use, how to present them, how many and what pace	Having a structure and a process for teaching reading
Language development	Speaking words aloud General language development	Confidence to explore spoken language issues	How to use second language Knowing that learning words helps with spoken language	Development of parent's modelling skills

Conception 1. Empowerment

This concept referred to the degree to which parents felt 'qualified' to support their children's learning specifically in the area of literacy development. For example this is how one parent felt before the project:

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I would read to my daughter but did not have much knowledge of how to get her to read and learn words by herself, therefore I mostly just read to her hoping she was listening… (06)

Table 2
Empowerment

Focus of variation	Quotations
Content	I will be using the resources we've been given for my youngest child when she is ready. (07)
Confidence	[It] gave me the confidence to start sooner [helping child's learning] (01)
Knowledge	[This project] has shown me that there are activities that can be done to give them an enjoyment of learning before they start school. (07)
Skills	It [the project] has given me a method that I maybe wouldn't have used. (01)

Conception 2. Engagement of parents

This concept refers to the extent to which parents felt engaged in the project in general; their enjoyment and depth of engagement.

Table 3
Engagement of parents

Focus of variation	Quotations
Content	… each word we put into the project was meaning "the world" for him … and that having a great influence into our mutual understanding… (03) She knows all the words and we now have a huge collection. My friends are all jealous. (01)
Confidence	I love doing it with her (01) He loves doing it and I enjoy doing it with him (05) I will make more videos, she loves doing them (01)
Knowledge	I am not entirely sure how a school will teach the children how to start reading but I hope that it might be similar to what we are doing at home as it does seem to work. (06)
Skills	I think it has given him more enjoyment when we come to sit down and look at books together. (07)

Conception 3. Engagement of children

This concept refers to the level of engagement of their children as perceived by their parents. Children were not interviewed directly but video footage corroborates the views expressed by parents.

Table 4
Engagement of children

Focus of variation	Quotations
Content	[he] loves the words and the folder. He gets very excited about the folder and wants to play with it and the words. (02)
Confidence	He really enjoys the time we spend looking at the words and playing the various different word games (07)
Knowledge	He knows where I keep them [the words] on top of the cupboard and points to them and says what they are. He got the words by himself and began saying them to himself. (05)
Skills	… as well as trying to write them [the words] (05) She has started tracing over the letters with her finger (04) He loves his words. He points to signposts and pretends that he knows what they say. He seems to have learned Coco by himself. (05)

Conception 4. Engagement of family

This concept refers to the perceived engagement and support of the family.

Table 5
Engagement of family

Focus of variation	Quotations
Content	Her and her friends [aged] five and nine played for half an hour today with the word cards, doing snap, memory and making up stories. It was lovely to see. (08)
Confidence	My elder son has been taking a great part in teaching the little one how to read. (03) Daddy created a game of running around an object on the floor and running back to read the word (01)
Knowledge	I keep telling his dad not to test him but he is very competitive and can't help himself. (02)
Skills	[Her] Great Grannie was very proud and telling everyone how amazing she was, being able to read at only two! (01)

Conception 5. The teaching activity

This concept refers to the actual literacy activity being used as a focus for parental engagement in the children's pre-school development.

Table 6
The teaching activity

Focus of variation	Quotations
Content	I didn't think she would have such a good repertoire of words and be quite as advanced as she is. (01) …without a doubt she has learnt a lot, all through playing with the words. (06). My husband is amazed at how well my son can read the words and also at my son's attitude to learning. (07)
Confidence	I was really surprised when I did what you said and just asked her to find the words. She wasn't saying them out loud but could find them … she must have been reading them in her head. (08)
Knowledge	[I] wouldn't have used so many words in such quick succession and probably wouldn't have used such long words. (01)
Skills	Doing this project… gave me a really good structure (01)

Conception 6. Language development

This concept refers to parent's perceived benefits to their child's spoken language or general communication skills.

Table 7
Language development

Focus of variation	Quotations
Content	When she looks at a book now she tries to work out new words and just says the ones she already knows. (08) He is developing a sense of humour in speaking and expressing himself… it helps very much his development, his general development that has no connection with reading… and some words because of all that introduction in the reading project it helps him… err motivates him to speak (03)
Confidence	*A focus on confidence to explore language issues is represented by questions from parents regarding mispronunciation of sounds and these are not included here.*

Knowledge	*A focus on second language issues only related to one family (not included here)*
Skills	*A focus on skills is represented by this extract from a video transcript of 'Missy' (aged 2 years, 8 months) teaching her baby (doll) to read, clearly based on her Mum's (01) modelling:* Missy: *(picking up the word baby)* Baby *(picking up baby doll)* you must have a look *(making doll look at the word and sitting her on her lap and pretending that her baby can speak)* baby *(putting doll back down)* good girl baby.

Discussion

With regard to research question 1, parent's feelings of empowerment, all parents responded positively post-project and all but one indicated a change in terms of feelings of empowerment (knowing how and what they could do, having the confidence to do it and what materials to use). The one parent who expressed no change had a University degree in Child Studies.

> My feelings haven't changed, as I have always been keen to teach 'Missy' as much as I can to prepare her for school and give her a head start. (01)

For research questions 2 (engagement of parents, children and families), there were clear expressions and reports of engagement and participation by parents, children and families. Parents reported that the children enjoyed the activities and that within family settings games were modified and adapted as they took ownership of the materials.

> 'Els' invented different games with the words and got mummy and daddy involved too. (06)

Changed levels of confidence and enjoyment will have had an impact on feelings of engagement. This was mainly concerned with confidence in doing the activities, confidence to get involved, confidence in the materials themselves and a confidence to explore language issues.

The choice of a literacy activity was based on the likelihood that parents would acknowledge its value and, if successful, this was likely to increase engagement. The activities were perceived by parents and families to be successful and this is likely to

have contributed to increased engagement. The impact of the activities were perceived as more than just word recognition and included improved spoken language, increased interest in books and increased social interaction.

The focus on knowledge that emerged in each of the categories analysed was not reflected in the research questions, but was an element of the original hypothesis for this project in terms of the training involved. This reported knowledge at post-project included parents feeling knowledgeable about: how to support their children; how to make it effective; the importance of personalised meaning; the importance of play and not testing; the appropriate pace; an appropriate structure; and the value of literacy learning to spoken language.

The request from parents, whose children are still pre-school age, to continue with involvement in the project is a clear endorsement of its success and an indicator of parental engagement of their children's learning.

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