A research review: the importance of families and the home environment

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

SUMMARY

Learning is complex; it begins at birth and continues throughout life. Parents are the first teachers and role models for their children, and therefore have a strong influence on their learning. Yet, studies continue to show that many parents are not aware of the importance they play in their child's education and have a limited understanding of their role in their children's learning (DCSF, 2007).

In the last three decades, several strands of research have produced compelling evidence justifying a focus on the family with a particular emphasis on early years in order to raise literacy standards. The key research findings are:

- **Families and parents are critical to children's attainment**. Parental involvement in their child's literacy practices positively affects children's academic performance and is a more powerful force for academic success than other family background variables, such as social class, family size and level of parental education.
- **The home is crucial**. Parents have the greatest influence on the achievement of young people through supporting their learning in the home rather than supporting activities in school.
- **Early intervention is vital.** The earlier parents become involved in their children's literacy practices, the more profound the results and the longer-lasting the effects. Children learn long before they enter formal education.

Parents are a child's first educator. A child's family and home environment has a strong impact on his/her language and literacy development and educational achievement. This impact is stronger during the child's early years but continues throughout their school years.

Many background variables affect the impact of the family and home environment (such as socio-economic status, level of parental education, family size, etc.) but parental attitudes and behaviour, especially parents' involvement in home learning activities, can be crucial to children's achievement and can overcome the influences of other factors.

Therefore, any policy aiming to improve literacy standards cannot be limited to formal educational settings, where children spend only a small proportion of their time. On the contrary, it needs to embrace the family as a whole and include parents as partners in their children's education from the very beginning of their children's lives. It should aim to raise parents' awareness of the difference they can make and set up systems that offer constant encouragement and support according to individual requirements and needs.

This paper looks in detail at the range of research underpinning the National Literacy Trust's work with communities and local areas to embed a strategic approach to literacy.

THE RESEARCH EVIDENCE

The significance of parental involvement and the home learning environment

Parents' attitudes and support for their children's learning influence performance on literacy tests irrespective of socio-economic status (Tizard, Blatchford, Burke, Farquhar and Plewis, 1988; Wells, 1987). Parental involvement in their child's literacy practices positively affects children's academic performance (Fan and Chen, 2001) and is a more powerful force for academic success than other family background variables, such as social class, family size and level of parental education (Flouri and Buchanan, 2004).

- Specifically parental involvement with reading activities at home has significant positive influences not only on reading achievement, language comprehension and expressive language skills (Gest, Freeman, Domitrovich, and Welsh, 2004), but also on pupils' interest in reading, attitudes towards reading and attentiveness in the classroom (Rowe, 1991).

- Parents make the greatest difference to achievement through supporting their learning in the home rather than supporting activities in the school (Harris and Goodall, 2007).

- Longitudinal studies, provide research evidence confirming that parental involvement in learning activities in the home is strongly associated with children's better cognitive achievement, particularly in the early years (such as Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, and Taggart,1999 and Melhuish, Sylva, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, and Taggart, 2001, see also Harris and Goodall, 2007).

Family involvement at school
- Feinstein and Symons (1999) found that parental interest in their child's education was the single greatest predictor of achievement at age 16.
- In a recent study (Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins and Weiss, 2006) for the Harvard Family Research Project, it was found that family involvement in school matters most for children whose mothers have less education. More specifically, the authors found that increases in family involvement in the school predicted increases in literacy achievement for low income families and that family involvement in school matters most for children at greatest risk.
- More specifically, Dearing and colleagues found that if families who were initially uninvolved in the school became more involved, their children's literacy improved. Importantly, their results indicated that even one or two additional involvement activities per year were associated with meaningful improvements for children.

Parental education, skills and attitude

There is a link between parents' and children's literacy levels[1]:

- Several recent studies found that parents with low literacy levels:
    - are less likely to help their children with reading and writing (Williams, Clemens, Oleinikova, and Tarvin, 2003; Parsons and Bynner, 2007);
    - feel less confident in doing so (Williams et al., 2003);
    - are less likely to have children who read for pleasure (Parsons and Bynner, 2007);
    - are more likely to have children with lower cognitive and language development levels (De Coulon, Meschi and Vignoles, 2008).[2]NB these links have been challenged – see footnote.
- The context provided by parents and their consistent support might be more important than any transfer of skills [for their children's literacy development] (Auerbach, 1989, p. 171).

Parental education level has an impact on young children's cognitive and language development:

- Parents' level of education correlates with the cognitive development of babies between 12 months and 27 months of age (Roberts, Bornstein, Slater and Barrett, 1999).
- Data obtained from a study of 16,000 three-year-old children, who were assessed within the framework of the British Millennium Cohort Study (George, Hansen and Schoon, 2007), indicated that children with the most educated parents (who had degree-level or above qualifications) were on average about 12-13 months ahead of those with the least educated parents (who had no qualifications)[3].

Parental attitudes and aspirations play a central role in children's language and literacy development:

- Parental aspirations and expectations on their children's achievements have a strong impact on children's school results (Fan and Chen, 2001; Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003).
- There is ample evidence that parents who promote the view that reading is a valuable and worthwhile activity have children who are motivated to read for pleasure (Baker and Scher, 2002).

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[1] Hannon (1999) does not exclude the possibility that other studies might succeed in identifying children with low literacy achievement on the basis of family characteristics. What he contests are the following key points: (a) the tendency to believe that a significant correlation implies an acceptable method of identification; (b) the use of reported literacy difficulties to measure parents' literacy levels, as very few parents tend to report having reading difficulties - in the ALSBU study only 107 children (out of a total of 2,617) had parents who admitted having reading difficulties; (c) the fact that, in the ALSBU study, data was misleadingly presented in a way likely to persuade that parental literacy difficulties accounted for much of children's poor literacy achievement. The interpretation of the ALSBU findings (1993) as evidence of intergenerational transfer of literacy skills, especially in relation to low levels of literacy, was challenged by Hannon (1999) through his key reinterpretation of the data. Hannon pointed out that in the ALSBU study the causal relationship between parents' and children's low literacy levels had been assumed and could not be deduced from the evidence collected[1].

[2] The study by De Coulon et al. (2003) was based on data from the British Cohort Survey. It found a positive and significant relationship between parents' literacy skills and their children's cognitive development, measured in terms of test results on the British Ability Scale Second Edition (which includes "naming vocabulary" for children aged 3-6; "word reading scale" and "spelling" for children aged 7-11). Such a positive relationship is more significant for parents with low literacy levels (below entry level 2). Quantile regressions on the data showed that the intergenerational transfer of basic skills is stronger for children with low levels of skills.

[3] Children's cognitive skills were measured using the Naming Vocabulary Subset of the British Ability Scales and the School Readiness Composite of the Revised Bracken Basic Concept Scale. The British Ability Scales is part of a set of cognitive assessments designed to gauge children's expressive language skills. The child is asked to name a series of pictures of everyday items. The school readiness composite measures children's readiness for formal education in terms of their knowledge of colours, letters, numbers, sizes, comparisons and shapes. The children are required to point as prompted by the interviewer (George et al., 2007).

The significance of parental involvement in their child's earliest years

- Research shows that the earlier parents become involved in their children's literacy practices, the more profound the results and the longer-lasting the effects (Mullis, Mullis, Cornille et al., 2004).
- It is now accepted that the link between disadvantage and achievement is cumulative: when poorer children enter primary school, despite early indications of potential, they tend to fall behind (Feinstein, 2003, 2004). Consequently, the chances of breaking cycles of poverty and deprivation are considerably reduced as children get older (DfES, 2004).

What is effective parental involvement?
- The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study found that what parents and carers do with their young children makes a real difference to the children's development and is more important than who parents are (i.e. than their socio-economic status or educational level). There are a range of activities that parents undertake with pre-school children which have a positive effect on their development in that they engage and stretch the child's mind. For example, reading with the child, teaching songs and nursery rhymes, painting and drawing, playing with letters and numbers, visiting the library, teaching the alphabet and numbers, taking children on visits and creating regular opportunities for them to play with their friends at home, were all associated with higher intellectual and social/behavioural scores. These activities could also be viewed as 'protective' factors in reducing the incidence of special educational needs because children whose parents engaged regularly in home learning activities were less likely to be at risk for special educational needs (Sylva et al., 2004).

Types of parental involvement (Clark, 2007)
- It should come as no surprise that parent and community involvement that is linked to student learning has a greater effect on achievement than more general forms of involvement (Henderson and Mapp, 2002).
- In a meta-analysis of over 50 studies, Jeynes (2005) found that types of involvement that required a large investment of time, such as communicating and/or reading with the child, as well parenting style and parental expectations, had a greater impact on educational achievement than some other forms of involvement, such as parental attendance and participation at school. Indeed, reading and communication with the child emerge as importance facets of parental involvement in numerous studies.
- However, involving parents in their children's literacy activities not only benefits their children. There are also numerous benefits that have been reported for the parents themselves, including greater skill acquisition, greater confidence and self-esteem, a better parent-child relationship, and increased engagement with learning.
- The lack of exposure to letters of the alphabet by school entry among low socio-economic status (SES) children delays their ability to acquire foundation-level literacy[4] (Duncan and Seymour, 2000).

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[4] Foundation-level literacy is a cognitive framework that consists of the recognition and storage of words and of the ability to decode words on the basis of spelling-sound correspondences.

- Other early years skills have been identified as strong predictors of later achievement:
  - demonstrating letter identification before age five (Tizard, Blatchford, Burke, Farquhar and Plewis, 1988)
  - understanding narrative and story (Meek, 1982; Wells, 1987)
  - understanding writing functions (Teale and Sulzby, 1986; Hall, 1987)
  - knowing nursery rhymes (Maclean, Bryant and Bradley, 1987)
  - demonstrating some phonological awareness (Goswami and Bryant, 1990; Stainthorp and Hughes, 1999)
  - being capable of explanatory talk (Crain-Thoreson and Dale, 1992; Dickinson and Beals, 1994).

The impact of reading to young children:
Parents reading to babies and young children has a strong impact on children's language and literacy development. Parents' reading to their children in the pre-school years is regarded as an important predictor of literacy achievement (Weinberger, 1996). This parental activity is associated with strong evidence of benefits for children such as language growth, reading achievement and writing (Bus, Van Ijzendoorn and Pellegrini, 1995; Brooks, 2000), the enhancement of children's language comprehension and expressive language skills, listening and speaking skills, later enjoyment of books and reading, understanding narrative and story (Wells, 1987; Crain-Thoreson and Dale, 1992; Weinberger, 1996),

- Parental involvement in their child's reading has been found to be the most important determinant of language and emergent literacy (Bus, Van Ijzendoorn and Pellegrini, 1995).
- Children who are read to at an early age tend to display greater interest in reading at a later age (Arnold and Whitehurst, 1994).
- Story reading at home enhances children's language comprehension and expressive language skills (Crain-Thoreson and Dale, 1992).
- Oral language developed from parent/child reading predicts later writing development (Crain-Thoreson, Bloomfield, Anthony, Bacon, Phillips and Samwel, 1999).
- Parents who introduce their babies to books give them a head start in school and an advantage over their peers throughout primary school (Wade and Moore, 2000).

Parental support continues to play a crucial role throughout children's and young people's lives:
- Although parental involvement has the greatest effect in the early years, its importance to children's educational and literacy outcomes continues into the teenage and even adult years (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). For example, Feinstein and Symons (1999) found that parental interest in their child's education was the single most powerful predictor of achievement at age 16.
- Children spend 15 per cent of their lives from age five to 16 in school and 85 per cent with their families, parents and communities (Literacy changes lives, 2006, p.34).

- Although adolescents desire independence and time with their peers, they continue to rely on guidance from parents and other adults (Zarrett and Eccles, 2006).

The big picture: trends in family life

The time parents in Britain spend with their children has increased steadily since the 1960s, and has shown a particularly high rate in recent decades (Fisher, McCulloch and Gershuny, 1999). Analysing UK time-use studies, Fisher et al. (1999) reported that the average time spent in child-related activities had risen from less than 30 minutes in the 1970s to more than one hour per day in the 1990s.

In addition to indicating that spending time with their children has increasingly become important to parents, other reasons for this marked increase in parental involvement may include a reduction in the pressures of domestic work and changes in domestic technology (e.g. pre-cooked meals, washing machines and dish washers; Fisher et al., 1999). Robinson and Godbey (1997) also speculated that the rise in parental involvement may be related to parents' increasing fear of the external environment (e.g. traffic and perceptions of increased threat of harm from adults), which may restrict the time children spend playing unsupervised.

While mothers in the UK still assume overriding responsibility for their children's education (e.g. West et al., 1998), the amount of time that fathers spend with their young children has also increased dramatically over the past 20 years (Gershuny, 2001; Fisher et al., 1999). Women continue to devote twice as much time as men to caring for children under four (approx. 4 hours per day compared to 2 hours for men), but men's involvement in child-related activities has increased from less than 15 minutes in the 1970s to almost 2 hours in the 1990s.

Indeed, fathers find some time for childcare irrespective of the hours they work. On average, fathers of under fives spend 1 hour and 20 minutes a day on childcare activities during the week and 2 hours and 30 minutes a day at weekends (Hurrell and Davies, 2005). More specifically, fathers of under fives spend about the same amount of time than mothers (1:10/day) on reading, playing and talking with their children at weekends (Hurrell and Davies, 2005).

Similar findings were also made by a BMRB (Williams, Williams and Ullman, 2002) report, which found that 24% of full-time working fathers felt very involved in child's school life compared to 26% of full-time working mothers. In addition, 24% of resident fathers compared to 37% of mothers reported helping with the child's homework "every time", and only 14% of full-time working fathers and 16% of full-time working mothers helped out in classrooms.

Ethnicity and parental involvement (DCSF, 2009)

- A survey of parents in 2007 has found variation in levels of parental involvement among different ethnic groups. For example,
- Black parents are more than twice as likely as White parents to say they felt very involved in their child's education
- Parents from non-White ethnic backgrounds are also more involved in their child's school activities (including homework).
- Parents from non-White backgrounds are also less likely to say that a child's education is the school's responsibility rather than the parent's (17% of Black and Asian parents compared to 27% of White parents said that it was the school's responsibility).
- Research on the views of parents from different ethnic communities in England found that Black and Asian parents placed an extremely high importance on the value of education and expressed a great deal of concern about the future of their children.19 Good education was viewed as very important to combat racial discrimination and disadvantage and to prevent social exclusion.

Figure 1. A research based model illustrating the concept of parental involvement for school-aged children (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003)

Parental role definition
(parents see education as part of their role)

Parental self-efficacy
(Parents are confidents they can make a difference)

School as active and reactive agents

Parental capacity for involvement

General parenting

In-school Involvement
(meeting teachers)

Minimises barriers

Initiates contacts

Affords opportunities

Parental/school interface

Responds to parental initiatives

Modelling, expectations, values, skills building

Parent/child interaction

Informed parent
(aims, values, assessment, programmes, courses, expectations)

At-home educational involvement
(modelling expectations, support, discussion, encouragement, skills training)

Pupil values

Pupil skills

Child shapes parent/teacher interaction

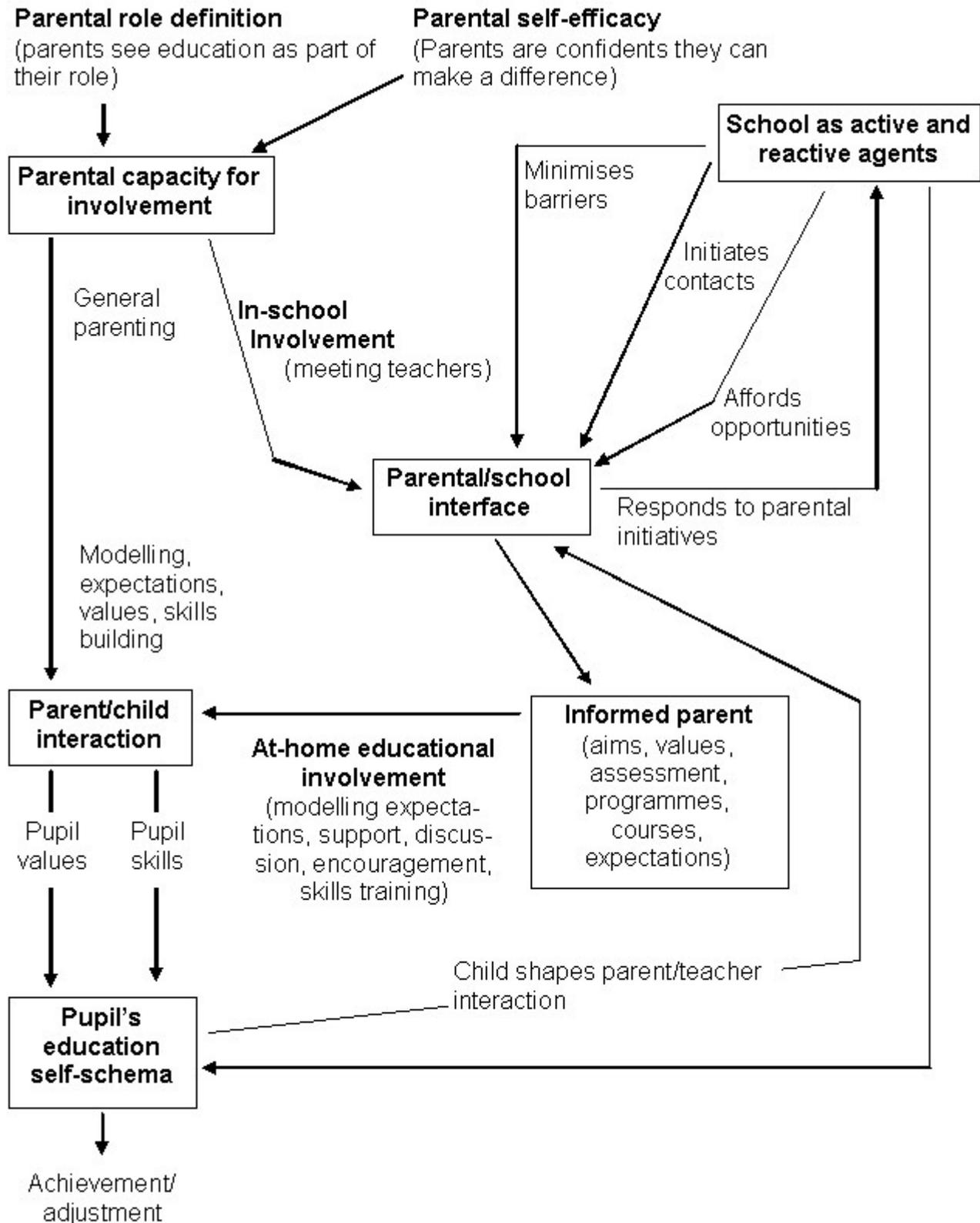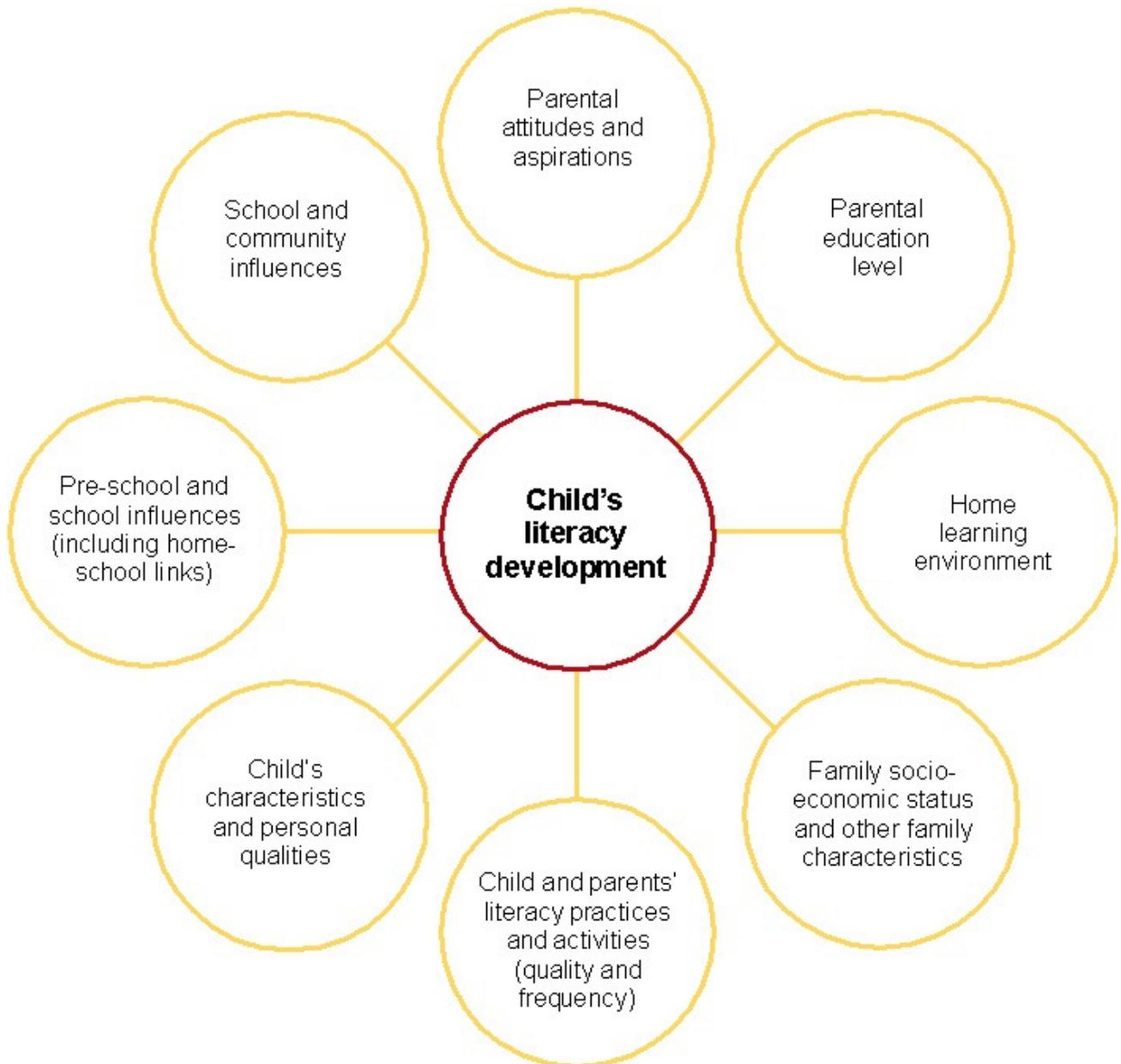**Pupil's education self-schema**

Achievement/ adjustment

Figure 2. Some of the key factors influencing children's literacy development

DEFINITIONS AND TAXONOMY

1. Towards a working definition of family literacy

The way we define the key concepts of *family*, *literacy*, and *family literacy* can have a strong impact on the way family literacy provision is developed and delivered. The National Literacy Trust does not believe in a prescriptive position in relation to definitions, as definitions need to be flexible and dynamic in order to be adapted to continually changing circumstances and situations. Nevertheless, it can be helpful to agree on definitions and consider their underlying assumptions. Therefore, this document seeks to clarify some key terms and to provide a working definition of family literacy.

The term family literacy is potentially confusing because it is used by different people to refer to very different things. Thus, some people use it to refer to the ways families use literacy within the home and the wider community, while others use it to refer to specific interventions aimed at supporting literacy in the home, or again to describe a field of study which investigates family literacy practices and family literacy intervention programmes and how both affect children's literacy development.

2. Family

Collins Student's Dictionary defines family as "a social group consisting of parents and their children". This is pleasantly straightforward but the shape and structure of families today is rapidly evolving.

Some important factors contributing to the diversity of family forms in the UK are mentioned in the government document *Every Parent Matters* (Department for Education and Skills, 2007, pp.2-3). For instance, cohabitation rates, marriage and divorce patterns, parental employment patterns, conception rates and age, and ethnic diversity in society need to be taken into account when considering contemporary family structures. The interaction of all the above-mentioned factors results in increasingly complex and varied family structures. Our understanding of the concept of family in the UK stems from a series of trends, which include the following:
- A higher percentage of children living in married couple families will experience divorce in their family before reaching 16 (28% according to an estimate dating back to 2002);
- A high proportion of dependent children live in stepfamilies (2.5 million out of 12.5 million, i.e. 20%, in 2000)
- The proportion of births to cohabiting couples is increasing (it rose from 10% to 28% between 1986 and 2004)
- There is a high number of one-parent families (1.7 million in Britain caring for over 3 million children in 2002), 50% of which live on low incomes.

This leads to a wider definition of family (cf. Wasik and Herrmann, 2004, p. 6; King and McMaster, 2000, p. 14; Hannon and Bird, 2004, p.24), where the boundaries of the traditional family structure need to be expanded to include:

- Two-parent families
- One-parent families
- Blended families
- Extended families (these could include a wide variety of members, such as siblings, grandparents, grandchildren, aunts and uncles, nephews and nieces, neighbours, friends, other members of the community, legal guardians, and foster children)
- Individuals living in the same household and calling themselves a family
- Families where individual family members live separately from one another but maintain a constant relationship
- Single-ethnicity families
- Multiple-ethnicity families

This expanded and inclusive definition of the family concept is summarised below in figure 3. As Wasik and Herrmann (2004) point out, "This broader idea of family has direct bearing on the study of literacy within families and the provision of family literacy services" (p. 6).

In the context of family literacy, it is essential to define family in the most inclusive sense to encompass significant others and extended family and community members whenever relevant. Moreover, it is important to take into account two fundamental and complementary issues (cf. Shively and Thomas, forthcoming, p. 3):

- Family is defined differently by different cultures;
- In most cultures, adult family members are the primary models for their children.

For the National Literacy Trust, the term parents reflects a broad and inclusive definition of family and is used to describe all kinds of carers, including biological parents, step-parents, grandparents, foster parents, siblings and other caregivers (see Hannon, Brooks, and Bird, 2007).

Figure 3: The complexity and diversity of contemporary family structures

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                              ┌─────────────┐
                              │   FAMILY    │
                              └─────────────┘
                                     │
        ┌────────────┬───────────────┼───────────────┬────────────┐
   ┌──────────┐ ┌──────────┐   ┌──────────┐   ┌──────────┐
   │One-parent│ │Two-parent│   │ Blended  │   │ Extended │
   └──────────┘ └──────────┘   └──────────┘   └──────────┘

           ( LIVING )                        ( ETHNICITY )

   ( in one      )  ( in separate )     ( single )   ( multiple )
   ( household   )  ( households   )

                         ┌──────────────────┐
                         │  FAMILY MEMBERS  │
                         └──────────────────┘

        Parents, children, siblings, grandparents, grandchildren,
        aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces, legal guardians, foster children
            neighbours, friends, other members of the community
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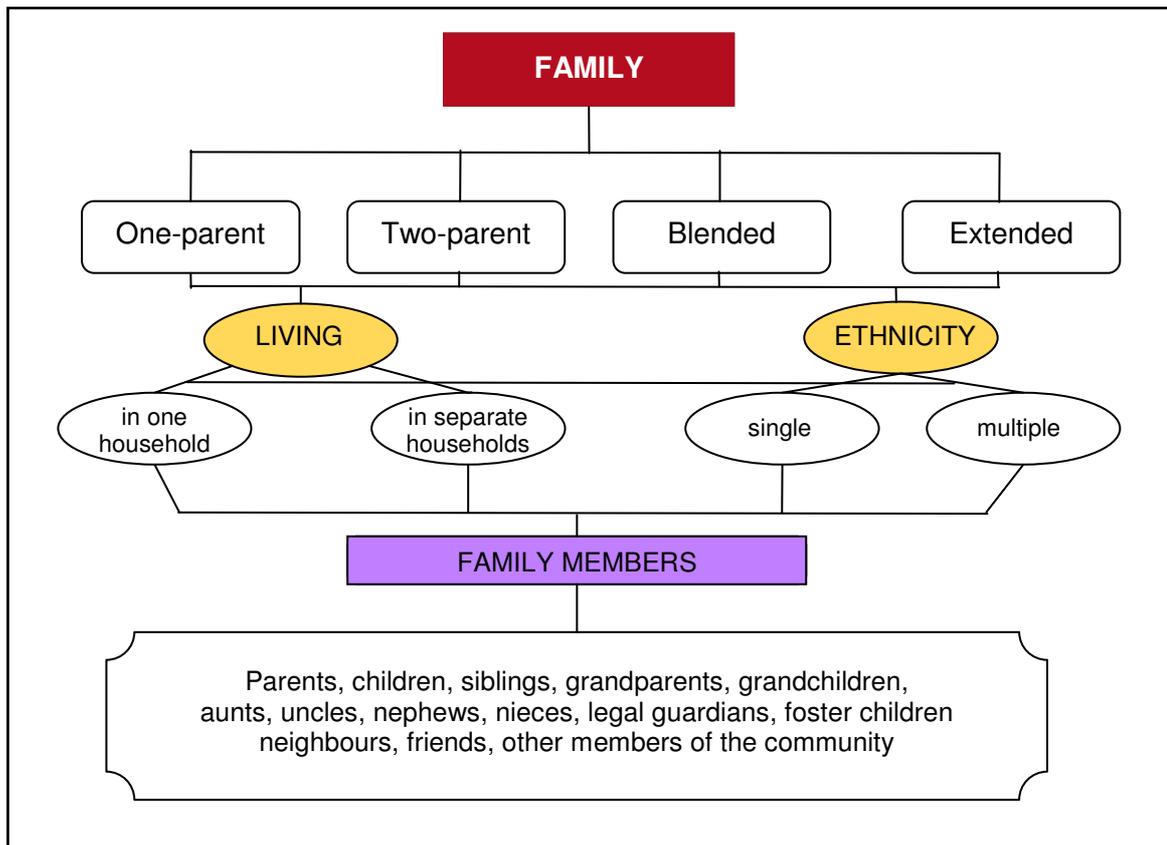
3. Literacy

Traditionally, *literacy* has been defined as the ability to read and write. However, in the past twenty years or so, this conventional definition of literacy has been challenged and broadened, to include a wide range of complex and multi-dimensional processes and skills.

Although researchers do not readily agree on the definition of literacy, there seems to be a general consensus on the fact that the very nature of the concept requires a definition that is dynamic, that reflects the continual changes of modern society and that takes into account the developmental and functional dimensions of literacy (cf. Wasik and Herrmann, 2004, pp. 3-6).

Figure 4: The abilities included in the definitions of literacy shown above

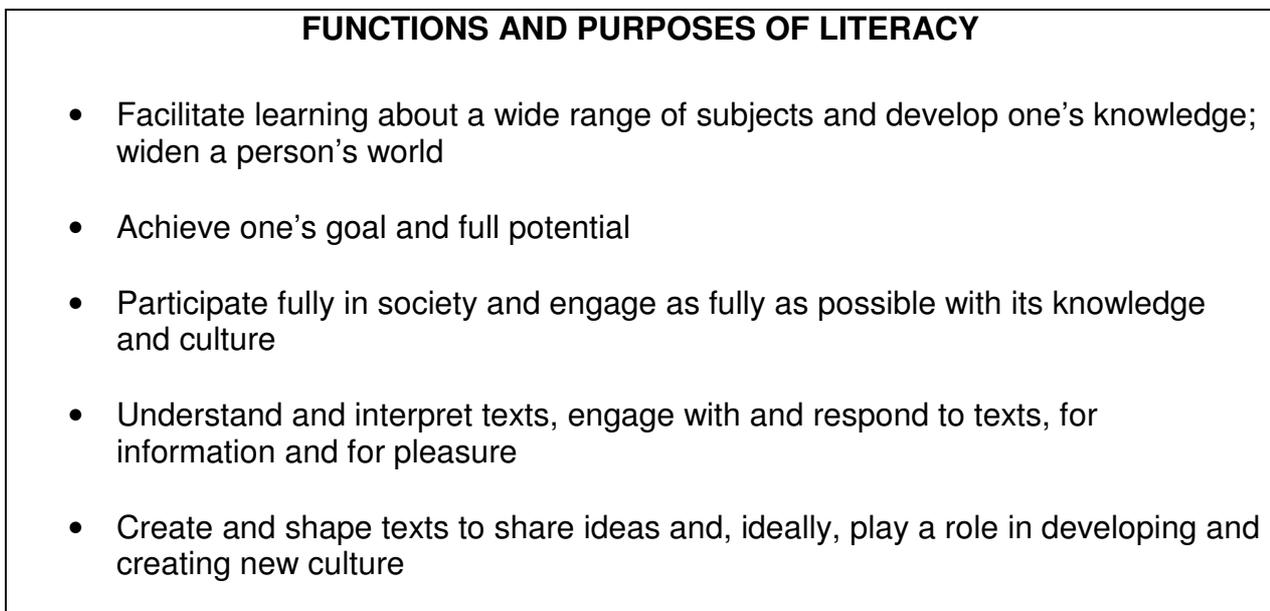| COMMUNICATIVE ABILITIES INCLUDED IN THE CONCEPT OF LITERACY		
Abilities and skills mentioned		**Definition number in Appendix A**
Identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials		1
Read and write appropriately for different purposes		2
Speak and listen for a wide range of purposes in different contexts:	1. Speaking 2. Listening and responding 3. Group discussion and interaction 4. Drama	3
Read and write for a range of purposes on paper and on screen:	5. Word recognition: decoding (reading) and encoding (spelling) 6. Word structure and spelling 7. Understanding and interpreting texts 8. Engaging and responding to texts 9. Creating and shaping texts 10. Text structure and organisation 11. Sentence structure and punctuation 12. Presentation	3
Recognise, reproduce and manipulate the conventions of text shared by a given community		4
Understand and employ printed information in daily life, at home, at work and in the community		5
Process information critically through interaction of [one's] knowledge of the world and the information that is presented in writing and other media		8
Communicate effectively		9
Read, write and speak in English		10, 11

Although all definitions agree on including the ability to read and write, only a few definitions limit the scope of literacy to written texts. Most definitions include oral, visual, electronic multimedia and other media of communication, and broaden the concept to encompass a wide range of communicative abilities (see figure 4).

The National Literacy Trust takes a broad definition of text, which includes printed, electronic, oral, and audio-visual forms. We will limit our definition of literacy to an alphabetic construction of literacy, as "to go too far in non-verbal areas where literacy is concerned is not constructive" (Kress and Street, 2006 and Pahl, 2008, p. 16). This does not mean that practices that include other forms of communication, for example creative art forms like painting or drawing, will be automatically excluded from literacy programmes.

Such forms of communications will, however, be included only when their function is to contribute to the development of verbal literacy[5].

Another core element of the definition of literacy is the purpose for which literacy is used. The definitions illustrated in Appendix A mention a variety of purposes, which are summarised in figure 3. We believe that the range of purposes for which literacy is used should be very wide and be considered an open category, where new purposes can be continually added according to changes in context and society[6]. Similarly, the range of contexts where literacy is used should not be restrained and should include informal settings, such as an individual's home, family and community life, as well as formal educational settings (cf. Wasik and Herrmann, 2004, p. 4). Moreover, the contexts where literacy is used (geographically, culturally, linguistically and socially) should be taken into account when determining literacy standards.

Figure 5: Functions and purposes of literacy

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FUNCTIONS AND PURPOSES OF LITERACY

- Facilitate learning about a wide range of subjects and develop one's knowledge; widen a person's world

- Achieve one's goal and full potential

- Participate fully in society and engage as fully as possible with its knowledge and culture

- Understand and interpret texts, engage with and respond to texts, for information and for pleasure

- Create and shape texts to share ideas and, ideally, play a role in developing and creating new culture

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4. Family Literacy

The term family literacy was coined by Taylor (1983) in her study of the ways in which parents impact and assist the literacy learning of their children. This concept of family literacy should be distinguished from family literacy programmes (cf. e.g. Hannon and Bird, 2004; Wasik and Herrmann, 2004).

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[5] The ability to 'compute and solve problems' mentioned in definition number 10 (see Appendix A), when referring to mathematical problems, will not be included in our definition of literacy, as it will be considered part of numeracy. It will be considered part of literacy only when it essentially refers to the ability to derive and convey meaning using language skills.

[6] In a 2004 position paper, UNESCO explored the diverse purposes of literacy, and how they change in time and according to situations: "People acquire and apply literacy for different purposes in different situations, all of which are shaped by culture, history, language, religion and socio-economic conditions. The plural notion of literacy latches upon these different purposes and situations. Rather than seeing literacy as only a generic set of technical skills, it looks at the social dimensions of acquiring and applying literacy. It emphasises that literacy is not uniform, but is instead culturally, linguistically and even temporally diverse. It is shaped by social as well as educational institutions: the family, community, workplace, religious establishments and the state." (see http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001362/136246e.pdf)

As a field of study, family literacy includes both the theoretical and the practical and spans across many and diverse research areas.

4.1 The concept

The International Reading Association defines family literacy as "the ways parents, children, and extended family members use literacy at home and in their community" (Morrow, 1995, cited in Wasik and Herrmann, 2004, p. 7; cf. also McGee and Morrow, 2005; Hannon and Bird, 2004, pp.23-24; *P.E.Fa.L. project: Final Report*, 2004). In this sense, family literacy can be considered "a phenomenon of family life", which "has long been acknowledged and appreciated" (Wasik and Herrmann, 2004, p. 7). This definition of family literacy stems from a belief in the importance of children's home life in their literacy development and is the one advocated by Wasik and Herrmann (2004):

> We reserve the phrase *family literacy* for literacy beliefs and practices among family members and the intergenerational transfer of literacy to children. We also use this phrase to describe studies of how young children become literate, including the relations between family literacy practices and children's literacy and language development. (p. 3)

Recent developments in the theoretical construct of family literacy recommend using the plural form (i.e. family literacies), to acknowledge that families have different "ways with words" (Heath, 1983) and very diverse linguistic practices (cf. Pahl, 2008, pp. 16-17; Wasik and Herrmann, 2004, p. 7), which vary across cultural, linguistic and social contexts (cf. Rodriguez-Brown, 2003; Taylor, 1997; Shively and Thomas, 2008, p. 5).

This definition brings a "sociocultural perspective" (Rodriguez-Brown, 2003) to the study of family literacy, acknowledging that practices in the home can differ culturally or linguistically from the mainstream. The sociocultural perspective honours parents as their children's first educators, acknowledges that parents have the potential to impact the literacy learning of their children, and values the role of parents, siblings and the extended family (cf. Crawford and Zygouris-Coe, 2006).

Crawford and Zygouris-Coe (2006) alert us to the dangers of adopting a prescriptive and rigid definition of family literacy. They argue that, when underpinning family literacy programmes, this type of definition risks trying to apply a "one-size-fits-all" response to a host of complex social and learning situations, devaluing the varied social systems in the very families and communities family literacy programmes are designed to help.

Reilly (2008) makes similar observations on how the theoretical construct of family literacy can affect the attitudes of families and practitioners involved in family literacy programmes. She draws on the work of Fairclough (1992, 2003) to apply critical discourse analysis techniques to examine the concept of family literacy. She argues that the concept has undergone a process of nominalisation. Through such process the original clause underpinning family literacy (possibly "family members using reading and writing in the home") has been transformed into a noun and what was a concrete practice has become an abstract concept. In the former, parents and children are treated as "agents who are

16

making choices and decisions about the activities, skills and texts that will enable them to fulfil a range of purposes". In the nominalised form, parents and children are excluded and replaced by other, external agents, (such as funding managers, teachers, local authority managers and policy makers) who deliver curricula that meet funding requirements. The term thus becomes associated almost entirely with educational service provision. The contributions of the multitude of practices relating to literacy that occur in the family tend to be less valued (cf. also Hannon, 1999, p. 124-125).

4.2 Programmes, initiatives and support services

The definition of family literacy programmes vary in literature, ranging from the very broad to narrower and more prescriptive ones.[7]

Similarly, the National Literacy Trust defines family literacy as:

> any programme or initiative that aims to work through parents to improve the reading and writing of their children, as well as those that have the improvement of the parent's literacy as an aim. Family literacy is a powerful way to support parents with few skills and show them how they can help their children become confident and effective communicators. It also has knock-on benefits for other family members - parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters.
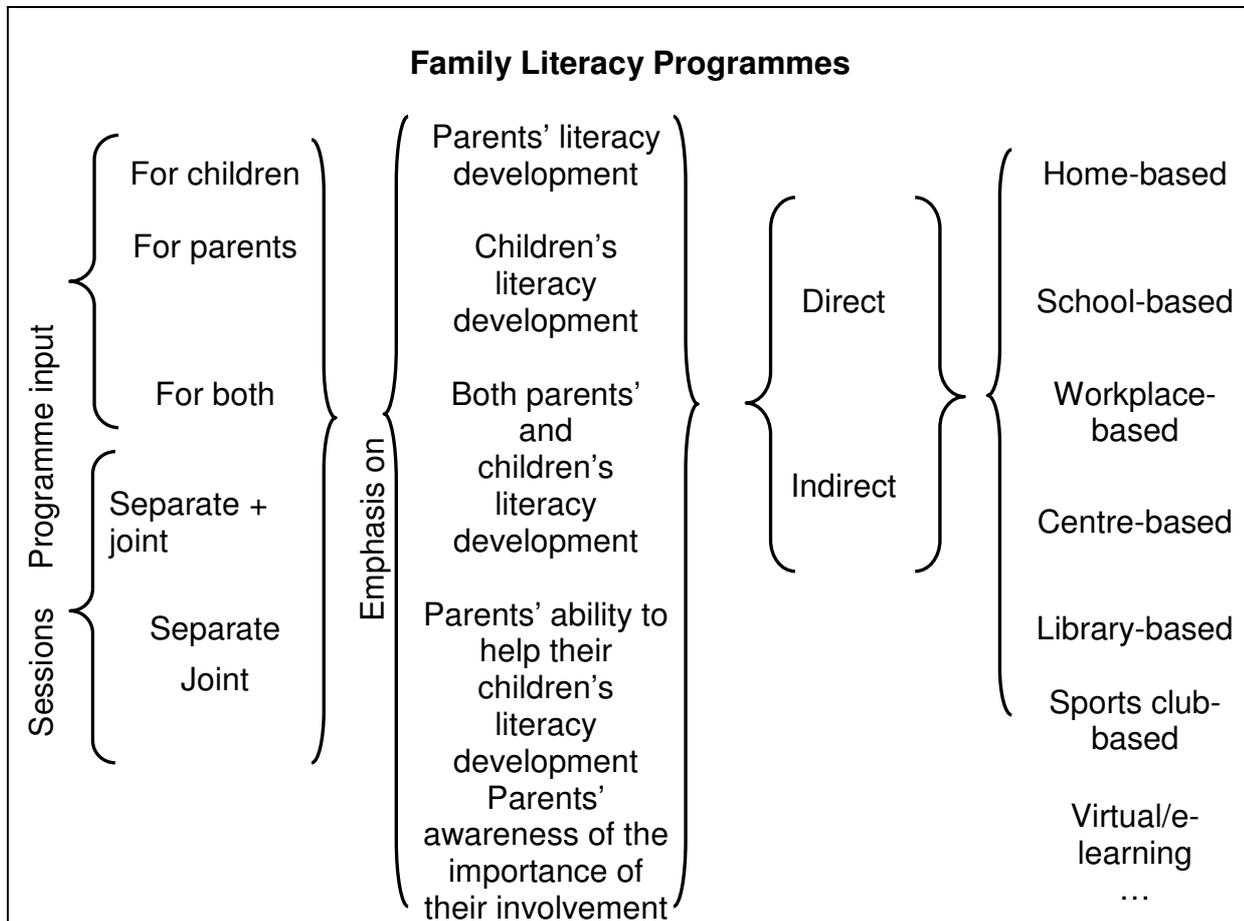
Family literacy programmes, as described, can be categorised according to several criteria (cf. Nickse, 1993; Wasik and Herrmann, 2004; Toomey, 1995. Hannon, Brooks and Bird, 2007). First, according to whose literacy development is to be foregrounded, programmes can be divided into those focusing on:
- Parents' literacy development
- Children's literacy development
- Both parents' and children's literacy development

Some programmes, focus on raising parents' awareness of the importance of their involvement in their children's literacy development rather than on the literacy development of parents or children.

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[7] Let us start by adopting a broad definition, such as the one suggested by Wasik and Herrmann (2004, p. 3), who use the terms "*family literacy services* or *family literacy programs*" to refer to interventions that enhance family members' literacy skills through an intergenerational focus".

Figure 6: Typologies of family literacy programmes.

Family Literacy Programmes

Programme input		Emphasis on		
Programme input	For children	Parents' literacy development	Direct	Home-based
	For parents	Children's literacy development		School-based
	For both	Both parents' and children's literacy development		Workplace-based
Sessions	Separate + joint		Indirect	Centre-based
	Separate	Parents' ability to help their children's literacy development		Library-based
	Joint	Parents' awareness of the importance of their involvement		Sports club-based
				Virtual/e-learning …

Additional factors that distinguish different types of family literacy programmes are (cf. Hannon, Brooks, and Bird, 2007; Skills for Families, 2005):

- the practitioners delivering the programmes and their relevant professional status and qualifications (e.g. early childhood educators, adult educators, full-time or part-time, paraprofessionals or volunteers, or a mixture of all of the above);
- the chosen target population for the programme (e.g. bilingual families, ethnic minorities, offenders, teenage parents, lone parents, fathers, etc.);
- the underlying concept of literacy and the kind of activities encompassed in such concept (ranging from conventional activities to a broader range of activities including creative multimedia texts, oral language and additional language learning);
- the duration and intensity of programmes, which can be classified as introductory, taster, short, or intensive courses[8].

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[8] In England, the Basic Skills Agency (which has recently merged with NIACE (the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, working in alliance with Tribal) to form the Alliance for Lifelong Learning) distinguishes between taster courses (typically one to two hours), introductory courses (typically two to four hours), short courses (typically 30 to 49 hours) and intensive courses (typically 72 to 96 hours).

In the UK, the Basic Skills Agency (BSA) has fostered programmes based on a model which includes three parts:

- A session with the children on their own
- A session with the parents working on their literacy skills on their own
- A joint session with parents and children.

However, this can lead to a restricted view of current family literacy activity and its historical roots (Hannon, 1999; Hannon and Bird, 2004; Hannon, Brooks and Bird, 2007).

The National Literacy Trust advises a broad definition of family literacy programmes, which combines the two meanings of the phrase family literacy and values and acknowledges family literacy practices that occur independently of any programme. This is the type of definition that Hannon and Bird (2004) advocate. They define family literacy programmes as "programs to teach literacy that acknowledge and make use of learners' family relationships and engagement in family literacy practices" (p. 24)[9].

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[9]

Findings on emergent literacy in turn lead to a re-evaluation of home learning. Building on such findings, Hannon (1995, 1998) identified ways in which home learning can be more powerful than school learning. Among the advantages of home learning over school learning are that the former:

- is shaped by immediate interests and needs
- is spontaneous and therefore effortless
- is a response to real rather than contrived problems
- is flexible in duration
- has a high adult-child ration while allowing a teaching role for younger family members.

Hannon also suggested that families can provide children with:
O - opportunities for literacy activities
R - recognition of early literacy achievement
I - interaction with more proficient literacy users
M - models of language use.

The ORIM framework can be successfully used by programmes and initiatives that support literacy in the home (cf. Pugh, 1996).

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