Place, Policy and Pedagogy:
A literacy ethnography of a small town

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Abstract

At a time when getting the 'best start' in early childhood is seen as essential for 'school readiness', educational attainment and economic success, the thesis considers how resources in an East Midlands' town are used by mothers to support their young (under 5) children's literacy development. The study adopts an ethnographic approach and relates to other place-based literacy research such as that carried out by David Barton & Mary Hamilton and Shirley Brice-Heath. Drawing on Bernstein's ideas of visible and invisible pedagogies, the study investigates how English education policy is interpreted and enacted through the different literacy resources that are made available to different communities within the town. The findings reveal the ways in which mothers are 'taught' to support their young children's literacy development differently depending on how they are framed, where they live and where they go. Additionally, Bourdieu's concepts of capital and habitus help to shed light on the different ways mothers support their children's literacy development and how they view their own and others' role. It is argued that the adoption of particular pedagogies and practices in different places within the town give mothers mixed messages, reinforce deficit discourses and perpetuate educational inequalities.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

From 1999 to 2013 I worked as a primary school teacher in three contrasting English state schools situated in different local authorities. Whilst leading the subject of English within a Midlands primary school from 2004 onwards, I became acutely aware that primary literacy learning was becoming more and more rooted in the teaching of decontextualised skills, such as decoding and spelling using synthetic phonics, and naming parts of speech and grammatical forms, with little reference to meaning-making . These shifts in literacy teaching, away from 'whole book' approaches, were off-putting to the children and most of the adults who cared for them.

Debates about how children should be taught to read have raged for decades. In the 1970's and 80's, writers such as Smith (1971) and Meek (1988) showed us that reading is not just about decoding the words on the page but is about making meaning. They emphasised the use of 'real' books so that children understand what reading is and take enjoyment from it. Stanovich (1984) recognised that readers need almost automatic word-recognition so that they can pay more attention to making meaning. In the 1990's, writers such as Goswami and Bryant (1990) started to pay more attention to phonological awareness as an important skill that children need in order to decode previously unknown words. The emphasis on phonics and word-recognition has been heavily politicised since then. Following on from his review into Early Reading (2006), Rose produced his report for the government on the Primary Curriculum (2009). In both reports, Rose stressed the importance of the systematic teaching of synthetic phonics from an early age as the prime approach to teaching children to read and spell. He argued that this approach allows children a high degree of automaticity so that they can become fluent readers by the age of seven and can then concentrate on understanding the meaning of what they are reading. This has meant 'real' books being pushed out in the early years by reading schemes and other resources such as flash cards. Rose also adopted Gough and Tumner's (1986) model of 'simple reading' (to

be a reader you need to be good at decoding and comprehension) arguing that schools that espouse this model of reading are the most successful. As a result, the idea of reading for pleasure is now overlooked in favour of being able to complete reading comprehension exercises.

Rose's ideas have formed a strong orthodoxy that is enforced in schools by a strict inspection regime. This same regime that produces league tables of performance raises parental anxieties about literacy standards and encourages families to engage in out-of-school activities to ensure their children do not fall behind or fail to meet the expected norms. The early and successful acquisition of literacy is also widely understood and promoted as having social (and ultimately economic) as well as cultural benefits, by both government and non-government organisations such as child welfare, health agencies, libraries and charities (e.g. Save the Children, The Sutton Trust, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, National Literacy Trust) who promote the importance of reading and literacy support in the home.

In 2013 I changed jobs and became a lecturer in a further education college responsible for teaching parents how to support their primary-aged children's literacy development. This alerted me to the gulf between parents' and teachers' understandings of literacy. The parents I taught (mostly mothers) struggled to understand their children's experience of literacy at school whilst at the same time feeling increasing pressure from their children's schools to do work at home to reinforce school literacy-learning (e.g. phonics and comprehension). This created anxieties in the mothers and a lack of confidence about how best to support their children's development as readers and writers.

My own experience as a mother, teacher and lecturer told me that the job of supporting their children's literacy development falls predominantly to mothers. We are still the primary care-givers and are usually the parent who has the most contact with outside agencies such as the Health Visiting service, Children's Centres and

schools. More than ever, mothers feel the pressure to support their children's learning yet how they make sense of this is less clear. What constitutes literacy has become increasingly ambiguous in a political context where highly traditional, grammar school inspired pedagogical approaches are being advocated in schools, while, at the same time, opportunities to engage in digital literacies expand exponentially out of school. Mothers are therefore left to navigate their own paths through ideological debates that are presented as 'truths' about successful parenting, despite the fact that many of them remember learning to read in ways that are currently dismissed. Mothers are also made to feel guilty by media stories such as those about children who start school with poor communication skills, who do not have bedtime stories read to them or spend too much time on games consoles.

1.1 What does it mean to be a 'good' mother?

"Parenting is not a gender-neutral or gender-equal practice" (Edwards & Gillies, 2011, p.152). It is predominantly mothers who have primary responsibility for the day-to-day care of children (Vincent & Ball, 2006) and who, in the main, support and extend their children's literacy (Mace, 1998). There has long been a discourse about what constitutes a 'good' or 'bad' mother but this is now tied up with notions around children being dependent beings who require mothers to identify and meet their needs (Ribbens, 1994). Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) and Hays (1996) argue that a 'sensitive' or 'intensive' approach to mothering, where mothers are positioned as educators (who should use every opportunity to offer their children learning opportunities), has become the norm and puts all mothers under a lot of pressure. Mothers have been given a public and political responsibility to ensure their children develop into law-abiding, productive citizens who can achieve educational success and reproduce dominant cultural values (David, 2005; Phoenix, Woollett, & Lloyd, 1991). Asher (2012) claims that the assumption that mothers will, and should, take on this role underpins government

policies, public services, cultural and commercial forces, employment structures, personal beliefs and attitudes.

Within the same discourse, mothers cannot be assumed to know how to do it 'right' so they must be taught the necessary skills (Vincent, 2000). A parenting industry of magazines, books, websites, television programmes and courses suggest that they need the help of experts. At the same time as 'mothering' comes to be seen as a set of techniques that can be learnt and employed, 'mothering' as a relationship between a mother and her child becomes invisible (Edwards & Gillies, 2011; Ribbens & Kirkpatrick, 2005). Mothers become subject to the gaze of professionals, such as health visitors and social workers, whose job it is to check they are doing it right and following professional advice (Lawler, 2014).

1.2 Mothers, literacy education and class

In their study of literature and advertising aimed at mothers of young children, Nichols, Nixon and Rowsell (2009) showed how being a good mother is also tied up with literacy work. They found that these texts urged them to have frequent close interaction with their children through reading books, talking to and singing with them. By inducting them into mainstream literacy practices they could guarantee their children's future educational success.

In addition, while pre- and post-natal services appear to be open to both parents, Henricson (2003) argues that information and support is directed towards mothers; programmes are female-orientated and held at times that are often inconvenient to fathers. As well as excluding fathers, the proliferation of 'advice' aimed at mothers makes it easier for others to judge them and question whether they are doing it 'right'. This often leads to feelings of inadequacy and guilt for not living up to expectations (Asher, 2012). If families are targeted as needing support but fail to accept it, mothers are overwhelmingly the ones who are criticised and penalised (Edwards & Gillies, 2011).

This is particularly problematic when working class and poor parents often see their role differently from middle class ones. Lareau (2011) found that working class mothers believed that as long as they provided love, food and safety, their children would grow and thrive, whereas middle class mothers saw themselves as educators able to develop their children's 'special talents'. It is therefore possible to see that while all mothers are invested in their children's well-being, ideas around 'good' mothering affect middle class and working class mothers differently (Reay, 2000, 2004a). Ball (2003) argues that middle class mothers are often the key figures in making decisions about their children's education and are able to gather information and ideas from other mothers in their social network in order to give their children an advantage. They can also buy in support such as commercial play and development activities. In contrast, working class mothers may struggle to employ the same resources as middle class mothers due to a lack of finances, time, educational knowledge, and support from male partners.

Lareau (2011) showed that middle class mothers did not necessarily have more time to spend with their children but were able to pay for 'enrichment' activities ('concerted cultivation') which gave their children an educational advantage. This idea has been supported by other researchers who have demonstrated how highly-educated mothers value and provide the sort of literacy experiences in the early years that can support their young children's development, and ensure cultural consistency between home and school (Gillies, 2007; Weigel, Martin & Bennett, 2006).

> Many middle class mothers … practise a kind of professional motherhood. They take their children to a range of carefully planned activities. They agonise over their development, their care, their future schooling (Vincent & Ball, 2006, p.84).

Since New Labour formed their UK government in 1997, policy has increasingly focused on 'good' parenting as a way to improve educational outcomes for children and increase social mobility. However, it has ignored its gendered status and class differences

(Gillies, 2005, 2006; Henricson, 2003; Vincent, 2000). While the demand for better parenting has increased the work-load of all mothers, it is working class mothers who have the least amount of resources but are expected to achieve the most (Reay, 2005). Lawler (2014) argues that policy-makers have assumed working class people do not know, want or value the 'right' things. At the same time, even though they are more able to invest time, energy and money into supporting their children's learning before they start school in order to give them a head start, middle class identities are seen as the norm (Reay, 1998). This has contributed to a discourse around the sorts of practices 'good' mothers engage in with their children which marginalises mothers whose practices differ. The construction of this discourse through government policy will be traced in more detail in Chapter 2.

While government policy has represented working class mothers as deficient and in need of support and education in order to be better, many commentators have argued the opposite. They have shown that working class mothers make powerful emotional commitments to their children, taking on the day-to-day caring for children, and wanting their children to do well at school so they can escape financial hardship (Gillies, 2005, 2006; Hays, 1996). Working class mothers have been seen to focus their time and effort into ensuring their children feel safe and have self-esteem by helping them to manage the failure and injustice they experience within the education system. This is particularly important for children who may not have the resources that other children can draw on which help to ensure their academic success (Gillies, 2007). For children growing up in families that lack economic and cultural resources, the emotional support they receive is significant (Hutchison, 2012; O'Brien, 2008).

Dermott and Pomati (2016) also found that the idea of widespread poor parenting amongst working class families was misplaced. The parents they surveyed all subscribed to the culture of intensive parenting and engaged in child-centred activities seen as markers of good parenting, such as reading to their children and playing with

them. However, it was the more highly-qualified parents that provided (what has been perceived to be) the most educationally-valuable support (such as regular bedtime reading, extra-curricular activities and days out). By sanctioning particular practices through educational policies, the state has made them the benchmark against which parents can be assessed. This has made it easier to accuse some parents of not doing enough.

> Science claims to tell the truth about natural mothering but it is founded upon a set of fantasies and fear of what is to be found in the working class (Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989, p.29).

The middle class have the power to define what good parenting is (Ribbens, 1994). In other words, they have the power to construct and maintain a dominant discourse though policies which value their own parenting practices while discrediting those of working class parents. The discourse that is created means that working class mothers, even if they spend the same amount of time with their children, are the ones targeted by interventions that position them as needing to be educated in how to parent in the 'right' (middle class) way. Working class mothers, who do not conform to the middle class practices associated with 'good' mothering, can then be blamed for all manner of social ills as they fail to give their offspring the skills they are supposed to need to improve their lot (Reay, 2000, 2004a). State interventions can therefore be seen as an attempt to regulate working class mothers' parenting practices by reinforcing particular ideas about what it means to be a 'good' mother. However this approach risks alienating them and making family life even more stressful (David, 1993).

Mothers who work in paid employment have to try to reconcile two conflicting roles (Hochschild, 2003). If they subscribe to the ideas around 'intensive' or 'sensitive' mothering, they face a conflict between staying at home with their child so they can provide the right sort of home learning environment, or employing others so they can work and provide economic stability (Richardson, 1993). In terms of childcare choices, Holloway (1998) shows how it also falls to

mothers to choose the type of childcare they want for their children, which can cause further turmoil depending on their attitude to educational development, their resources, and what provision is available. Those who subscribe to the notion of a mother being the best person to care for their child in the early years look for childcare that resembles what they would provide at home, with workers they see as substitute mothers (Moss, 1999). As a result, childcare remains the domain of women; it 'allows' women, rather than parents, to go to work (Vincent & Ball, 2006) and because childcare providers also treat the mother as the primary contact, the idea that they are primarily responsible for children is perpetuated (Asher, 2012).

For many working class mothers, the idea of being a 'good' mother conflicts with being a 'good' worker as government initiatives such as the extension of free childcare places and reduced welfare benefits increasingly compel them to contribute to the family income. The pressure to fulfil both roles well means that they have a greater chance of being seen as failing, and lone-mothers are particularly vulnerable. If poor mothers do not work, they are criticised for being unproductive and dependent on the state. If they do work, there is less time to spend with their children and support their development, but if things go wrong they are blamed for neglecting their children (Dally, 1982). In this way "the mother must walk a tightrope of conflicting and impossible demands" (Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989, p75). At the same time, what is demanded of fathers is far less prescriptive. "Approval is comparatively easily won. A father has merely to push a pram down a street or attend a playgroup to be regarded by others as a paragon of caring, modern fatherhood." (Asher, 2012, p.122)

It is in this context that I undertook my study. It was clear to me that motherhood is not a universal experience. It depends on a woman's social and economic circumstances, as well as her sense of identity (Richardson, 1993). In addition, as Chapter 2 shows, literacy has many different meanings. Street (1993) argues that literacy is bound up in ideologies, beliefs and social norms. These can be constantly

changing and may include mothers' own experiences of education, their role within the family, their relationships with others outside the immediate family, as well as what they see and hear in the media.

1.3 Aims of the study

In designing this study it was important to me to hear mothers' views in order to understand their experiences and how they saw their role in supporting their children's literacy development. As Ribbens and Edwards (1998) comment, women's experiences as mothers, "have not been well understood or accorded significance" (p.5) within the social sciences. In addition, whilst previous studies of out-of-school literacy have made a significant contribution to understanding the richness and complexity of everyday literacy practices, not many of them have focused on mothers with very young children (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). By focusing on mothers of children under the age of five, I hoped to address these gaps.

I also recognised that different parenting experiences, understandings and circumstances were likely to affect mothers' ability and desire to engage with services and resources designed to assist them in the role of supporting their children's literacy development. In order to understand how services and resources were experienced by different mothers, it was important to me to study them within their situated context. I chose the Midlands town of Embervale where I had worked as a lecturer for a year as this had given me some insight into how the inhabitants of the town were viewed by others. My understanding was that the people who lived in the town were quite economically deprived with low educational attainment. This led me to ask what resources did this town have to help mothers support their children's literacy development and how were they being used. On this basis my research question was formed:

How are the resources provided by a small town used by mothers to support their young children's literacy development?

To answer this question it was necessary to explore the range of literacy resources available in the town and the mothers' engagement with these resources. I wanted to be able to spend a prolonged period of time experiencing the different resources first-hand and building relationships with mothers in order to better understand their experiences and views. I therefore felt an ethnographic approach would be best suited to doing this.

By focusing on a specific set of people in a particular place, I aimed to generate in-depth and nuanced data that could not only enhance current understandings of place-based literacy practices but also contribute to existing knowledge around mothers' perspectives and experiences. I hoped the findings would help policy-makers and service providers better organise community resources for promoting young children's literacy development. Opportunities for learning within different community settings could be maximised, mothers could feel less anxious about how best to help their children and young children's literacy development could be supported well before they start school.

Although it could be argued that a small scale study may lack generalisability, this does not mean that the findings will not be recognised by other communities or that recommendations could not be applied elsewhere.

1.3.1 Use of theory

In keeping with the ethnographic tradition, I did not have a pre-decided theoretical framework at the start of the research. However, as Robson declares, "it is not possible to start a research study without some pre-existing theoretical ideas and assumptions." (2011, p. 148). It is therefore important to explain how theoretical concepts have been used within this study.

Concepts were borrowed from the theories of Henri Lefebvre, Pierre Bourdieu and Basil Bernstein, and used as tools to understand different aspects of the research.

Lefebvre's (1991) three concepts of perceived, conceived and lived spaces provide a way of thinking about how places are 'produced' through different types of '(social) space'. As Lefebvre writes, "from the point of view of knowing, social space works as a tool for the analysis of society" (1991, p.34). The three different concepts enable us to think about places as complex, changing constructions made up of: the material space that can be described (perceived space); the space of dominant ideologies and discourses (conceived space); and, the subjective space of the users that can work to generate 'counterspaces' (lived space). These are explained in more detail in Chapter 3 where they are used to understand how Embervale had developed over time. They are then employed again in Chapters 5 and 6 to understand how different spaces within the town were constructed through the various ways resources were provided and experienced.

In keeping with Bourdieu's (1989) approach of using his ideas as 'thinking tools' to shed light on society, his concepts of capital and habitus were used for thinking about and explaining themes that emerged from the data. By using his concepts in this way, it is important to recognise that a different researcher may have brought others to bear. However, at every stage of the research process, I have done my best to make informed choices based on careful examination of the literature and data available.

In terms of understanding the availability of literacy resources and the ways in which they were used, Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of capital proved to be useful thinking tools. The four types of capital he identified were economic, cultural, social and symbolic (defined in more detail in the next chapter). Economic capital, in the form of money and assets, was a useful concept for thinking about how the cost of resources influenced the way they were used and who used them. The concept of cultural capital, in the form of knowledge about literacies, education, and the role of parents, was particularly helpful in thinking about the resources that mothers accessed and valued, as well as how they saw their role. Social capital, in the form of

family and friend networks, was also important when considering the role of other people in children's literacy development and what cultural or economic capital they may bring. These concepts are operationalised further, in the final chapter, to consider more equitable ways to support children's literacy development.

Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus was also used. Bourdieu developed this concept as a way of thinking about the relationship between agency and structure (Reay, 2004b). He understood habitus as the way in which an individual positions her/himself within the social world, and the way in which the social world is positioned within the individual. Consequently habitus can be seen in individuals' dispositions and attitudes, and the practices they engage in. Bourdieu considered how habitus allows for agency and change, but is often reproduced by the ways in which the social world predisposes people to behave in certain ways. In other words, the context in which people find themselves will influence their actions and how they make sense of their lives. The concept of habitus was particularly helpful in thinking about the different ways mothers experienced and talked about the resources they used, and how they saw their role.

Bernstein's (1990) concepts of visible and invisible pedagogies are used to think about how resources were provided and experienced by different groups, and the nature of intervention. Where pedagogy is visible, Bernstein (1990) argued there is an obvious hierarchical relationship between the teacher and her students. The teacher exercises authority over what is taught and how, and establishes herself as a transmitter of knowledge. Where pedagogy is invisible, although the teacher still exercises some control over what and how she teaches, she takes on the role of facilitator and rules and relationships are implicit. These ideas were useful for understanding the different ways that professionals viewed their role and the mothers they worked with.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

In the next chapter the study is contextualised through a discussion of how, since 1997, UK government policy has approached the idea of parental involvement in the education of children under the age of five. This chapter goes on to explore differing understandings of children's literacy and the role of professionals and parents. Chapter 3 gives the study further context by providing a summary of Embervale's economic and geographical history as well as a description of what the town is like today. It is important to note that, I have used a pseudonym for the town in an attempt to protect the identity of participants. This is discussed further in Chapter 4 which details the study's methodology. Chapter 5 then 'paints' four detailed portraits based around the four different types of literacy resources found in Embervale. Analysis of the findings in Chapter 6 is supported by the ideas of Bernstein (1975, 1990) and Bourdieu (1984, 1986, 1990). Finally, conclusions and recommendations are discussed in Chapter 7.

Chapter 2 – Constructing policies, parents, pedagogies and practices

Policy is a social and political construct. It is created in response to a perceived social problem. Policy frames the problem and the people involved in a way that suits the priorities and ideologies of the ruling political group. At the same time, dominant discourses are constructed and perpetuated around the perceived problem and how it should be tackled.

As Bacchi (1999) argues, it is important to look at who is defining what the problem is and for what purpose, as well as how discourse is used to frame/construct the problem.

> Issues get represented in ways that mystify power relations and often create individuals responsible for their own 'failures', drawing attention away from the structures that create unequal outcomes. (Bacchi, 2000, p.46)

Those who construct the problem and discourses around it are able to hold on to a powerful position. Whereas those who are constructed as 'needy' or 'disadvantaged' become the 'subjects' of policy and are disempowered. (Bacchi, 2000, 2017). In relation to education policy, Ball (1990) notes that discourses have been "constructed to define the field, articulate the positions and thus subtly set the limits to the possibilities of education policy" (p.22).

As noted in Chapter 1 in relation to working class mothers, policy discourses define different groups in particular ways e.g. as 'needy', 'deficient', and/or 'disadvantaged' in order to construct a problem (Bacchi, 1999) and legitimate particular practices (Ball, 1990). Policy has constructed a discourse around what it means to be a 'good' parent which has meant some parents' practices can be viewed as deficient and detrimental to children's learning and development. In this way policy exercises power through producing discourses as if they are 'truth' and allowing only certain voices and viewpoints to be heard (Ball, 1993). Some commentators have argued that just the use of the term 'parent' ignores gender, ethnicity and class. This has

led to a very limited understanding of the experiences of different people (Crozier & Reay, 2005), inequalities being reinforced (Edwards & Gillies, 2011) and the diversity of parenting cultures that exist being concealed (Caddell, 1996).

Although there has been a broad consensus between different governments about the important role that parents play in their young children's education, their policies reveal different ideas about the role of the state and how policy should be enacted. The following section shows how the policies of the New Labour government (1997-2010) reflected a commitment to investing in public services for the benefit of parents and their children, as well as a paternalistic stance that believed parents needed state help to be 'better'. In response to various reports, a key paper - *Every Child Matters* (Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 2003) - identified the problem of children from lower socio-economic backgrounds achieving less well academically. New Labour's response was to heavily invest in early years' services, such as Sure Start Children's Centres, to help parents create the sort of home learning environment seen to raise children's school-readiness and academic attainment. In 2007, a change of name from the Department for Education and Skills to the Department for Children, Schools and Families signalled a shift from framing education as solely the realm of teachers and the state, to one that included families. Along with new policies such as *Every Parent Matters* (DFES, 2007) this also marked a shift away from looking at wider social and economic factors as the cause of educational underachievement towards the parenting practices of particular families. By framing the problem in this way, a discourse was constructed around certain parents (mothers) being needy, deficient and responsible for their children's lack of school success.

In 2010, a Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition came into power and renamed the Department for Children, Schools and Families to the Department for Education reflecting a neo-liberal ideology that educational achievement is key to economic success and global competitiveness. They continued to focus on parental responsibility

and early intervention for particular families through *Supporting Families in the Foundation Years* (DfE, 2011) but rather than framing poverty as a cause for some children's lower educational attainment, parental responsibility, school-readiness and early intervention were framed as the solutions to the problem of poverty. If children from poorer families were able to do well academically they could compete in the global marketplace, achieve social mobility and economic stability, and escape poverty. But unlike their predecessors who had invested considerable sums of money into early years' services, the Coalition government (2010-2017) and the subsequent Conservative government (2017-present) have made substantial, ongoing cuts to services as part of their 'austerity' agenda. This has resulted in a reduction in services with any remaining support being heavily targeted towards particular families and communities. Their *Troubled Families* programme (DCLG, 2012, 2014) was a key example of this. At the same time, individual responsibility has been reinforced through cuts to welfare benefits and the growth of funded childcare places to encourage poorer families to take up paid employment. In this way a discourse has been constructed and perpetuated through policies which no longer recognise and address fundamental social and economic inequalities, but frame particular individuals as responsible for their problems.

The chapter explores this in more detail by tracing UK government policy from 1997 to the present in relation to parental involvement in education. It looks at how policies have been constructed and enacted, and how they are underpinned by different discourses, political interests and ideologies. How support has been offered to parents (mothers) leads to a consideration of how policy also constructs particular pedagogies and practices. The chapter then narrows its focus to consider how educational policy has constructed a particular understanding of literacy for young children and the professionals that work with them.

2.1 Constructing policies and parents

Reforming family and education policy was high on the agenda of the New Labour government who were in office from 1997 to 2010. They wanted to eradicate poverty and believed that education could do this through improving economic 'well-being' (Ward & Eden, 2009). As part of their wider focus on education as a lever for social mobility, the government saw a role for parents as educators. Gillies (2005) argues that families had always been a concern to politicians, but this was the first government to push parenting practice centre-stage. Their consultation paper *Supporting Families* (Home Office, 1998) argued for the government playing a more significant role in the family by providing greater support to all parents.

> All parents need support with their children's health, education and welfare, and many also want advice and guidance on how to bring up their children […] our priority is to provide better support for parents so that parents can provide better support for their children. Currently, the provision of support to parents does not match their needs. Two problems stand out. There is a gap in support in the vital early years between birth and school and there is insufficient information for parents on the more general parenting support available (p.6).

Vincent (2000) comments that the government used the growth of private-sector goods and services, such as parenting classes and TV programmes as evidence that parents wanted help, whilst also reinforcing the idea that parenting is the responsibility of the individual and involves a set of skills that can be taught and improved. The emphasis on 'parent' as a verb seemed to be the main concern for the government (Edwards & Gillies, 2011). It was how mothers and fathers 'parented', rather than who they were, that was important. *Supporting Families* (Home Office, 1998) framed 'parenting' as something that could be separated from its particular context and reduced to a set of methods requiring certain skills and knowledge. It was up to parents to ensure they possessed this knowledge; if parents did not know what to do, the government

would provide support in the form of advice and training from professionals such as Health Visitors and through a national helpline.

Support was to be offered in a way that suggested parents could choose what was appropriate to meet their needs. Gillies (2005) argues that this type of support is based on the idea of encouraging moral responsibility amongst parents who must seek help when they need it so they can do the best for their children. Parents who did not fit this model of parenting could now be framed as the problem and blamed for their children's difficulties. 'Good' parents were the ones who saw it as their responsibility to provide the 'right' sort of parenting and opportunities for their children, and who accessed the necessary advice and information when they needed it (Gewirtz, 2001). However, Gewirtz sees this model of parenting as problematic for two reasons. First, government policy treated middle class parents as a homogeneous group who shared the same values and acted in the same ways. Second, government policy failed to acknowledge why some parents did not engage in certain types of 'parenting' activities. Poverty, stress, ill-health and poor living conditions make it more difficult for some families. Additionally, there is little incentive for them to take schooling seriously if there is a lack of decent employment opportunities where they live.

In 2003, *The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievement and Adjustment: A Literature Review* (Desforges & Abouchaar), was published by the government. The researchers collated and analysed a wealth of research in order to assess the impact of parental involvement on children's learning. A key finding, that has proved to be very influential in subsequent policy-making, was that 'good at-home parenting' has the most significant effect on children's educational achievement, even when other factors such as social class and ethnic group are taken out of the equation.

> Research consistently shows that what parents do with their children at home is far more important to their achievement than their social class or level of education. It would seem that if the parenting

> involvement practices of most working class parents could be raised to the levels of the best working class parents in these terms, very significant advances in school achievement might reasonably be expected. This inference from research cannot be said too often. (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003, pp.87-88)

Desforges and Abouchaar highlighted the point that some families (notably, "most working class") needed help to be able to provide the 'good at-home parenting' that was considered beneficial for children's learning and development. They also acknowledged that factors such as the effects of poverty, crime, domestic violence, mental ill health, self-confidence and knowledge were preventing some parents from providing the right sort of home environment. For support to be effective it needed to deal with these issues simultaneously rather than separately. While children's educational achievement was still framed as the responsibility of parents, unlike *Supporting Families* (Home Office, 1998) the authors of this report recognised that not all parents were the same and that different types of support would need to be offered.

This research was swiftly followed by and referred to in the Green Paper, *Every Child Matters* (Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 2003) which also stressed the importance of parenting practices on children's lives. The paper had been produced in response to two reports: one concerning a particularly shocking case of child abuse; the other concerning the low educational achievement of children in care. In light of the findings of these reports, the government now steered their focus on families towards two key areas - how to make sure every child could be kept safe and do well at school. For Henricson (2003) debates around the best ways for the state to support families now swung between the two ideas of care and control (providing support for families but also seeking to regulate their behaviour). The state was now framed as having a parenting role similar to the one it expected parents to take on.

Every Child Matters (Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 2003) identified a range of problems that were seen to be associated with poor

outcomes for children: "low income and parental employment; homelessness; **poor parenting** *[my emphasis]*; poor schooling; post-natal depression among mothers; low birth weight; substance misuse; individual characteristics such as intelligence; and community factors, such as living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood" (p.17). As these problems were much more likely to be found in working-class communities this meant they were framed as in the most need of state support and intervention. A further problem reinforced this - a large gap had been identified between children from different socio-economic groups when children entered school for the first time. This meant support could now be focused more sharply on the early years, and in keeping with the government's earlier publications, professional advice and education were framed as the best types of support. This was to be addressed by the creation of a network of Sure Start Children's Centres in wards deemed to be in the top 20% nationally for economic deprivation. The Centres would offer universal early education, childcare, health services, as well as family and parenting support for families considered to be 'at risk'. For Edwards and Gillies (2004) 'support' was no longer being framed in terms of material benefits such as child support or income support. It was now seen as education and advice from experts who could give particular families the parenting norms and values they were thought to be lacking.

But, as the title suggests, it was *Every Parent Matters* (DfES, 2007) that really put parents at the forefront of the government's drive to secure the best possible outcomes for children and set out more clearly what 'good parenting' looked like. There was recognition that social mobility had declined since the 1950s and that children from low socio-economic backgrounds were not doing as well as those who were better-off. However, instead of focusing on the living conditions of these families, the government framed the problem as parents simply not accessing the support that was available. The report therefore called for resources to be better directed towards the parents of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and for

services to be ready to intervene in families where parents were deemed to be lacking the necessary parenting skills.

> While seeking to create the conditions within which many more parents themselves feel confident about engaging effectively with their children's learning and development, government must pay particular attention to parents, for whatever reason, who currently lack the motivation, skills or awareness to do so. (DfES, 2007, p.6)

Every Parent Matters (2007) was soon followed by *The Impact of Parental Involvement on Children's Education* (DCSF, 2008a) which focused on the role of parents in supporting their children's education at home. Both policy documents marked a shift away from looking at wider social and economic factors that had been stressed by Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) and *Every Child Matters* (2003). Instead, these reports brought the government's focus sharply back onto the parenting practices of individual families. The reports stated that parents and the home environment they created were the most important factors in shaping children's well-being, achievements and prospects. Using evidence from the *Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) 3-11* study (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004) parents' aspirations and encouragement were seen to affect children's cognitive, social, literacy and mathematical development in the early years.

The EPPE project was the first major longitudinal study of the development of children aged three to seven years in England. In particular, the researchers studied the home learning environment (HLE) that parents provided for their children. They defined the right sort of HLE as one that incorporated activities such as reading regularly to their child, library visits, playing with and teaching letters and numbers, painting, drawing, teaching nursery rhymes and singing. If parents actively engaged in these activities they could significantly influence their child's development. The quality of the home learning environment was seen as more important for children's intellectual and social development than parental

occupation, education or income. In other words, what parents did was more important than who they were.

Along with Desforges and Abouchaar's (2003) earlier findings about the importance of 'good at-home parenting', it was now argued that if all parents, no matter what their circumstances, could engage in the 'right' sort of activities with their young children then they would be more likely to succeed at school and beyond. These reports very much framed parents as children's first educators and emphasised that it was their responsibility to provide the right conditions for a child to develop well and succeed at school. Thus the government was able to reframe parenting as an occupation (rather than an intimate relationship) that required particular knowledge and skills that could be gained from expert advice and training (Edwards & Gillies, 2004).

Gillies (2005, 2007), Edwards and Gillies (2004, 2011) and Cullen, Cullen, Lindsay, & Strand (2013) have been highly critical of this model of parenting that, they argue, is more closely matched to that of white, middle class parents than to working class or ethnic minority ones. Parents who have not fitted the government's model of a 'good' parent have been framed as deficient. This has meant being marginalised and vilified for demonstrating different styles of parenting. Gillies (2005) argues that the government attempted to reframe issues of poverty and inequality as a disconnection from the values and aspirations that 'good' middle class parents shared, such as choosing which school to send your children to, taking an interest in school work, supporting learning at home, and building social networks which could be drawn on when needed. Intervention was therefore designed to foster conformity to these values (Edwards & Gillies, 2004; Gillies, 2005). However, research carried out for the government by Day, Williams and Fox (2009) examined various types of interventions that were designed to support parents with their children's 'at home' learning. They found that parents' views on how they could support their children's learning were highly individualised and that interventions were most successful when they built on

parents' existing knowledge and skills rather than assuming what they did or didn't know.

Cottle and Alexander (2014) also see government policy on parental involvement as having a history of framing the home environment of some families as deficient and requiring certain parents to accept expert help, while those who are seen to support their children's education are labelled 'good' parents. They argue that by promoting a particular model of parenting there has been an assumption that parents are a homogeneous group who share the same priorities and beliefs, and have equal access to resources. Working class parents are often unable to access resources that middle class parents take for granted. The authors of Save the Children's (2013) research on how to help children from low-income backgrounds succeed at school argue that actually all parents, regardless of income, share common values such as the importance of reading at home and helping with homework. However, a lack of money and time stops them from accessing resources and activities for their children, and working longer hours means they are less likely to be at home with their children.

> Parents and families are a critically important part of a child's learning and development. The stress and anxiety of struggling to make ends meet can undermine parents' ability to parent and to provide the material support for children's education. Protecting families' economic living standards in hard times is crucial to tackling educational disadvantage. (Save the Children, 2013, p.13)

Similarly, Draper and Duffy (2006) acknowledge that parents are not a homogeneous group; they have diverse views and beliefs which may conflict with those of professionals trying to support them. For example, many working class parents see their role as a parent in terms of caring for, protecting and loving their children, rather than teaching them, which they see as the job of schools (Edwards & Gillies, 2011; Gillies, 2008). Gillies (2008) argues that it is easy to see this as a rejection of the value of education because it does not conform to the model of parental involvement that the government

was keen to promote and that middle class parents subscribe to. However, when faced with hardship, injustice and insecurity, working class parents have to employ different forms of emotional support for their children such as building resilience and coping skills.

> Parents with access to middle class resources (such as money, high-status social contacts and legitimated cultural knowledge) are able to draw on these in exploiting and directing relationships with professionals to their own benefit. In contrast, working class parents are more likely to find themselves struggling to address disadvantages and problems that set their practices apart from normative, middle class models of good parenting, and the normative values structuring formal parenting 'support' initiatives, such as parenting education classes. (Edwards & Gillies, 2011, p.147)

The section now moves on to consider how two further governments have framed parents in relation to their involvement in their young children's education. Although there was a change in government in 2017 there has been little to distinguish the two due to the Conservative party maintaining the greatest share of power. From 2010 to 2017, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition was led by a Conservative Prime Minister and a majority of Conservative cabinet members. This was replaced by a single Conservative government that is still in power today.

From 2010 the Coalition government continued the emphasis on parental responsibility and early intervention for those families that were seen as not meeting their responsibilities. In *Supporting Families in the Foundation Years* (DfE, 2011), the Department for Education, in collaboration with the Department for Health, set out the new government's plans for giving young children the best start in life. The 'foundation years' were defined as pregnancy to five years old. These early years were framed as a crucial period of development underpinning later achievement, as well as social and emotional wellbeing.

> Children's physical, emotional, language and cognitive development from pregnancy to age five are the foundations of the rest of their

> lives, influencing what and how they learn, their physical and mental health, friendships and relationships, and later vocations and careers. (DfE, 2011, p.8)

The document also showed the new government's commitment to the idea that families were the most important influence on young children. Parents continued to be framed as their children's first educators. They were responsible for ensuring their children reached a good level of development in the foundation years so they would be able to succeed at school.

> The things that parents or carers do with children at home, like talking to, reading to, and playing with them, are key predictors of future development and readiness for school. The impact of the early home-learning environment on outcomes at age five has an effect over and above factors such as socio-economic status, maternal education and family income. (DfE, 2011, p.9)

At the same time a new problem was introduced. If children were not able to reach a good level of development in the foundation years then they would not possess 'school readiness'. Without this, they were less likely to succeed at school, achieve economic stability and escape poverty. The report was informed by several reviews including Field's review on child poverty and life chances (2010). He underlined the importance of 'school readiness' for children's educational success.

> In their first few years children learn to walk and run, to speak and communicate, to relate to others, to play, explore their own curiosity, and to enjoy learning through their play, as well as beginning to read and write and use numbers. They are the key elements of 'school readiness'. We do children no favours if they are not properly prepared for the transition into school and beyond reception to Year 1. By the age of five children should be ready to make the most of the wealth of opportunities available to them at their next stage of learning and development. (DfE, 2011, p.18)

Allen's (2011) report into the influence of early intervention also highlighted the importance of making sure children are supported

when they are very young so they can develop rapidly. He advocated making sure all children, regardless of family income, possessed high levels of 'school readiness'. In keeping with a neo-liberal ideology, this paper framed the problem of poverty as the result of educational failure caused by poor parenting. It was now the responsibility of parents to ensure they engaged in the 'right' activities with their young children so they could be made 'ready for school' and go on to achieve educational and economic success.

Roulstone, Law, Rush, Clegg and Peters (2011) claimed that language development (seen as essential for 'school readiness') was the area of learning most strongly influenced by the home environment. The number of books available to the child, the frequency of library visits, the range of activities provided by parents and the number of toys available were all seen as important predictors of a child's vocabulary by the age of two. Parents' involvement was therefore stated to be the biggest influence on children's early language and literacy skills, yet Waldfogel & Washbrook (2010) argued that children from low-income backgrounds often lagged behind their peers from higher income backgrounds by as much as sixteen months in vocabulary when they started school, indicating that they may lack the right sort of home learning environment. Citing Blanden's (2006) research into social mobility, *Supporting Families in the Foundation Years* (DfE, 2011) stated,

> There is clear evidence that enabling children to develop their speech, language and communication skills at an early stage makes an enormous difference, and helps to reduce the incidence of special needs. Children who start school as confident speakers with good language skills become successful learners and achieve in life. Vocabulary at age five is the best predictor of later social mobility for children from deprived backgrounds. (DfE, 2011, p.25)

Thus, rather than looking for structural factors to explain the existence of poverty, the problem of poor speech and language skills was framed as a reason for the lack of social mobility amongst

children from poorer backgrounds. This meant the government could focus on the early identification of children lacking these skills and give parents particular types of help to ensure their children were 'school ready'.

In 2011, following riots that broke out in various parts of England, the government launched their *Troubled Families* programme (DCLG, 2012, 2014). Instead of looking at structural causes for the rioters' disaffection, blame was placed on individuals and families. The problem of the riots was framed as due to a number of 'troubled' families who were failing to provide a stable home environment. As a result their children were growing up to be violent criminals with a lack of respect for authority. The programme aimed, by 2020, to 'turn around' the lives of 120,000 families living in England, who had been identified as having multiple problems. Of these, 25% of the families had children under the age of five and 66% were judged to have parenting difficulties (which were often ascribed to not being parented well themselves). The programme therefore called for interventions that tackled all the problems simultaneously, rather than the dominant problem that presented itself (such as criminal behaviour or truancy), and for local services to become more effective. This approach contributed to the discourse that poor parenting was the real cause of social problems. Parents just needed to be provided with support to become better parents so the problems could be solved (Daly & Bray, 2015).

In 2016 the Prime Minister gave a speech on the government's *Life Chances Strategy* (Cameron, 2016) which reinforced these ideas and put renewed emphasis on the importance of good parenting in the early years of a child's life so they would have a greater chance of achieving educational and economic success.

> Families are the best anti-poverty measure ever invented. They are a welfare, education and counselling system all wrapped up into one […] we know the importance of those early years in setting children up for a good life. It's about improving education, so those who've

> had the toughest starts have every chance of breaking the cycle of poverty.

Education was key. Both the education that parents provided for their young children, and the education of parents so they would know how to do this in the best way.

> So I believe we now need to think about how to make it normal – even aspirational to attend parenting classes. We should encourage the growth of high-quality courses that help with all aspects of becoming a great mother or a great father […] so I can announce today that our Life Chances Strategy will include a plan for significantly expanding parenting provision. (Cameron, 2016)

In this way, the role of the state was framed as not being responsible for providing financial help for poorer families to help them escape their immediate poverty, but for teaching them how to be more responsible parents. If they were able to be great parents then their young children would be given the 'right' start in life and be able to achieve what they had failed to do. Ofsted (2016) and the Social Mobility Commission (Clarke & Younis, 2017) have also stressed the educational role of parents and the importance of the early years to ensure children's academic success and increase their social mobility.

> If we get the early years right, we pave the way for a lifetime of achievement. If we get them wrong, we miss a unique opportunity to shape a child's future. (Ofsted, 2016, p.3)

In summary, over the last twenty years the various policies of different UK governments have framed parents as having a significant impact on children's educational development and achievement particularly in the early years so they can be made 'ready for school'. For the New Labour government this meant investing heavily in public services to support families with a view to achieving greater equality by raising the attainment of poorer children to the same levels of their better-off peers. For the Coalition

and Conservative governments, this framing aligned with their neo-liberal stance that educational success leads to economic success and a reduction in dependency on the welfare state. If parents, rather than the state, can be held responsible for whether or not their children escape poverty, then state investment in public services can be cut.

While there has been some agreement between the different governments that support must be offered to the parents who are seen as not giving their children the 'right' start, the ways they have offered this support has differed. The next section discusses the different ways policy has been enacted over the past twenty years. It shows how different forms of support have been constructed and how these have led to the construction of particular practices and pedagogies.

2.1.1 Support – constructing practices and pedagogies

2.1.1.1 Sure Start

In *Supporting Families* (Home Office, 1998), the New Labour government claimed that prior to 1997, early years provision had been patchy, poorly-funded and of little importance to policy-makers. As a result, they declared Sure Start to be a ground-breaking, influential and widespread early intervention programme designed to bring together early education, childcare, health and family support for the benefit of young children (under four) and their parents living in the most economically disadvantaged areas. Bagley (2011) shows how this policy strategy can be seen as part of a wider agenda focused on building social capital by targeting not just the child, but also the family and local community where Sure Start operated. For Moss (2004) this initiative also embodied a belief in the unique role of the early years as a way to address wider social and economic problems.

The original goal was for the state to establish two hundred and fifty Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs) in sixty of the poorest areas

by early 2002, so that children in these areas would be better prepared for school and the cycle of deprivation could be broken. These offered outreach and home visits, family support groups and parenting sessions, opportunities for play and learning, healthcare, and support for children with special needs. They were centrally funded so could offer additional services as they saw fit and were committed to involving parents and local communities in decision-making with the main purpose being to strengthen ties between parents (especially mothers) and their children, as well as between mothers and members of the community (Bagley & Ackerley, 2006; Lewis, 2011). By the end of 2003, the number of SSLPs had been extended to over five hundred. At the same time the Neighbourhood Nurseries programme aimed to create forty-five thousand new full-day childcare places for the children under five in the poorest areas of England. By targeting services in particular working class areas, Gewirtz (2001) argues that the state implied that social capital was missing in these places. In other words, Sure Start could give working class families the social capital that middle class families were seen to already possess. These two programmes (Sure Start Local Programmes and Neighbourhood Nurseries) then became the basis for the Sure Start Children's Centres which, as part of the *Every Child Matters* (Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 2003) agenda, New Labour began to see as basic provision for all young children.

Every Child Matters also marked a shift from the state having responsibility for providing early years' services. It now became the role of local authorities to improve outcomes for all children. As well as appointing a Director of Children's Services and a lead council member for children, local authorities were required to work with public, private and voluntary organisations. The *Childcare Act* (2006) cemented their role by making it the legal duty of local authorities to improve the well-being of children in their area, with a view to reducing inequalities between young children. Well-being was defined as relating to: physical and mental health, and emotional well-being; protection from harm and neglect; education, training and recreation;

the contribution made by them to society; and social and economic well-being.

In *Every Child Matters* (2003) the government argued that by defining the poorest areas as having the most need for Sure Start initiatives, lots of children in need who lived in other areas were missing out. So by shifting the responsibility to local authorities who had a better knowledge of their localities, services could be placed to benefit all families in need of support. However commentators such as Bagley (2011) and Lewis (2011) show that this policy led to local authorities playing a more central role in deciding what happened in communities rather than the local stakeholders, such as the parents themselves who up until now had been involved in decision making around the services that they wanted and needed (as funding had come directly from central government). Bagley argues that parents became disengaged and suspicious of the help that was being offered, and as a result the social capital that Sure Start had begun to build was eroded.

To enable parents to take up employment or education/training, local authorities also had to ensure they were providing reasonable childcare and that parents had information about what was available, including any other services they could benefit from. Children's Centres were to offer early education and childcare, as well as links with Jobcentre Plus and workforce training. This highlighted a new government focus on tackling poverty by providing childcare and training to enable parents to work (Lewis, 2011). Local authorities were given specific guidance - *Parenting Support: Guidance for Local Authorities in England* (DFES, 2006) - on how to design and deliver parenting support services and how to provide easily-accessible information about what was available in the local area.

As Eisenstadt (2011) notes, in 2007 the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) became the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). This signalled a shift from framing education as solely the realm of teachers and the state to one that included

families. Two documents, *The Children's Plan* (DCSF, 2007) and *Every Parent Matters* (DfES, 2007), stated that Sure Start Children's Centres were the best way of providing integrated services for families with young children as parents could access advice and support from a range of professionals under one roof which was particularly important for children with delayed development and requiring early intervention. For example, drop-in play facilities could act as a 'gateway' to helping parents access other services they could benefit from (Jupp, 2013). Both reports promised an increase in Centres from 1055 to 3500 by 2010 so there would be one in every community. Although all families could access the services, the support they offered should be based on local need and focus more on the families needing extra help. Ones in the most deprived areas would offer more intensive support and outreach services, and extra funding would be given to local authorities to ensure this happened. The government argued that visiting families at home had been shown to be one of the most effective ways of encouraging hard-to-reach families to access the services on offer at the Children's Centre. Home-Start, a voluntary organisation that provided trained volunteers to offer support and friendship to mothers with young children by visiting them at home, was seen as an organisation that would be well placed to do this work.

> Going forward we need to ensure that parents understand the benefits to their child that can come from working more effectively with services; and the boost to child outcomes that can come from effective parenting in the home. We also need to ensure that parents know to expect services to work in partnership with them and that it is the good parent that seeks extra help when they need it not the poor one. (DfES, 2007, p.42)

The arrival of a new Coalition government in 2010 was marked by another change of name - from the Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) to the Department for Education (DfE), heralding a renewed focus on the importance of education for raising living standards and improving life chances. In *Supporting Families*

in the Foundation Years (DfE, 2011) the government claimed that they wanted to retain the existing network of Sure Start Children's Centres but increase the uptake of parenting programmes and make sure early intervention was at the heart of their work. Children's Centres were seen as instrumental in targeting and providing support to families that most needed it. Despite the change in government, Eisenstadt (2011) comments that the continued existence of Sure Start during this time should be seen as evidence of an ongoing commitment by the state to improving the life chances of very young children.

However, since 2010 state funding to local authorities has steadily reduced and the focus has shifted from provision for all. Middle class parents had been seen to overuse the Children's Centres so funding was to be more carefully directed towards 'problem' or 'troubled' families (Jupp, 2013). In *Supporting Families in the Foundation Years* (DfE, 2011) local authorities were tasked with making sure that high-quality early years provision was more carefully targeted towards the families who were seen to be the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. In 2013, the Coalition government issued the document *Sure Start Children's Centres Statutory Guidance* (DfE, 2013d) to clarify the duty of local authorities to secure sufficient, accessible centres and to target evidence-based interventions for the families needing the most support. The guidance argued for the Centres to have a core purpose of improving 'school readiness'; parenting aspirations and parenting skills; child and family health; and life chances. However, the government's ongoing commitment to austerity has meant huge cuts in funding to local authorities leading to many Children's Centres being closed down and there is now variable provision in different localities (Jupp, 2013). In 2015, 156 centres closed, double the number that had closed during the previous year (Walker, 2017). A report named *Unknown Children: destined for disadvantage?* (Ofsted, 2016) highlighted that some local authorities were not doing everything they could to ensure that disadvantaged children were

getting the best start. This is not surprising when reducing budgets inevitably result in the need to cut services.

Yet in the Conservative government's *State of the Nation* report (2017a) the Social Mobility Commission urged local authorities to focus on disadvantaged children by: not reducing the funding they allocated to early years' services; by supporting providers of early years services with staff training; ensuring disadvantaged two year olds took up their funded childcare places; and offering parents effective advice. With the ongoing cuts to local authority funding as part of the Conservative government's austerity measures, there are tensions here. On the one hand, the local authority is framed as being responsible for ensuring disadvantaged children and their parents have access to high-quality early years' services. On the other hand, ever-decreasing budgets mean that services have to be reduced or cut. As a result, many families are left with fewer places to go where they can find support but continue to be blamed for failing to give their children the 'right' start in life. By removing support, the discourse of deficit and blame is maintained.

2.1.1.2 Educating parents

Parenting programmes and family learning courses have often been provided through Sure Start programmes and Children's Centres. In their first education White Paper *Excellence in Schools* (1997), the New Labour government's focus was on what schools should do, with parents' support and involvement. For disadvantaged parents, family learning courses were seen as the best way of engaging them with their children's education and understanding the importance of their role. Whilst primary schools traditionally ran these courses for parents of primary-aged children, there has been a shift to encouraging parents of younger children to sign up so that children can be helped to be 'ready for school'. As a result, family learning and similar courses have also been provided through Sure Start. However, for Jupp (2013) the whole idea of reducing parenting to a set of skills is problematic as it presupposes that parenting can be learnt or changed. Moreover, by targeting particular parents, some

users of the centres, who have not wanted to be seen as 'in need of help', have minimised their interactions with staff preferring to seek advice from other parents. Edwards and Gillies' study (2004) of parents' perspectives on support demonstrated that most parents viewed family and friends as their main form of support in terms of childcare, emotional support and advice. They only tended to seek out professionals when they needed practical help and/or advice in terms of school education (e.g. teachers) and health (e.g. health visitors and doctors) rather than skills-based support such as parenting programmes.

Every Parent Matters (DfES, 2007) suggested that for parents who struggled with basic literacy and numeracy skills, family learning courses would not only boost their skills and involvement in their children's learning but also increase their employability to lift them out of poverty. As Wainwright and Marandet (2011) argue, it is easy to see how the idea of family learning fitted into the political context of improving parenting skills and encouraging parents to become partners in their children's education. For Reay (2008), the provision of parenting programmes aimed at working class parents can be seen as an attempt by the government to inculcate them with what they saw as middle class behaviours and values. Cottle and Alexander (2014) see the government's support for parenting classes as reflective of a belief that this type of intervention is an effective way for parents to build a support network (seen as something that 'disadvantaged' families lack) that will make it easier for them to be 'good' parents. This can also be seen as part of the broader policy shift towards locating responsibility for overcoming social and economic inequalities at the level of the individual (Cullen et al., 2013).

This has been seen most recently through the Troubled Families programme (DCLG, 2012, 2014) which was introduced in 2011 as a response to riots that had broken out in parts of England. Crossley (2017) argues that the programme framed sections of the poor as 'troubled families' who could be blamed for all sorts of problems,

rather than looking at the root causes (i.e. poverty). The main intervention associated with the programme was the allocation of a key-worker to work intensively with the family in their home, with a focus on parenting skills. This firmly constructed the working class home and mother (the main target of the intervention) as the source of the problems. Not only did this construct a private space (the home) as one that could be made public through state intervention (Crossley, 2017) but this approach also contributed to the discourse that poor parenting was the cause of social problems. Parents just needed to be provided with support to become better parents in order to overcome their problems (Daly & Bray, 2015). However in 2016 an evaluation of the programme suggested that this approach has had limited success as the government overestimated the ability of targeted interventions to transform the lives of poor families who faced many complex problems (Day, Bryson, White, Purdon, Bewley, Kirchner Sala & Portes, 2016). Learning to be a better parent could not solve the problems of poverty such as cramped, unsuitable housing, not enough money to be able to eat well and pay the bills, and poor health. Yet, government policy has failed to recognise this and has continued to frame parents as responsible for their own circumstances in order to justify cuts to public services and maintain a discourse of deficit and blame.

Vincent (2000) agrees that ideas around 'good' parenting are highly classed and sees it as predominantly the working class who are targeted by policy and initiatives (so they can become more like the middle class). She argues that 'good' parents are seen as the ones who are responsible for their child's development, particularly in the early years when it is important that they get their children 'ready for school'. For her, parenting courses attempt to 'train' parents to interact with their children in ways that reflect the dominant middle class ideas about what being a 'good' parent (or mother) means. However they often ignore the cultural and material conditions that these parents and children experience, and that affect the resources they can draw on. Wainwright and Marandet (2013) argue that

family learning has been dominated by mothers, despite efforts to include fathers, which tells us a lot about how motherhood has been constructed in relation to education; mothers are still seen as children's main carers and educators.

2.1.1.3 Educating children

Since 1997 a key theme of government policy has been the framing of early education as a preventative measure – to avoid problems later on in life which have been seen to be linked to poor educational attainment e.g. unemployment and crime (Pugh, 1999). This idea has been reinforced by research (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Siraj-Blatchford, 2006) which has shown that the home learning environment (HLE) and good quality pre-school education rather than social class, are important to children's cognitive attainment (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2008). Having followed the 3000+ children that began the EPPE project through secondary school as well, Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj and Taggart (2014) retitled their project, the *Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE) Project.* Their findings revealed that positive pre-school experiences have lasting effects right through a child's education including up to and beyond the end of compulsory education. The amount of time spent in pre-school and an early start (between the age of two and three) have positive effects, particularly for children whose parents have lower qualifications. However they also recognised that

> The life chances of some children are shaped by important individual, family, home and school experiences from an early age. There is no level playing field at the start of school or in later phases. These early effects of disadvantage emerge at a young age and their influences continue to shape students' later educational outcomes through subsequent phases of their educational careers […] No single educational influence acts as a 'magic bullet' that can overcome disadvantage. However, parental actions that provide a better home learning environment (HLE) and also supportive educational environments (pre-school, primary school and secondary school) may well make a difference to children's and young people's

> academic and other important educational outcomes and so can help improve life chances (Sylva et al., 2014, pp.78-79).

Save the Children (2012, 2013) and The Sutton Trust (Waldfogel & Washbrook, 2008) have produced their own reports examining why poorer children do not achieve as well as other children at school. The authors of these reports found that these children were already developmentally behind when they first entered school and were less likely to achieve at school, get good qualifications and find well-paid, stable employment. The Sutton Trust found that 'parenting style' and 'home learning environment' were the biggest factors for explaining this difference, particularly in the areas of literacy and language. Therefore, both charities have advocated policies that have a clear focus on the first few years of a child's life. They recommend free early years education for all two year olds living in poverty and the provision of proven parenting and family support programmes with an education focus for all families living in deprived areas. Unlike government policy however, they assert that the responsibility should not just lie with parents and that parents cannot be treated as a homogenous group. They argue that poor parents often have to work long hours for low incomes which makes it is harder for them to support their children's learning at home and to find suitable childcare. Improving families' budgets, high-quality, flexible childcare and Children's Centres are seen as vital in supporting the development of children in the early years.

It is possible to see how recommendations from the different reports have been reflected in the policies of each government over the last twenty years. Through Sure Start, outreach work and other parenting programmes designed to teach parents how to be 'better', they have sought to promote interventions to equip parents with skills and knowledge to provide the 'right' home learning environment (Einzig, 1999). At the same time there has been an increase in funding for childcare places, particularly for disadvantaged families.

Pugh (2006) asserts that during the 1980s and early 1990s there were unclear and often conflicting messages about what early years policy should be concerned with. Was it about preparing children for school, or providing childcare so both parents could go out to work? Eisenstadt (2011) states that childcare for very young children was still seen at the start of the twenty-first century as a means to an end – enabling parents to work rather than early education. However research such as the EPPE study showed that early education could protect disadvantaged children against low academic attainment (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010). Furthermore, the quality of provision combined with lengthier attendance was particularly beneficial for poorer children if their parents had low levels of education (Sylva, 2014).

In the Treasury's document *Choice for Parents, the Best Start for Children* (2004) the New Labour government set out their vision "to ensure that every child gets the best start in life and to give parents more choice about how to balance work and family life" (p.65). They stated that they wanted to lose the distinction between 'early education' and 'childcare' by "focusing on highly-integrated services for children that develop personal, social, emotional and learning skills, within a caring environment" (p.65). The report also cited findings from the EPPE study to show that every additional month at pre-school from the age of two improved cognitive performance at school-entry. In particular, that regular attendance at a high-quality setting was associated with good intellectual, behavioural and social development.

Another key document, *The Children's Plan: Building Brighter Futures*, was designed to 'strengthen support for all families during the formative early years of their children's lives' (DCSF, 2007). It outlined five principles; the first of these being that the government needed to do more to support parents and another being that services needed to be shaped by and responsive to families. The plan offered various ways that this could be done: strengthening the relationship between parents and schools through better

communication and regular contact; providing more Family Learning programmes; and extending free early education to disadvantaged two year olds. In terms of educational achievement, parents' support was essential. But it was also up to high quality early years' education providers, with the support of parents, to ensure children were 'ready for school', particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

> World class early childhood services enable young children to have the best start in life so they can take full advantage of later opportunities to learn and develop. Therefore, the Government's ambition is that every child by age 5 will be developing well and ready to start their next phase of learning, having the confidence and communication skills to access the primary curriculum. Our 2020 goal is that every child will be ready for success in school with at least 90 per cent developing well across all areas of the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile by age 5. This will require us to build on the creation of a universal early years system, with a fresh impetus on improving quality, supporting parents and providing help earlier to those who need it most. (DCSF, 2007, p.55)

With a slightly different emphasis, the Coalition government's report, *Supporting Families in the Foundation Stage* (DfE, 2011), hailed high quality early education (along with parental involvement) as one of the most important vehicles for improving a child's life chances, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. This report cited findings from the *Effective Pre-school and Primary Education 3-11 Project* (Sylva et al., 2008) to provide evidence that children who attended a high quality pre-school did better in reading and maths at the age of six, than children who had not, and that this positive impact was still seen at age eleven. Moreover, disadvantaged children benefitted significantly from quality pre-school experiences, especially when mixed with children from different backgrounds (Sylva & Taylor, 2006). Therefore, *Supporting Families in the Foundation Stage* (DfE, 2011) called for extending early education to disadvantaged two year olds, so they would have a better chance of keeping up with their better-off peers, and well-qualified practitioners

who would be able to help parents understand their own crucial role in supporting their child's development.

From 2004 the New Labour government offered all parents of three and four year olds free childcare (twelve and a half hours a week for thirty two weeks a year). This was extended in 2010 by the Coalition government to fifteen hours a week, thirty eight weeks of the year. Then from 2013, fifteen hours a week of free childcare were offered to two year old children who were identified as 'disadvantaged' (from low-income families) and from September 2017 the Conservative government increased the number of hours of free childcare from fifteen to thirty hours a week for three and four year olds (where a parent works at least sixteen hours a week) (DfE, 2015). This represents substantial financial commitment from each government towards early education and care. However some critics have predicted that the focus on poorer, working families will cause further disadvantage for the children of parents who are not in regular employment and therefore do not qualify (Lloyd, 2015). The focus on working families could also be seen as an attempt to encourage more parents into regular work in order to further reduce welfare spending.

Until the introduction of free childcare places, the childcare sector in England had been largely run by private providers that relied on parents bearing the cost of childcare. Although the free hours have been welcomed by working parents, provision outside these hours and age groups still comes at a high cost (Brogaard Clausen, 2015). While Pugh (2006) comments that there has been a huge increase in public expenditure to ensure places have been available in the state sector, as well as private and voluntary nurseries that meet the required standards, Moss (2014) has shown that the continued existence of wide range of providers in the UK (e.g. childminders, nannies, playgroups, nurseries, pre-schools) has meant an increasingly fragmented system that has suffered from a lack of real investment and a poorly-qualified and poorly-paid workforce where the old division between 'care' and 'education' still remains.

This has been highlighted most recently in *More Great Childcare* (DfE, 2013b) which attempted to recognise the problems with having such a diverse range of providers that vary in quality, availability and affordability. The report set out what the Coalition government planned to do over a period of ten years to address these issues, such as improving the qualifications of early years' staff and regulating providers through Ofsted in order to drive up quality and educational outcomes whilst also increasing the flexibility and availability of provision to enable both parents to work. However Ofsted's *Early Years* report (2015a) challenged the view that the early years' sector is predominantly about childcare rather than education, and noted that professionals increasingly see themselves as teachers of the youngest children. Although this has resulted in better outcomes for all children, the outcomes of disadvantaged children have risen in line with their better-off peers so the gap in attainment remains.

Yet, as part of their focus on supporting 'troubled' families and increasing social mobility the Conservative government made it their ambition to close the 'word gap' between young 'disadvantaged' children and those from more affluent backgrounds (DfE, 2017d). They have called for more investment in early years' education so 'disadvantaged' children can be identified early and supported to 'catch up' their peers. In this way early education has been framed as the cornerstone of social mobility – if children arrive at school with the same skill set, they have an equal chance to succeed in the global marketplace and to lift themselves out of poverty.

Neo-liberal policy that has promoted a reduction in the welfare state alongside an increase in childcare, has meant increased pressure on poorer mothers to seek employment. This has given them a conflicting message about their role; the educational environment of the home and parental support are supposed to make the biggest difference to children's future development yet both parents should be in work to raise the family income (Sylva & Pugh, 2005). Not only are parents meant to find a high-quality childcare provider and secure employment, they also have to provide a home learning environment

that will ensure their child is able to develop well and be 'ready for school' in order secure their educational achievement, economic success and global competitiveness. Taggart, Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons and Siraj (2015) explain the drive for changes to pre-school provision as not only indicative of increasing numbers of women in the workforce, but also the growing understanding of the importance of early education in the context of international tests that have highlighted the need to prepare children for the compulsory stage of schooling (from age five). For Moss (2015), early intervention in the form of childcare/education has therefore been supported by all political parties as a way to enable survival in the global marketplace by facilitating mothers' employment, as well as providing the first stage of learning needed to create the future workforce.

However, this has meant childcare and early education increasingly being taken out of the home. Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson and Hundeide, (2013) state that more children all over the world are now enrolled in some form of early childhood care and that the early years are now widely recognised as a vital developmental stage. In 2017 the Department for Education (DfE, 2017a) reported that 96% of four year olds, 93% of eligible three year olds and 71% of eligible two year olds in England were enrolled in some form of funded childcare. Yet Sammons, Hall, Smees, Goff, Sylva and Smith (2015) found that longer-term use of childcare predicts lower scores for the early home learning environment, suggesting that the more time a child spends in care, the less time is spent engaging in home learning activities with a parent. By framing childcare as a way to increase children's readiness for school, whilst also using it to incentivise both parents to work, government policy may have made it more difficult for some parents to provide the 'right' sort of home learning environment and given them the message that it is no longer important.

2.1.1.4 Early years' curriculum

To ensure some consistency of provision between the huge range of early years' providers, in 2000 the New Labour government produced

Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA/DfEE, 2000) for children from the age of three to five. This became statutory from 2002. At the same time, it produced guidance for providers that looked after younger children in the form of *Birth to Three Matters* (DfES, 2002). For the first time, development objectives and pathways for the youngest children were specified. These two stages were then brought together by *The Childcare Act* (2006) that created the Early Years Foundation Stage - from birth to five years. This was soon followed by a *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (commonly known as the EYFS Framework) (DCSF, 2008c). This established mandatory guidance for early years' providers to follow to ensure that, from birth to five, young children are able to learn, develop, and stay healthy and safe. This has since been revised by subsequent governments in 2012, 2014 and 2017. The framework covers all types of providers from childminders, day nurseries and pre-schools to the end of the first year of primary school (the 'reception' class that most four year olds attend in the year they turn five).

The EYFS framework (DfE, 2017c) that is still in place today in England was revised following Tickell's recommendations (2011), and meant a slimming down from the 69 early learning goals (ELGs) that had previously been prescribed, to 17. These goals were seen to be the ones that were most important to ensure later educational and economic achievement. This has put academic pressure on to children, and pressure on to the professionals and parents to prepare children for formal schooling (Brogaard Clausen, 2015). By measuring children according to learning behaviours and capabilities that have been defined as existing in a 'typical' child at that age/stage, professionals have been given a way to identify children who are 'disadvantaged' and 'in need of intervention' (Basford & Bath, 2014). In this way, childcare has been seen as a 'safety-net' where children who at risk of not being 'ready for school' can be monitored and identified early (Grieshaber, 2000).

In order to reach a 'good level of development' (GLD) and be 'school ready', children need to be achieving (at least) the expected level in the areas of communication and language, physical development, personal, social and emotional development, literacy and maths by the end of the foundation stage. This has meant a 'datafication' of early years pedagogy where practitioners have to assess children against a narrow set of goals (Roberts-Holmes, 2015). The focus on testing children against a specific set of criteria can be seen as part of wider neo-liberal education policy which is concerned with the need to be competitive on an international scale, as highlighted by PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) rankings. As a result, the curricula for the other stages of schooling have also been narrowed, teaching has become more formal and testing has increased. In the case of the early years foundation stage, the preoccupation with getting children 'school ready' has also seen an increase in the difficulty of achieving a GLD in literacy and maths, which has led to more formal teaching of this age group through the use of ability grouping and whole-class teaching (Roberts-Holmes, 2015).

For commentators such as Urban (2015), this schoolification of the early years has also led to the belief that *more* education is the key to closing the educational gap between children from different backgrounds (as seen in the increase in childcare funding) without addressing whether it is the kind of education being offered that is part of the problem. He argues that mainstream early education has become part of the wider neo-liberal view of education that is about preparing an individual for employment in the global economy. In this way, it fails to recognise or value the different ways of being and knowing that exist outside the white, middle class understandings of education, and therefore fails to make a difference to the educational outcomes for the most vulnerable, marginalised children.

The EYFS framework also promotes the need for practitioners to help mothers and fathers understand how they can support their children's learning. In this way it positions parents as needing to be

educated too (Cottle & Alexander, 2014). The framework stresses the important influence of what happens in the first five years of a child's life on future life chances – "good parenting and high quality early learning together provide the foundation children need to make the most of their abilities and talents as they grow up" (DfE, 2017c, p.5). If a child is struggling with any of the three prime areas of learning (communication and language; physical development; personal, social and emotional development) then practitioners have a duty to discuss this with the child's parents and agree how to support the child, including getting specialist help. Ongoing assessment is therefore seen as key to identifying children who are falling behind and for informing parents of their child's progress so they can reach a good level of development and be 'school ready'.

In this way, early years' practitioners have been framed as being responsible for educating parents in how to support their children's learning, by giving them ideas for resources and activities at home (Sylva et al., 2004). If they do not include provision for parent support and education then they have been seen as missing an important way to raise achievement (Sylva et al., 2008). Research for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Carter-Wall & Whitfield, 2012) showing that parental involvement in a child's education strongly influences 'school readiness' and subsequent attainment has led to them promoting early year's practitioners working closely with parents. Ofsted have also promoted the idea of partnership through their reports, *Getting it right first time* (Ofsted, 2013b), *Unseen Children: Access and Achievement 20 Years On* (Ofsted, 2013c) and *Teaching and Play in the Early Years – a balancing act?* (Ofsted, 2015b). They argue that the best leaders of early years' provision recognise the importance of strong partnerships with parents in order to achieve the best outcomes for children. This can be achieved in lots of ways such as home-visits, sharing information, encouraging parents into the setting for meetings and to join in activities, and setting up their own lending libraries. As the later report (which looked at a range of different settings) states, "the best settings

worked as much with parents as they did with children. This was especially beneficial for the most vulnerable families who came to trust and respect the school through the steps they had taken to engage them in their child's learning in varied and non-threatening ways" (2015b, p.23). They claim that this is particularly important for disadvantaged children as interventions that encourage high levels of parent engagement in their children's learning are more successful at closing the gap for these children; they help parents to improve their parenting skills and the home learning environment so their children are better prepared for school (2013c). However Robson (2006) has shown that parental involvement in early years' settings is problematic. For example, some parents feel that the mark of a good early years' provider is one where they do not need to get involved i.e. there is not a problem. Also, parents need to believe that their involvement matters and can make a difference to their child's achievement, which depends on professionals and parents having a balanced relationship.

In summary, UK government policy discourses around 'deficient' and 'troubled' families have been used to frame the problem of lower educational attainment as primarily the responsibility of parents. Certain parents (mothers) have been blamed for not providing the 'right' start for their young offspring and have then been offered various types of support based on this view. For example, the New Labour government adopted a paternalistic role through offering state support to help some parents to be 'better'. They invested heavily in early years' services and were responsible for setting up the Sure Start programme. However they have been accused of constructing a model of parenting based on middle class practices and of treating all parents as a homogenous group with access to the same resources and values. By assuming that parents can simply learn to become 'better', they have been seen as ignoring the very

different living conditions that make it harder for some parents to act in the ways the government would like. Instead of tackling structural inequalities, support has been targeted towards parents (mothers) that have been seen as deficient and lacking parenting skills. In this way, mothers, rather than the state, have been blamed for children's lack of educational success and inability to improve their living conditions. This has been reflected in the ways support has been offered, such as parenting programmes that have sought to 'teach' mothers how to parent in ways that some commentators have argued are based on dominant middle class ideas about what being a 'good' mother means.

The subsequent Conservative/Liberal Coalition and Conservative governments continued to focus on parental responsibility and early intervention in order to raise educational attainment, particularly for 'disadvantaged' children. Their neo-liberal belief that education is the key to economic success, social mobility and global competitiveness has meant an even sharper focus on educational outcomes and the need to get young children 'ready for school'. By putting the onus on parents for achieving this, these governments have also been able to pursue an austerity agenda resulting in severe cuts to services that have historically supported children's learning, such as Sure Start Children's Centres. At the same time increased funding for free childcare places has given parents mixed messages. On the one hand childcare has been framed as a solution to the problem of 'school readiness', particularly for 'disadvantaged' children. On the other hand childcare has been seen as a way to encourage more parents into work in order to raise families' incomes and reduce the welfare state. This approach has been seen by some commentators as detrimental to the home learning environment as many parents no longer have the time or energy to spend engaging in particular activities with their young children and come to see it as the responsibility of childcare providers to get their children 'ready for school'.

The creation of a statutory EYFS framework for childcare providers has also cemented the idea that early childhood is characterised by a series of developmental steps or goals that children should achieve from birth to the age of five. This 'schoolification' of early childhood, characterised by measuring, data and the use of more formal teaching methods, reinforces the framing of certain families as deficient. If their children are assessed as not reaching the defined goals at the right time, they must be in need of intervention to 'catch up' their peers, and their parents must need educating about how to support their learning better.

The chapter now narrows its focus to consider how educational policy has constructed a particular understanding of literacy for young children and the professionals that work with them. As has already been seen in various government reports (Blanden, 2006; Field, 2010; Roulstone et al., 2011; Waldfogel & Washbrook, 2010) literacy skills, such as having a good spoken vocabulary and beginning to read and write, have been seen key indicators of 'school readiness'. Different understandings of literacy, from government policy definitions to ideas around literacy as a social practice, are explored, in order to consider what this means for young children's learning, the role of parents and the types of support that have been offered.

2.2 Constructing literacy pedagogies and practices

Literacy is a term that has been socially-constructed to mean different things at different times to different people in different places (Cook-Gumperz, 1986). The next two sections will contrast how literacy has been constructed through government education policy with an understanding of literacy as a social practice.

2.2.1 'School' literacy

The literacy that children are presented with at school has increasingly been one that is based on a decontextualized, universal set of skills to be taught and learnt (Gillen & Hall, 2003). Neo-liberal ideologies around the need for competitiveness within a global

educational and economic marketplace require the ability to measure educational attainment in order to make national and international comparisons. An example of this can been seen in the *National Primary Curriculum* (DfE, 2013c) where reading for primary-aged children (age five to eleven) is defined in terms of their ability to decode words using phonic and linguistic knowledge. In a similar vein, the *Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (EYFS Framework)* (DfE, 2017c) defines literacy along the lines of linking sounds and letters in order to read and write. Because these skills can be decontextualized they can be measured. Five and six year old children's ability to decode words using their phonic knowledge has been tested since the statutory phonics screening test was introduced by the Coalition government in England in 2012.

The EYFS Framework lays out seven areas of learning and development– three of these are referred to as prime areas, one of which is 'Communication and Language'. Then there are four specific areas which underpin the three prime areas – 'Literacy' is one of these. Communication and language development is described as children acquiring the skills and confidence to express themselves, including speaking and listening in different situations. This may be responding to stories, following instructions, asking questions, and developing their own spoken narratives and explanations. Literacy, on the other hand, is described as children linking sounds and letters together so they can begin to read and write, as well as being given access to a wide range of reading materials (books, poems and other written materials) in order to get them interested in literacy. The literacy skills that children gain in the early years are seen as essential for 'school readiness'.

By the end of the Foundation Stage (end of the academic year in which they turn five) children are assessed on whether they have acquired the necessary literacy skills. These include being able to read and understand simple sentences (using phonic knowledge to decode words and recognising some irregular words) and being able to write simple sentences (using phonic knowledge and correct

spelling of some irregular common words). Assessment is in English, even if a child speaks a different language at home. To assist with assessment, *Early Years Outcomes* (DfE, 2013a) was produced by the government so practitioners would know what age-appropriate behaviours they should look for. Larson and Marsh (2005) argue that the idea of literacy being something that can be broken down into a series of age-related steps reinforces the idea of literacy as a set of skills that can be taught discretely. Additionally, by constructing literacy in this narrow way government policy marginalises other understandings and experiences.

As Daniels (2015) asserts, the goals that children have to reach are aligned with how well they have mastered print literacies specifically. In this way, policy shapes the pedagogical practices of practitioners working with young children. For example, they are more likely to focus on printed texts rather than incorporating the diverse range of literacy practices that children might bring with them. Marsh's (2003) study of literacy practices in the homes and nursery of three and four year old children, showed that the televisual literacy practices and books that reflected popular culture, and which the children enjoyed at home, were noticeably absent from the nursery setting.

Furthermore, many early years' specialists have argued that the goals are too abstract, arbitrary and developmentally inappropriate for most five year olds to achieve and should be delayed until the end of Key Stage 1 (age seven) (Whitehead, 2009). Yet children who do not progress in a linear way through each stage are at risk of being identified as 'deficient' and 'in need of intervention'. Due to the ever-increasing pressure on schools from the testing regimes imposed on them through neo-liberal government policy, they must be able to demonstrate what they are doing to help all children reach age-related expectations. This means that schools are more inclined to focus on what these children lack, rather than on their 'funds of knowledge' (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992). Not only do they feel forced to introduce interventions to help children 'catch up', intervention programs may also be brought in for parents that are

not seen to be supporting their children's literacy development in the 'right' ways (Neumann, 2016).

2.2.2 Other understandings of literacy

In contrast to how literacy has been constructed through government policy, an influential body of work known as the New Literacy Studies (e.g. Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 1996; Street, 1984) has shown that literacy is best understood as a set of everyday, social practices situated within particular times and places. Street (1984) challenged the dominant view that literacy is singular and autonomous i.e. that there is only one form of literacy and it is independent of context (as 'school' literacy has been constructed). Instead, Street saw literacy as an ideological construct embedded in particular social institutions and cultural practices. He argued that literacy cannot be separated from its context of use as different literacies are recognised at different times and in different places. As has been seen with 'school' literacy, the state constructs what is to be valued, taught and assessed (Purcell-Gates, 2006; Street, 2012). Over the last twenty years this construction has been tied up with government ideologies and concerns around 'school-readiness', social mobility, economic independence and global competitiveness.

Instead of viewing literacy as a noun (such as a set of skills), there needs to be a shift of emphasis to literacy as a verb – a way of being and doing (Bartlett, 2008).

> Literacy is primarily something people do; it is an activity, located in the space between thought and text. Literacy does not just reside in people's heads as a set of skills to be learned, and it does not just reside on paper, captured as texts to be analysed. Like all human activity, literacy is essentially social, and it is located in the interaction between people. (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p.3)

Literacy practices involve what people do with texts, their awareness of literacy, constructions of literacy and discourses around literacy (how people talk about and make sense of it). Street (1995) stressed the social nature of literacy in that how people interact affects the

literacy being learned and their ideas about literacy. Literacy practices need to be inferred from literacy events which happen within a social context and usually involve a form of text i.e. activities where literacy plays a role (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Heath, 1983). Literacy events are observable episodes that arise from, and are shaped by, literacy practices.

Street (1995) also explored how literacy practices associated with different areas of life 'leak out' and influence other areas. This can be seen in the case of 'school' literacies where government policy has promoted a particular construction of literacy involving skills that can be measured. This understanding of literacy has hugely influenced the literacy practices of early years' practitioners and primary teachers. These 'school' literacy practices have become more dominant and visible, while other vernacular literacies are marginalised and devalued. Although there are multiple literacies practised in the community, home and workplace, 'school' literacy has become the only literacy and, as such, is bound up with issues of power in wider society. It is able to influence other areas of life such as media discussions on literacy, labelling on educational toys, political debates and parents' own discourses. For example, parents in Street's study (1995) adopted an understanding of literacy associated with school and directed children's learning at home along these lines believing that this would enable them to gain economic and social advantages. They saw a particular type of literacy as necessary for creating a particular type of identity and position in the world. In this way, parents adopted the government's construction of literacy as something that was necessary for gaining educational and social advantages, and economic success.

But if parents do not subscribe to the dominant view of literacy and engage in literacy practices that are valued by the education system, then their children are likely to be at a disadvantage when they start school and beyond. Different understandings and experiences of literacy in and out of school have been seen by some researchers as creating a discord between home/family literacy practices and school

literacy practices, which has then been used to explain why some children do not achieve well at school (Cairney, 2003; Hamilton, 1994; Makin, 2003; McCarthey, 2000). If children's understanding of literacy begins with what they encounter at home, this will differ within every family depending on their individual circumstances. The particular literacy practices of each member of their family will shape the learning and ideas that the youngest children will have about literacy.

Researchers such as Heath (1983), Taylor (1983) and Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines (1988) have emphasised and shown that children are immersed from a very young age in many different literacy discourses and practices. Heath's study of how children experience and use language before and after they start school, illustrated the different meanings that literacy had in two communities and how this then affected the children's encounters with 'school' literacies. Taylor's study of children's literacy practices at home also showed how parents' own experiences and understandings of literacy influenced what they did with their children. Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines looked at the literacy lives of economically-deprived children and showed how important the literacy practices of the family were for shaping children's literacy experiences. They were also able to challenge the idea that low-income families do not engage in a rich variety of literacy practices.

Similarly, Teale (1986) observed children in low-income households and found that they had numerous experiences with written language before they started school. Reading and writing occurred, not as the prime activity, but as part of other activities that the family used to organise their lives e.g. shopping, and paying bills. However, what he also recognised was that some children had more experience of interacting with others (adults and siblings) around literacy and that there was little evidence of parent-child reading in lower-income homes. Furthermore, children from higher-income backgrounds had a wider range of experiences with literacy as their parents could afford to access more goods and services. For example, they were

more likely to encounter menus, adverts, catalogues, maps and travel brochures than children from lower-income families. Taylor (1983) also found that middle class parents often did reading and writing at home that was associated with their work, but this did not appear to happen in lower-income households (Heath, 1983; Teale, 1984). Therefore, complex cultural, economic and social factors create different home literacy environments, causing young children to have different literacy experiences depending on where and by whom they are brought up. As Leichter (1984) explains, there are three ways in which family environments influence a child's literacy experiences: the physical environment, which includes economic and educational resources; the interpersonal interactions that a child experiences; and, the emotional and motivational climate, which refers to the aspirations and understandings of the family around literacy (p.40). In this way, it is easy to see how there could be vast differences between the literacy experiences of children from different home environments, and how definitions and constructions of literacy are context-dependent (Nutbrown, Clough, Levy, Little, Bishop, Lamb & Yamada-Rice, 2017). Literacy is not singular, universal or context-free as policy definitions of literacy have suggested. Instead, it should be thought of in pluralistic terms as it means different things at different times to different people in different places (Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Hamilton, Tett, & Crowther, 2012).

The different ways that parents engage in literacy practices with their young children and how these relate (or not) to 'school' literacy are now explored further.

2.2.3 Young children's literacy and the role of parents

As argued above, young children do not arrive at school as a 'blank slate' as their early literacy experiences shape their understanding of reading and writing (Hamilton, 1994). However, the idea that literacy development is a continuous process which begins at home (Miller, 1996; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998) has been used in government

policy to construct a model of parenting based on getting children 'ready for school' and to emphasise the importance of the early years for getting things 'right' so children can achieve well academically and secure their future economic success.

Some literacy research has promoted a model of early literacy based on interaction between parents and children, particularly around reading. Cole et al. (2011) conducted a review of research around the importance of the home environment for children's literacy and concluded that parents were critical to children's attainment, especially as children spend a much greater proportion of their time at home than in school. Hannon (1995, 1996) also agreed that children's literacy learning is strongly related to home experiences which is why there is a variation in children's abilities when then start school. In the years before school, he argues that parents need to provide learning opportunities, recognise their child's achievements, interact with their children and act as models of literacy (Hannon, 1996). The National Literacy Trust have published reports on the importance of parents promoting literacy in order to make a difference to their children's academic success. In *Why Families Matter to Literacy* (Clark, 2007) they state that reading is the one subject that parents can make the greatest difference to and that children who are successful readers are successful in other academic subjects too. Plus the earlier that parents engage their children in literacy activities, the greater and long-lasting the results. Their findings fit with See and Gorard's (2015) systematic review of existing studies on the role of parents in their children's education which indicated that parents reading to their children in the early years alongside high quality early parent-child (particularly mothers) interaction were the two strongest factors associated with 'school readiness' and successful school outcomes.

For middle-class parents, this construction of literacy may be unproblematic. Their home literacy practices are often strongly related to those found at school as they subscribe to the construction of literacy that the state provides, but this is not the case for all

families (Hannon, 1996). Brooker's (2002) case study of two boys from different family backgrounds entering school at the same time, illustrated how children's early experiences of literacy needed to match those of the classroom if they are to be successful. Parents needed help to know what to do to support 'school' literacies, and teachers needed to understand the literacy practices of families, rather than treating all children the same.

In her study of pre-school children from different ethnic backgrounds, Minns (1997) showed that their experience of literacy was inseparable from their experience of family life, and therefore the types and quantity of literacy practices and events that they experienced at home differed. Weinberger (1996) looked at the influence of parents' involvement from birth. In line with the idea of literacy occurring within particular cultural and social contexts, she also concluded that children have different experiences which shape their view of literacy as well as their ability to succeed at school. Just as Heath (1983) showed how the townspeople's children were already socialised into the way schools taught literacy because they had book-reading experience, Schieffelin and Cochran-Smith (1984) argue that some children are socialised to go to school and participate in school activities and some are socialised to become literate, and that this is determined by the literacy practices that are valued in the homes and communities they find themselves in.

It is worth noting again that although much of the research and policy talks about *parents* supporting their children's literacy development, some researchers have drawn attention to the significant role of mothers. For at least the last hundred years, mothers have been seen to be the main supporters of their children's reading at home (Mace, 1998), they are most often the parent who takes children to the library (Becker, 2012), and they have been expected to take prime responsibility for their children's intellectual development including arranging suitable childcare/pre-school education (Holloway, 1998). Using data from the Millennium Cohort Study, Hartas (2011, 2012) argues that the literacy development of children aged five is more

directly related to the mother's level of education than to family income. If mothers have a low income, but a good level of education, they are better at accessing support and services, and are more likely to read regularly with their children. 'Educated' mothers are more likely to identify and access activities for their children that they think will benefit their learning and development. This finding is supported by the EPPE study that found that mothers' level of education along with the home learning environment were the strongest influences on children's attainment up to the age of eleven (Melhuish, 2016). Hartas states that mother-child interactions and maternal reading habits support a culture of reading in the home, which help children to make links between learning at home and at school. It therefore seems that it is what mothers do that makes the biggest difference to children's early experiences of literacy and whether they are able to succeed when they get to school.

2.2.3.1 'Emergent' literacy

While Hannon (1990) states that it is important to recognise that literacy is more than just decoding letter-sounds or spelling correctly (it also enables us to understand each other and communicate in meaningful ways), he claims that literacy is needed to access all areas of the school curriculum so children are at a huge disadvantage if they find reading and writing difficult. He argues that certain practices have been shown to be beneficial for children's literacy achievement when they start school.

The literacy skills that young children start acquiring from birth before they can read and write, and which have been seen as vital for later literacy achievement, have been labelled 'the roots of literacy' (Goodman, 1984) or 'emergent' literacy (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Just like the roots of a plant, experiences that young children have with literacy at home are seen as vital for their literacy development or 'growth'. Researchers, such as those mentioned above, have been keen to try to make these experiences explicit, in order to identify exactly what it is that parents/mothers do that makes a difference to their children's literacy development.

'Emergent' literacy suggests that there is no one point when a child learns to read or write, but that these skills gradually emerge without formal teaching (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). The type, amount and quality of literacy experiences that a child encounters in real-life contexts and for real purposes ('functional' literacy), including the attitude of adults towards reading and writing, are seen as providing a child with the 'roots of literacy' (Goodman, 1984). These roots involve print awareness, shaping and writing skills, alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness (Neumann & Neumann, 2009). Hume et al. (2015) include a child's motivation or interest in reading and writing, which for young children is influenced by how their parents engage them in literacy-promoting practices; for example shared book-reading with babies (Makin, 2006). And as Merchant (2008) points out, children's earliest encounters with print and the written word set the scene for learning to read.

Hannon (1996) identified three strands to help understand how young children's literacy develops: early experiences of reading (different types of text); early experiences of writing (from scribbling to recognisable forms); and early experiences of oral language (storytelling, phonological awareness and de-contextualised talk). However, to what extent young children have these early experiences depends on their family circumstances (Brooker, 2002). For example, some families may be able to successfully incorporate opportunities whilst going about their 'natural' everyday activities, e.g. writing a shopping list. But others may attempt to teach their children particular concepts (e.g. the letters of the alphabet) in a more formal, structured way. While Brooker (2002) argues that this latter approach is less likely to benefit children's learning than spontaneous, meaningful activities, Neumann and Neumann (2009) suggest that parents can still initiate activities to promote particular literacy skills in a relaxed and meaningful way.

Burgess (2011) conducted a study of home learning environments of children under two years of age. He argued that what parents do at home has a significant effect on children's later achievement at

school, particularly in terms of their reading development, letter knowledge, phonological sensitivity, oral language and interest in literacy. However, he also found that home learning environments differed greatly, often in response to parents' own literacy practices and motivations for supporting their children's learning. Haney and Hill (2004) looked at the types of literacy activities that parents carried out with their children at home, and the effects of these. They found that young children gained higher scores in vocabulary knowledge, beginning reading skills and awareness of print if they received parental instruction at home. However, they also found that parents differed in their knowledge around how best to support their children's learning and tended to stick to activities they felt most comfortable with, such as learning letter names and sounds. Additionally, parents tended to be guided by their children's interests; for example if they felt that children were interested in activities such as book-reading, then they were more likely to read and tell stories to their children (Sackes, Isitan, Avci, & Justice, 2016).

Clark (1984) looked at how the home could best contribute to the early development of literacy, and found certain characteristics in families of children who were able to read fluently and with understanding when they started school. They had the support of parents who would engage them in extended, positive interactions (sometimes involving books); some had role models in the form of older siblings who were succeeding at school; the local library was often a place where the children were able to choose their own books; and they entered school with the desire (as well as the ability) to read. Edwards (2014) showed that sharing books with children from a very early age, combined with homes that were a rich source of printed materials and mothers who viewed literacy as both necessary and pleasurable, were important for developing print knowledge. Parents' storybook reading that incorporated dialogue before, during and after the book was read promoted children's language growth, 'emergent' literacy and reading achievement (Saracho & Spodek, 2010). Children were also exposed to more complex language than

they heard through conversation alone (Senechal, 2012). Teale (1984) argues that sharing stories is a way of familiarising children with the literacy heritage of their culture, and socialising them into particular attitudes and values that are often linked closely with those held by schools. In this way, sharing storybooks has been seen as one way of helping children be 'ready for school'.

For Hannon (1990) other ways that parents can promote 'emergent' literacy are: providing opportunities for drawing and scribbling; socio-dramatic play; drawing attention to environmental print; teaching nursery rhymes; and taking children on visits, trips and holidays which provide new literacy experiences. Repeating nursery rhymes and other familiar rhymes makes children more aware of the different letter sounds, which subsequently helps them when learning to read (Weinberger, 1996). Mark-making has been identified as the earliest signs of writing development, helping young children to understand that writing stands for something meaningful (Browne, 2008). Hallet (2008) recognises the importance of signs, shapes, patterns and logos in our environment, and how children must learn how to 'read' these in order to become literate and understand the world they live in. For Pinkham and Neuman (2012), if parents carry out particular activities (especially in the early years), children will be able to acquire the knowledge, skills and dispositions they need for successful literacy development. They identify these as: reading with their children; guiding television viewing; providing stimulating conversation and experiences; modelling reading for pleasure; and establishing routines for dedicated literacy activities such as bedtime stories and weekly visits to the library.

2.2.3.2 The importance of talk

Save the Children (Finnegan, 2016) argue that by interacting and talking with their children, parents can directly affect their language and brain development. They advocate talking to children from birth, singing songs, looking at books with babies, and keeping dummies for bedtime so toddlers have lots of opportunities to practise talking. Topping et al. (2013) assert that learning to speak and understand

language is a major part of early childhood, with most children being able to talk by the age of three. These language skills then form the foundation they need for learning to read and write. As most children are with their parents during the first three years of life, these researchers wanted to know what they did to help their children become successful speakers. By examining other studies, they concluded that interaction around toys, trips and books was important for enhancing language, with book sharing having the most powerful effect.

Liebeskind, Piotrowski, Lapierre and Linebarger (2014) found that if the home literacy environment provided opportunities for children to engage in language-based interactions with their parents, then children could develop vital language skills. They argue that early literacy skills are needed as soon as they enter school as children with weak language skills have been shown to struggle to catch up with their peers, and the gap often widens as they go through school. Media stories have also focused on primary school teachers' concerns around the growing number of children arriving at school with poor speech and language skills (Morton, 2015) who then fail to meet expected standards in national tests at the end of primary school (Jeffreys, 2016).

As already discussed, Roulstone et al. (2011) claim that a young child's communication environment (number of books available, frequency of library visits, attendance at pre-school, parental instruction, and number of toys) is a predictor of a child's expressive vocabulary at the age of two. Furthermore, their language development (understanding and use of vocabulary) at the age of two can be used as a predictor of their educational performance when they start formal schooling. They argue that a child's social background along with their language and communication environment are strongly associated with their 'readiness' for school (in terms of success in assessments in reading, writing, language and maths). Children from poorer backgrounds are more likely to have poorer language skills when they start school, which suggests that

their home environments do not support good development of language skills. Sylva (2014) drew on a range of evidence to show that poorer children were at an immediate disadvantage when they started school due to having a much smaller vocabulary than their better-off peers. Children from wealthier homes had more opportunities to initiate and engage in developed conversations and had access to print materials, whereas children whose parents had low levels of education were less likely to be taken to a library.

These ideas have been supported by Evangelou, Sylva and Kyriacou (2009) who found that both children's phonological skills and vocabulary were important for learning to read. At the age of five, phonological skills were a good predictor of reading success at age seven, and vocabulary at the age of five was a good predictor of the more complex reading tasks children are expected to do at age eleven. The Communication Trust (2016) has supported the idea of improving the communicative environments of disadvantaged children in order to close the gap between poorer and better-off children and give them an equal start in life. They claim that only 20% of parents in 2011 knew what the expected level of language development was for a three year old. Therefore they argue that parents and early years' providers need to be made aware of what to expect in terms of a young child's language development so they can nurture it. In addition, if children with delayed language can be identified early they can be supported to 'catch up'. In 2017 The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and Public Health England published a review (Law, Dockrell, Gascoigne, Mckean, & Theakston, 2017) to explore the best approach for supporting the language development of children up to the age of five due to concerns around the numbers of children from lower socio-economic groups starting school with poor language skills. They argue for interventions that promote "language-boosting interactions" between children and their carers.

2.2.3.3 Techno-literacies and popular culture

In recent years as new technologies have rapidly developed, researchers have been interested to look at young children's experiences of multimodal literacies. Young children now have to attend to and move between spoken, printed, visual, media and digital 'literacies' which involve the use of screens such as television, video, computers, internet, games consoles, phones and tablet computers (Flewitt, 2008; Formby, 2014a; Marsh & Millard, 2000; Waller, 2008). Children less than a year old are becoming familiar with touch-screen technology that is easy to navigate and allows them to interact with letters, symbols and words (Neumann & Neumann, 2017). Children may require a different set of literacy skills ('multiliteracies') than older generations would have needed (Harrison & McTavish, 2018). Parents have reported that children learn multiple literacies through different technologies, environmental print as well as book-based literacies (Beecher & Makin, 2002; Marsh, 2008) and that they believe it is important that their child learns to use technology from an early age to do well at school (Formby, 2014a).

Children who read either e-books or printed books at home with parents have been shown to have greater language skills than those children who do neither; what seems to matter most is that parents are engaged in reading practices with their children, not what they use to do it (Korat, Shamir, & Heibal, 2013). Yet most early years' settings understand early literacy as book-based literacy, pre-reading and pre-writing skills, and name-writing (Beecher & Makin, 2002; Formby, 2014b) and do not encourage children to interact with digital technologies (Palaiologou, 2016). It seems that the emphasis of a skills-based curriculum and assessment requirements mean that practitioners may fail to recognise, value or extend children's experiences with these newer techno-literacy practices (Arrow & Finch, 2013; Makin, 2003; Wolfe & Flewitt, 2010).

Adding to this, Ashton (2005) and Beecher and Makin (2002) argue that children's everyday engagement with multimedia means that

they are very familiar with popular culture through TV programmes, film, books, apps, toys and so on. However many of the literacy curricula in early childhood settings do not acknowledge or reflect this. This tells children that their experiences and knowledge are meaningless and marginalises those children who do not recognise the forms of literacy they are confronted with, such as texts from the traditional 'canon' of children's literature. Marsh and Thompson (2001) showed how three and four years old were avid consumers of popular culture material, and that when they built on these practices, an early years' setting could engage parents in their child's learning and bring the literacy practices of the nursery and home closer together.

The National Literacy Trust (Close, 2004) wanted to investigate the relationship between television and language development in children from birth to age five. They found that for children under two, one-to-one interactions with an adult were better for enhancing language. However, for children from two to five, there were some benefits to their language if their parents chose age-appropriate, good-quality educational television programmes that offered opportunities for verbal responses and introduced a mixture of familiar and new content. They also stressed the importance of adults viewing these programmes with their children so they could explain and model the language being used and introduced. On the other hand, children who watched programmes that were aimed at a general or older audience, who watched alone, and/or watched a lot of television, were more likely to have poorer language.

It is therefore imperative to consider learning across contexts and through various texts and resources rather than only thinking of learning in the terms of government-imposed standards and measures (Lamont Hill & Vasudevan, 2008). As technology develops, ideas around what it means to be literate will need to change or the gap between home and school literacies is in danger of getting wider (McTavish, 2014; Nutbrown et al., 2017) and parents will be left with

little advice around how best to harness the available technology to support their children's learning (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2016).

Having shown the many different literacy practices that children may or may not experience and how they relate (or not) to 'school' literacy, it is possible to see how some children and families come to be seen as 'deficient' and 'in need of intervention'.

2.2.4 Literacy intervention

As the studies have demonstrated, there has been growing recognition that to support the literacy development and educational achievement of children, engaging and supporting parents, families and communities is crucial (Cairney, 1996; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Nutbrown et al., 2017; Ofsted, 2013c). However, it is also worth noting (as discussed earlier) that many community interventions unfairly place the responsibility for children's literacy onto mothers who are expected to sign up for and attend courses, and then implement what they have learnt (Bagley & Ackerley, 2006; Edwards & Gillies, 2011; Gillies, 2008; Lewis, 2011; Wainwright & Marandet, 2013).

In doing so, interventions designed to 'teach' particular mothers how to be better parents adopt certain pedagogical practices based on assumptions about mothers' knowledge and skills. In the interventions described below, there is an emphasis on a more visible pedagogy (Bernstein, 1990) where professionals position themselves as experts who should decide what mothers need to be taught.

As early as 1975, in *A Language for Life* (commonly known as *The Bullock Report*) it was recognised that children needed to be exposed to a wide range of language before starting school and that the best way to do this was to help parents understand how children's language developed and how they could support it. Recommendations included educating parents via ante-natal clinics and through the health visitor once a child was born. One thing parents should be doing was sharing books with their children from a young age and introducing them to other types of print such as

letters, labels and traffic signs. In this way, the child would see reading as an activity with a purpose and develop the right attitude towards it – "from the beginning it should be established as a thinking process, not simply as an exercise in identifying shapes and sounds" (DES, 1975, p.100). This report acknowledged that literacy was not simply a set of skills to be learnt, but needed to be part of a range of activities that were meaningful to children and their parents. However, the National Literacy Trust (Bolton & Clark, 2012) found that a third of parents did not realise that they have the biggest influence on their child's language and literacy development. They suggest making them aware of the difference they can make through activities that can easily be incorporated into daily life, such as singing in the bath, looking at road signs and food labels, sharing a bedtime story, drawing and painting.

Some researchers have examined various initiatives and interventions designed to improve home literacy environments. The NELP (National Early Literacy Panel) report into *Developing Early Literacy* (2008) synthesised a large body of research in order to find out how young children's language and literacy could best be supported so that they were ready for reading and writing at school. They found that interventions to improve children's oral language skills were the most effective; these included programmes that improved alphabetic knowledge, book sharing, and language-enhancement instruction. Another study by Reese, Sparks and Leyva (2010) found that: parents who encouraged their children to talk about the pictures in a book were able to enhance their children's vocabulary; parents who were encouraged to tell richer stories were able to improve their children's narrative skills; and parents who were trained to focus on print were able to improve their children's 'emergent' print and writing skills. They concluded that because different interventions achieved different outcomes, they should be carefully designed to meet the literacy needs of children (and their families).

Unlike the interventions described so far which have suggested adopting a visible pedagogy based around what professionals decide parents need to be taught about, others have suggested taking parents' perspectives into account when designing literacy programmes (Swain, Brooks and Bosley, 2014). They recognise that not all parents or children are the same and approaches that work well in some communities may not work in other contexts (Anderson, Anderson, Friedrich, & Kim, 2010). In this way, there is scope for the use of more invisible pedagogies where professionals exercise some control over what parents learn but relationships are more balanced and collaborative.

Close (2001) found that parent-centred approaches that enabled them to take part in events in the community helped them to become more confident at supporting their children's literacy and creating the right sort of home environment. In his evaluation of an initiative (*Talk To A Literacy Learner* programme) designed to bring pre-schools, schools and parents together to raise children's literacy achievement, Cairney (1996) noted that interventions need to be adaptable so they can meet the needs of different parents. Parents and practitioners needed to feel that they were working in partnership to enhance their children's literacy learning. Another initiative (*Parents as Partners in Early Learning*), designed to build effective partnerships between pre-schools and parents, used special events such as family picnics to run phonics workshops. The parents, who were from a South Asian community in Yorkshire, needed lots of encouragement to attend, but it enabled them to work collaboratively with practitioners who were able to understand how to support parents better and value what they did at home (DCSF, 2008b).

The idea of building support and partnerships has also been supported by Froiland, Powell and Diamond (2014) who looked at an initiative designed to improve the vocabulary of children from low-income families. They found that home literacy improved when parents felt they had supportive social networks in the neighbourhood. They therefore concluded that support for parents

needed to be provided in ways that strengthened their social networks. Research by the National Literacy Trust (2011) around literacy and poverty has also shown that for children living in areas of deprivation (who often have less advantageous 'early childhood caring environments') the community can be an important influence on the educational aspirations of families. They recommend local, area-based approaches that cater to the needs of particular communities and engage families.

However, Anderson et al. (2010) have warned against interventions that work on the notion of particular homes and communities being deficient of literacy and that seek to promote and impose 'school' notions of literacy without recognising home literacy practices. They showed that this approach has been resisted by families who felt they were being punished, whereas initiatives that responded to what parents wanted and incorporated literacy practices and texts that they were familiar with were more successful. Marsh and Thompson (2001) agree that many initiatives are tokenistic and only focus on school needs, rather than community literacies. They suggest building on children's interests, such as using familiar televisual texts, to bridge the gap between home literacy practices and those of educational settings. Taylor (1983) sought to understand some of the differences that might exist in her study of literacy within the family. For her, children's literacy developed best in relational contexts which were meaningful to the young child. Therefore, she believed that intervention that was not felt to be relevant to the everyday lives of parents and children alienated them. This is supported by Day et al. (2009) who reported that initiatives designed to help parents support their children's learning were most successful when they validated parents' prior knowledge and skills and were consistent with their own philosophies and approach, e.g. using role play to support early language and literacy development. In contrast, Wolfendale (1996) argues that if parents are educated about the school curriculum, then they can be empowered.

It therefore seems that the best approach may be one where connections can be made between home and community literacy practices, pre-school and school literacy practices, so that all children can have equal access to school literacy (Makin, 2003).

2.2.5 Literacy resources

For young children who are yet to start formal schooling, literacy practices will not only be heavily influenced by family members, but also the resources available to them in the home and community (Heath, 1983). These may include material resources, such as books and toys, but also time, social support and skills. For example, families that are able to provide structured routine are more likely to engage in literacy enhancing activities. (Weigel et al., 2010). Families may have a good income, but, as has already been argued, if both parents are working then there may be limited time to support their children's learning.

Bourdieu's (1986) concept of four different forms of capital is useful here. He described four different types:

> **economic** (money and assets); **cultural** (e.g. forms of knowledge; taste; aesthetic and cultural preferences; language, narrative and voice); **social** (e.g. affiliations and networks; family, religious and cultural heritage); and **symbolic** (things which stand for all of the other forms of capital and can be 'exchanged' in other fields, e.g. credentials) (Thomson, 2012, p.67)

For parents of young children, the concept of capital could relate to the resources they have access to, as well as the ways in which they use them to support their child's literacy development. If they buy resources or access them through other people and places, such as the library and childcare providers, this can be seen as having and using economic and/or social capital. If parents then use these resources to enhance their child's development in ways that match 'school' literacy, this can be seen as helping their child to acquire cultural capital in the form of 'school readiness' that may then be

exchanged for symbolic capital in the form of high educational attainment.

Merchant (2008) and Neuman (1999) have shown how books and narrative texts are important resources for supporting the early literacy development of babies and toddlers. Neuman describes how books help children learn topical knowledge; that words can create different worlds beyond the here and now; and that there are conventions associated with written language and reading. Therefore, children who do not have access to books in the home have been seen to be at a significant disadvantage. However, she also showed that childcare settings that provide rich and diverse reading materials, and staff that frequently use books interactively with the children, can help to improve young children's concepts of print, writing, letter knowledge and narrative.

At the same time, Formby (2014a) argues that for disadvantaged three to five year olds, technology can offer a route into reading, as they are now twice as likely to look at or read and enjoy stories on a touch screen (despite having less access to touch screens than their better-off peers). Wolfe and Flewitt (2010) argue that for all children to be able to fully participate in twenty-first century literacy practices, they need to have access to human and material resources, including technology and internet access; have the skills to use them effectively; and understand how they can be used for different purposes.

Deficit models of literacy have often assumed that low-income families have fewer resources, resulting in children with fewer and poorer literacy experiences and lower educational achievement (Cairney, 1996; Neumann, 2016). Hartas (2012) argues that it is the **combination** [*my emphasis]* of fewer financial resources and low educational attainment that is likely to limit parents' ability to provide learning opportunities and materials for their children, and may also affect their familiarity with community resources. Although raising income may help, Hartas asserts that this needs to be combined with

access to education and training for parents. As studies of out-of-school literacies have shown, income is not necessarily related directly to home literacy resources or how they are used (Grieshaber, Shield, Luke, & Macdonald, 2012). Instead, children's contrasting experiences of home and school literacy practices have been used to explain underachievement.

For some researchers, spaces and places have been seen to provide important resources and experiences that might be not available in the home (Nichols, Nixon, & Rowsell, 2011).

2.2.5.1 Libraries

Historically, libraries have been expected to play a key role in supporting children's literacy development, and many organisations exist today that assist and guide libraries in how to do this. For example, The Reading Agency is a charity that sees itself as "championing public libraries in the UK because they give everyone an equal chance to be a reader" (The Reading Agency, 2015). They actively help promote children's literacy in libraries by helping them to run national initiatives such as the 'Summer Reading Challenge' which is specifically focused on encouraging children's reading. Book Trust is another prominent UK charity that claims to encourage and enable parents to read regularly to their children from birth, by providing free books to children under the age of five through their Book Start programme, and by supporting organisations such as libraries. Their aim is to help children do better at school and in life and to improve literacy and social mobility (Book Trust, 2015). Both The Reading Agency and Book Trust are supported by government and lottery money through Arts Council England who see public libraries as "trusted spaces, free to enter and open to all. In them people can explore and share reading, information, knowledge and culture" (Arts Council England, 2015). Furthermore, there is evidence that library usage is linked to the reading levels of children and their general educational attainment (Arts Council England, 2014).

Libraries have become increasingly focused on early childhood literacy, and have taken on the role of helping to develop the pre-reading skills children will need when they start school (MacLean, 2008). For some families, they have become an important community resource providing free access to books and other services to support their young children's literacy development (Celano & Neuman, 2015; Nichols, 2011). As Becker (2012) notes, story-time sessions help to introduce young children to language that they might not hear as part of everyday conversations, and help to develop their listening and other skills they will need for school. However, if libraries only reflect the dominant, traditional 'school' notions of literacy, which not all parents may subscribe to, then they risk alienating these families (Nichols, 2011; Ward & Wason-Ellam, 2005). On the other hand, if libraries reaffirm how parents already interact with their children (e.g. talking, singing, reading, writing and playing) then parents feel reassured that they are doing the right things and are more likely to engage with what the library offers (Celano & Neuman, 2015).

As well as libraries being tasked with the role of supporting children's early literacy experiences, childcare has also been expected to provide learning opportunities for children, particularly those seen as 'disadvantaged'. Childcare providers have been given the role of getting children 'ready' for school, identifying those needing early intervention and educating parents in how to support their children's learning.

2.2.5.2 Early education

Sylva and her colleagues, were able to show in their EPPSE study, that early education can help to boost the academic performance of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. And as Melhuish, Phan, Sylva, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford and Taggart (2008) have shown, good quality pre-school education can have a significant impact on children's literacy and future achievement, particularly if activities for parents and children to engage in together are promoted.

However, despite the emphasis on ensuring children are 'ready' for primary school, Ofsted (2015b) recognised that in 2014 around two fifths of children still did not have the skills needed to reach a good level of development by the age of five, which was worse in the most deprived communities where less than half of children had the skills that were seen as crucial for starting school. In particular, around a quarter were struggling to speak, listen or interact socially. Notably, the report stated that "every word, choice and interaction made by a parent, either in their child's presence or while engaging directly with them, plays a significant part in their child's learning: instilling a bedtime routine; gentle reminders to say 'please' and 'thank you'; and recognising colours or textures when toddlers help to unload the washing machine all constitute teaching" (pp.4-5). Despite the emphasis on the importance of parents as children's first teachers, the report stressed the need for disadvantaged two year olds to access early education as they were less likely to experience a rich and rewarding home learning environment. The report therefore examined settings where disadvantaged two year olds were achieving well. Speech, language and communication were prioritised, with staff making sure they spent all their time with adults who could teach them how to play and engage with others. In addition, a dedicated time each day was given to teaching communication, language and literacy. For most settings, this meant focusing on phonics. However, one setting had employed an early reading specialist who developed other skills the children were seen to need in order to become readers, such as memory, rhythm, rhyme, vocabulary and auditory discrimination. The influence of older children was also deemed to be valuable for the younger children who would mimic their actions and behaviour as well as hearing more sophisticated language.

Save the Children (Finnegan, 2016) have recognised that, as parents feel increasing pressure to work and contribute to the family income, more children than ever are spending time in nursery and pre-school settings. They argue that these can benefit children's language skills

and educational outcomes as long as they are led by qualified early years' teachers. For Miller (1996) pre-school can help prepare children for the literacy they will encounter in school. However, she stresses that educators need to start with where the children are (recognising that literacy does not start when they enter the setting) and reflect the literacy they are already familiar with. In this way, pre-school should be seen as part of the continuum of 'emergent' literacy that begins at home.

In summary, UK government policy has constructed a particular understanding of literacy to fit with neo-liberal concerns around educational attainment and global competition. This has been seen through the creation of statutory curricula where literacy has been reduced to a set of age-related steps and measurable skills. The teaching of phonics as the prime strategy for learning to read and spell now dominates early years' and primary classrooms as phonics skills can be decontextualized and tested. At the same time, a knowledge of letters and sounds has been promoted as essential for school-readiness which, some commentators have argued, has resulted in the use of more formal teaching methods in pre-school settings. Additionally, by reducing literacy to a series of age-related steps and skills, children who are measured to not be achieving them at the prescribed time have been labelled as deficient and needing intervention.

But as the New Literacy Studies have emphasised, literacy is a social practice influenced by different discourses, texts, times and contexts. As such, there are multiple literacies experienced and understood by parents and young children. However, 'school' literacy has been constructed to be the only literacy and has marginalised other literacy practices. For some commentators this explains why some children find it harder to succeed at school - because they do not recognise the literacy they are presented with there.

Yet families (particularly mothers) who do not engage in the types of literacy practices seen to support 'school' literacy, such as book reading and mark-making, are seen as preventing their children from acquiring the 'roots' of literacy required for school success. Rather than exploring other literacy experiences and understandings, these children (and their parents) have been targeted by interventions designed to give them the literacy skills they lack. Mothers have primarily been targeted by initiatives that have not only reinforced their responsibility for their children's academic achievement, but also a particular construction of literacy that they may not recognise or value. Family income, available time, use of childcare, level of education and use of community resources may also be factors affecting their ability to engage with 'school' literacy practices. For initiatives to be effective and reduce educational inequalities, some researchers have argued for a validation of parents' skills and knowledge as well as a recognition of the different literacy practices, experiences and resources that families have.

The next chapter describes the town where the study took place. Literacy events happen within different contexts. How mothers and their children experience and understand literacy will be influenced, in part, by how policy is enacted where they live and within the places they go.

Chapter 3 – Constructing place

> Place is … a way of seeing, knowing and understanding the world. When we look at the world as a world of places we see different things. We see attachments and connections between people and place. We see worlds of meaning and experience...To think of an area of the world as a rich and complicated interplay of people and the environment – as a place – is to free us from thinking of it as facts and figures. (Cresswell, 2004, p.11)

Because of our different experiences, places hold different meanings for different people. Similar to literacy, place is a multiple construct. Cresswell's understanding of 'place' is what Lefebvre (1991) termed '(social) space'. He recognised three different types of (social) space:

1 **Perceived space** includes material/physical space and is produced through the everyday activities/practices that people engage in. It is empirical space that can be measured and described.

2 **Conceived space** is the space of dominant ideologies and discourses, so may be seen in language and texts, such as in the design of the physical space and how the space is expected to be used.

3 **Lived space** is the space of the imagination of the users and inhabitants. It is subjective and has the potential to generate 'counterspaces' that resist and change the dominant order.

Soja's (1996) concept of 'third space' is similar to Lefebvre's 'lived space' in that it provides another way of thinking about space in terms of 'real-and-imagined' places. He argued that the spaces and places we live in are socially-constructed as both real and imagined geographies which shape our lives in different ways (Soja, 2004).

Similar to Cresswell's understanding of 'place', Massey (2013) saw social space as a product of our relationships and connections with each other of which there are a multitude at any one moment in time embodying multiple meanings. However Massey (2005) extends our

understanding of space/place by adding a time dimension. Practices are connected to multiple others across space and time so we must also look beyond a place in order to understand it (Massey & Jess, 1995). This includes identifying discourses and expectations that come from other spaces and times to form what Lefebvre termed 'conceived space'. As outlined in Chapter 2, government policy has constructed particular discourses around the role of parents and a type of literacy which has come to be seen as necessary for 'school readiness' and educational success. By examining the place of Embervale in terms of its 'perceived space', it should be possible to show how the 'conceived space' of discourses and expectations have shaped literacy practices there.

Sheehy and Leander (2004) examined the significance of space in terms of literacy research and practice. In keeping with the theorists already discussed, they saw space as both a product and a process and asked how space was constructed. They agreed that we need to look at the discursive practices that give spaces their meaning. Although what we do is dominated by particular representations that are seen as 'natural', often people's experiences contradict these and different spaces are constructed. The idea of different spaces links to Lefebvre's idea of 'lived space'.

With this understanding of space/place, this chapter considers how the place chosen for the study - the East Midlands' town of Embervale – has been constructed over time. A visit to the local studies section of the town library in 2015 provided a variety of written and pictorial sources. I have synthesised these to give a brief history of the town.

3.1 History

Mastoris (2001), Baker (1983) and Duckworth, Baker and Jacobs (2013) explain that Embervale owes its existence (and its name) to the mining industry, as a settlement did not exist before two mines were opened in the early nineteenth century. Because the mines provided employment, not just for people living in the surrounding rural area but also further afield, they were quickly accompanied by

the building of houses and schools for the workers and their families. A few years after the mines were opened, a railway line was built to transport the coal which soon carried passengers too. With strong transport links, many other industries (such as brick and tile works, iron works, and railway wagon works) quickly emerged, as well as retail services. By 1841, the town had a population of 1200.

In 1883 another railway line was opened linking the town to other major towns and cities (including London). This enabled the town to become an important trade centre with a wide range of employment opportunities. Many of the shops in the town today developed out of the front rooms of houses that needed to be rapidly built along the two main roads that led in and out of the new town (Figure 1 and 2) and towards the end of the nineteenth century the town also had several churches and schools, a market, a very successful co-operative society that spread out across the district, two railway stations, a public park and a Public Hall.

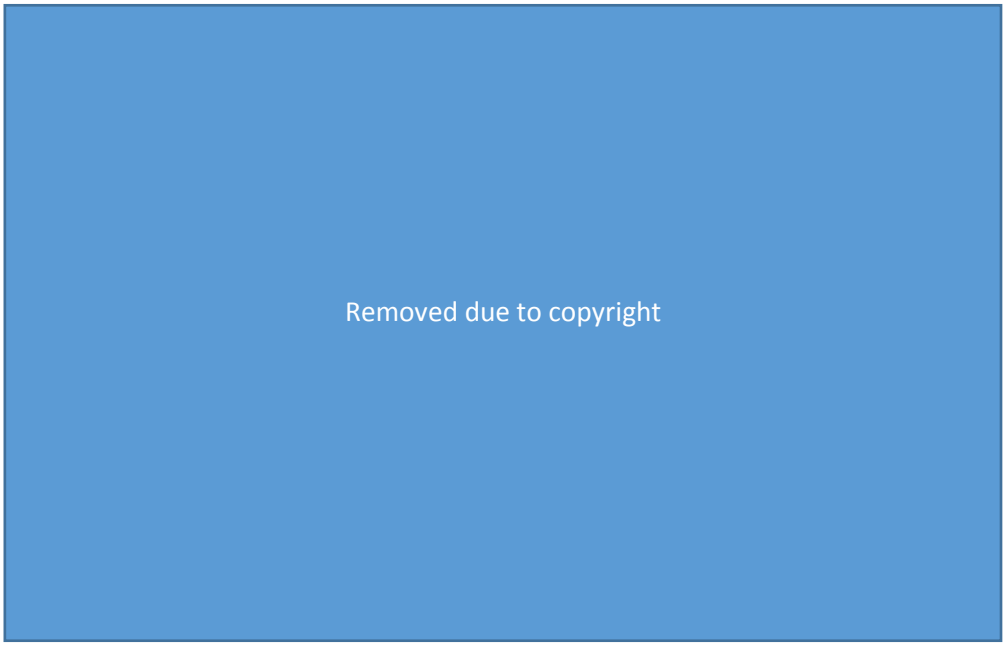


Figure 1 - High Street

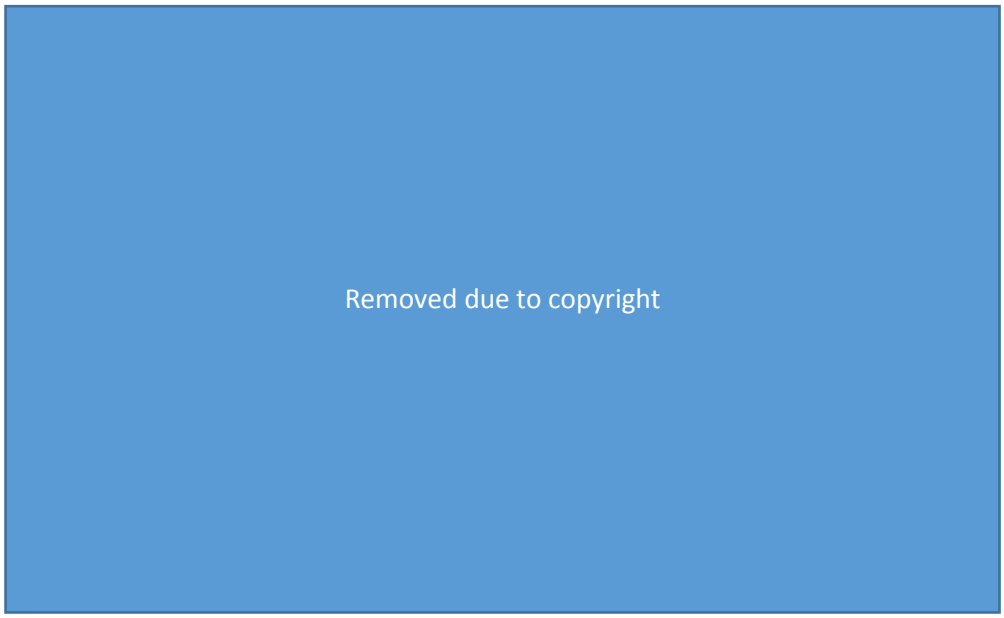


Figure 2 - Belvoir Road

By 1901, the population had soared to 7150. The more prosperous workers and employers wanted to live in larger houses with more domestic comfort. As a result, larger terraced houses were built on the edges of the existing rows of housing, then detached and semi-detached houses were built further along the important thoroughfares, whilst very large detached properties for wealthy entrepreneurs were built on the edge of the town and countryside beyond. The prosperity and affluence experienced by many inhabitants of the town meant that other services emerged such as banks, car sales, two luxury cinemas, a technical college, high schools, a bus company, a public baths, and more factories. A council was also created to ensure the proper provision of gas, water, sewage disposal, street lighting, road maintenance and the telephone. Houses continued to be built throughout the twentieth century, particularly on the east side of the town (surrounding the larger properties that had previously enjoyed views of open countryside). In this way, Embervale was constructed as a place of growth and prosperity.

3.2 Economic change

However, as part of railway reforms nationwide, in 1964 the train station was closed, and then in 1982 and 1986 the two mines closed.

This meant that the other industries that had developed in relation to the mining industry also began to fold. Inevitably jobs were lost. In an attempt to provide alternative forms of employment, the district council created several industrial, retail and business parks on the outskirts of the town (The Building and Social Housing Foundation, 1990). In addition, several new residential developments were built, particularly on old industrial sites, to provide a mixture of private and social housing. Although passenger rail services ceased, transport links were improved through the creation of a relief road around the edge of the town linking it easily to two motorways and a major airport less than ten miles away. This meant that many large employers were attracted to set up in the town, particularly in the construction, manufacturing and distribution sectors. In 2017 Amazon opened a huge distribution hub on the outskirts of the town, creating around 2000 jobs.

Despite new forms of development, a town centre survey showed that people in the town were concerned about the shortage of leisure and entertainment facilities (the once-popular cinemas and nightclub had closed down) (BMG Research, 2006). A newspaper article titled *[Name of town]: More big plans for the town that never regenerated* (Leicester Mercury, 2015) attempted to explain why residents believed their town was not a priority for the district council and why they felt that any new promises made by the council would not be kept. It referred to plans that had been made in the past that have not transpired, such as re-opening the railway line, creating a monorail system, rebuilding a train station, and improving the town centre with new shops and town square. Whilst local residents have been pessimistic about plans, district councillors have been more optimistic and keen to show that there is still a focus on regeneration (Thompson, 2015). But perhaps one of the biggest blows felt by the people of Embervale was the council's closure of a multi-million pound discovery and science museum in 2015. It had been opened on the site of one of the former collieries and celebrated Embervale's industrial heritage. After much campaigning to keep it open, its

closure confirmed residents' beliefs that the council was not interested in regenerating Embervale (Martin, 2015). The closure of the museum also meant that, apart from the headstocks that are just visible above the newly-built housing developments, traces of the town's mining and industrial past have disappeared.

Comments on the Facebook site *[Name of town]: Past, Present and Future,* as well as newspaper articles and letters printed in the local newspaper during 2015 revealed how people have experienced the town's 'perceived spaces' (Lefebvre, 1991). The reader is confronted with a sense of disappointment and disgust at the run-down appearance of the town centre with its shabby shop-fronts, empty shop units and lack of free parking and pedestrianised areas. Much of this is blamed on council leaders who are accused of abandoning the town due to their plans for regeneration not transpiring.

To find out more about the recent history of Embervale, I made telephone contact with a local historian. He explained that there have been many attempts to regenerate the town over the years and that he had been involved in creating new plans for the town centre. One of these was funded by the district council in 2009 and produced in partnership with the Prince's Foundation for the Built Environment (NWLDC, 2010). Plans show a remodelling of the town centre around a series of four 'squares', and a reduction in traffic going through the town. Nothing has been done with the plans since. In November 2017 the district council adopted a new Local Plan for development across the district until 2031. The vision for Embervale is that it will have "grown significantly and… will have benefited from major new investment in infrastructure and as a result, the town centre regeneration as a heritage town will be well underway." (NWLDC, 2017, p.19) There are currently plans for substantial new housing developments (to include some social housing), road improvements, and a revival of the 'Four Squares' plans to improve the town centre.

By tracing how Embervale has been constructed over time it is possible to see how economic changes have constructed the

'perceived space' and how local government has constructed 'conceived space' through its plans to regenerate the town. However, the different ways that people have experienced these spaces has resulted in different understandings. Whilst councillors seem optimistic about the future of the town, local residents have been pessimistic. These different constructions of place/space can be seen as examples of 'lived space' (Lefebvre, 1991) or 'real-and-imagined' place (Soja, 1996, 2004).

To try to get a deeper understanding of how these different spaces had been constructed, I carried out an informal interview with the Conservative Member of Parliament for the district. He was proud of the retail offering on the outskirts of the town where the major supermarkets were situated as well as a recent housing development on an old pub site, which he believed was a major improvement. However, he was not prepared to divulge future plans for development because "there are people who would be keen to oppose them if they knew what they are"! This secretive approach may help to explain why residents of the town have lost trust in the people they see as having the power to construct the town differently but failing to do so.

In keeping with the policies of his government (discussed in Chapter 2), he ignored structural factors and blamed individuals for the circumstances they lived in by claiming that their low aspirations were responsible for the continuing existence of deprivation in parts of the town. As far as he was concerned, there was high employment in the area, good schools, excellent opportunities for young people through the further education college (on the outskirts of the town) and a growing number of apprenticeships in the area. It was the fault of individuals if they were not able to acquire a good education, secure a job and an income to raise their living conditions. In this way, he espoused the neo-liberal belief that educational achievement enables individuals to compete in the marketplace and to gain economic security and social mobility.

These initial snapshots of the town and people involved with it, illustrated a sense of place that was not shared by everyone and confirmed my understanding of space/place as a multiple construct. "The identities of place are unfixed, contested and multiple." (Massey, 1994, p.5). Over time, as a place develops or declines, meanings shift.

In order to get my own sense of the town's material and physical spaces ('perceived space') at the time of the study, I explored it in person. I also examined data that were available publicly through various sources to get a sense of how these spaces might be experienced by different groups of people living in different parts of the town.

3.3 Mapping the town

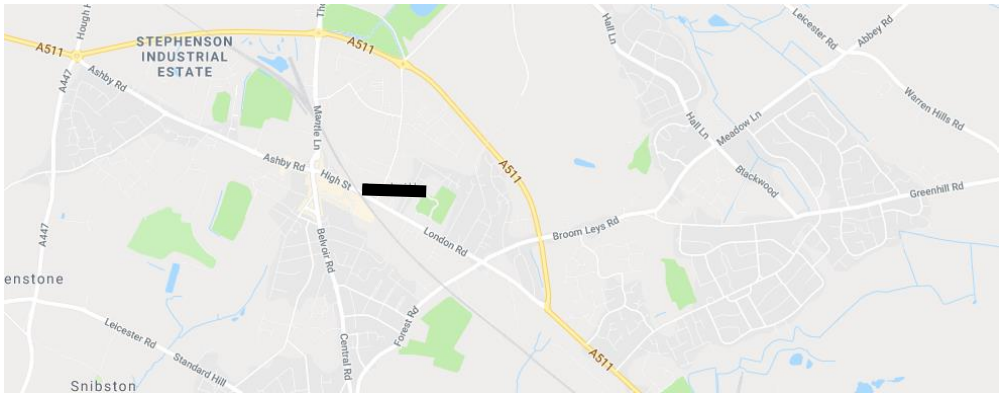


Figure 3 - Map of Embervale

The map shows a town that it split in two by the A511 relief road that links it to the M1 motorway to the east, and the M42 motorway to the west (Figure 3). On the west side of the A511 is the town centre, whilst the east side is made up of a variety of residential properties. The town is divided into three council wards; one to the west, one in the centre, and one to the east. Census data from the Office of National Statistics revealed that the one to the west is the smallest of the three wards with a population of just over 5000 (352 of whom are aged 0-4), followed by the central ward with a population of just under 6000 (435 of whom are aged 0-4) and the one to east with

just over 7000 (366 of whom are aged 0-4) (ONS, 2011). In all three wards, over 92% of the population described itself as White British.

3.3.1 West side

Due to a lot of new house building on old industrial sites, this area is predominantly made up of residential properties. These are an even mix of terraced, semi-detached and detached properties, with nearly 80% being owner-occupied, 13% privately rented and 7% social housing (ONS, 2011). A primary school and a small community theatre can also be found in this ward. According to a report produced by the County Council using the data from the 2004 Indices for Deprivation, this area is ranked in the top 25% of most deprived areas within the county and in the top ten of most deprived areas in the district. It also ranked in the top ten in the district for children living in income deprived households, employment and health deprivation (LCC, 2005).

Adjoining this ward is the central ward. To the north of the ward are the more recently developed industrial and retail parks, and the town centre can also be found in this ward. Shops and other services are clustered along two main roads that meet at a busy traffic junction (Figure 4).



Figure 4 - Belvoir Road 2015



Figure 5 - Shop occupying old cinema building



Figure 6 - Private day nursery occupying old Railway Hotel building

Many small businesses occupy old buildings (built for the growing population during the 1800s and early 1900s) such as a shop that occupies one of the old cinema buildings (Figure 5) and a children's nursery in the old Railway Hotel (Figure 6). But there are also some modern buildings built during the latter part of the twentieth century that house a library, a Children's Centre (Figure 7), a supermarket (Figure 8), an indoor market hall and a shopping precinct (Figure 9).



Figure 7 - Sure Start Children's Centre in the town centre



Figure 8 - Supermarket



Figure 9 - Shopping Precinct

Moving away from the retail area, several primary schools, pre-schools and a high school (aged 11-14) can be found in this ward as well as residential properties (Figure 10). Many of the houses were built during the nineteenth and early twentieth century to house the growing workforce. 44% of the housing stock are terraced houses, 27% are semi-detached, 15% are detached and 10% are flats. Of these, 63% are owner-occupied, 19% are privately rented, and 16% are social housing (ONS, 2011).



Figure 10 - Older residential properties near the town centre

According to the report produced by the County Council using the data from the 2004 Indices for Deprivation, this area scored high for deprivation compared to other areas in the district, and ranked in the 20% most deprived districts for education, skills and training in England (LCC, 2005). Furthermore, crime rates are high, with over two hundred cases of anti-social behaviour and just over one hundred and fifty incidents of violence and/or sexual offences between October 2014 and September 2015 (Police UK, 2015).

3.3.2 East side

This ward adjoins the central ward on the east side of the relief road. It has two main roads running through it that are fringed with large semi-detached and detached houses built for the wealthier entrepreneurs and industrialists during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Wedged between these two roads is a 1970s estate of approximately four hundred homes that were built and looked after by the East Midlands Housing Association. On the southern side of this estate, and separated by one of the main roads, is the much larger 1950s council estate (some of the houses here have been bought by residents). Like the western ward, this ward is mainly characterised by residential properties; 46% semi-detached, 37% detached, 8% terraced and 9% flats. Of these, 56% are owner-occupied, 6% are privately rented and 38% are social housing (ONS, 2011).

In terms of services, the council estate has a small row of retail premises (Figure 11) which include a convenience store and a community office (seen with the blue shutters).



Figure 11 - Shops on the council estate

The only other building providing a service is the Community Church. (Figure 12).



Figure 12 - Community Church on the council estate

On the housing-association estate, services consist of a community centre run by the housing association (Figure 13), a convenience store and a take-away food outlet.



Figure 13 - Community Centre on the housing-association estate

There is also a primary school which has a Children's Centre and pre-school on the same site. The Children's Centre was the first one in the district. Behind these are a high school (for ages 11-14), an upper school (for ages 14-18) and a special school.

The eastern ward is one of seven priority neighbourhoods in the district of North West Leicestershire and scores high on the indices of deprivation (NWLDC, 2011). The 2004 Indices of Deprivation also show that the two estates are in the top 10% most deprived areas in England for income, employment, health, education and crime (LCC, 2005). Crime figures for October 2014 to September 2015 show that there were around four hundred incidents of anti-social behaviour and nearly three hundred cases of violent and/or sexual offences in this area (Police UK, 2015). The housing-association estate has a high proportion of teenage parents and 'NEETS' (young people not in education, employment or training) (NWLDC, 2011). As noted in Chapters 1 and 2, policy discourses define different groups in particular ways (e.g. as 'needy', 'deficient', and/or 'disadvantaged') in order to construct a problem (Bacchi, 1999) and legitimate particular practices (Ball, 1990). The 'problem' of teenage parents and 'NEETS' can be seen as an example of this.

In summary, Embervale's past and present is marked by periods of development and decline that have not only shaped its physical and material characteristics ('perceived space') but also how different people experience and understand the town. Because places mean different things to different people, different spaces are constructed. People such as district councillors and the Member of Parliament are seen to construct a 'conceived space' through their plans, policies and discourses. Meanwhile residents construct their own 'lived spaces' as they experience 'conceived' and 'perceived' space in different ways. How they understand and construct place is influenced by a range of different factors; memories associated with a particular place, how they experience the place now, and how that place is represented by others. In this way, Embervale can be seen to be more than its physical, economic and cultural characteristics. As Massey (1994) stresses, we need to see places as a complicated combination of social relations. People construct places, both in their imagination and in their material practice (Massey & Jess, 1995).

The next chapter continues with the idea of multiple meanings and experiences in its explanation of the methodology and methods adopted for this study.

Chapter 4 - Methodology

In Chapter 1, I introduced the research question,

How are the resources provided by a small town used by mothers to support their young children's literacy development?

This chapter will outline how I approached answering this question.

4.1 Why ethnography?

The research question is informed by the ontological belief that reality is socially constructed by the subjective experiences of individuals. As Chapter 3 recognised in its discussion of how places are constructed, realities are not fixed; they are subject to change over time and are influenced by other people (Burr, 2003). Robson (2011) explains that the social world is made up of human beings that are subjective, who make conscious decisions, have ideas about the world they live in and give meaning to what happens around them. These ideas and meanings influence their behaviour, so to understand the social world we must find out what these meanings and ideas are.

This leads to an epistemology where the researcher must find a way to explain individual cases, rather than look for general, universal principles in order to understand the different realities that exist (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). While my research question seeks to understand the experience of mothers with children under five, as the discussion in Chapter 1 shows they are not a homogenous group and therefore should not be treated as such. This study will therefore try to understand how mothers' different experiences and perspectives construct multiple realities. "The task of the researcher is to understand the multiple social constructions of meaning and knowledge" (Robson, 2011, p.24).

Therefore, in my view, a research question which "seeks to capture, interpret and explain how a group, organisation or community live, experience, and make sense of their lives and their world" (Robson,

2011, p.79), is best aligned with an ethnographic methodology as it involves the researcher immersing herself into the culture of the group in order to describe it in detail. This approach also allows a range of voices and perspectives to be heard. By accepting the different ways in which people experience and construct the social world, ethnography enables the researcher to explore its complexities and contradictions, rather than trying to find a definitive 'truth'.

An ethnographic approach also means being able to explore ideas in depth by keeping questions open and following up emerging ideas over a relatively long period of time. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) explain, initial questions are refined over the course of the research until it becomes more clearly focused and data can be generated more strategically in order to answer the questions more effectively. Cerwonka and Malkki (2007) agree that ethnographic research is not a steady accumulation of more and more insight but requires constant revision of insights gained earlier. Therefore, in ethnographic research the design is not fixed at the start of the study, but builds and changes throughout the process so that answers can be found in the most appropriate ways. This was important for this study as it was not possible to know beforehand exactly what services and resources were available, how they were being used and whether I could gain access to them.

4.2 Researching literacy

As has been shown in Chapter 2, literacy is a multiple construct (Hull & Schultz, 2001) as it means different things to different people in different contexts. Barton and Hamilton (2000) described literacy in terms of practices (what people do with literacy) and acknowledged that these involve values, feelings and relationships that might not be observable, but can be explored through observing literacy events which will be shaped by people's understanding of literacy.

> Literacy events are located in time and space. Reading and writing are things which people do, either alone or with other people, but

> always in a social context – always in a place and time. To make sense of people's literacy practices we need to situate them within this context. (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p.23)

By observing literacy events in real contexts, a researcher can explore individual activities, understandings and identities; social events and the interactions involved; and broader social and institutional structures, in order to get a deep understanding of the different constructions of literacy that are present in a particular place (Maybin, 2000).

In a long history of important ethnographic studies in the field of literacy (e.g. Maybin, 2000; Street, 2003; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988), two major studies of place-based literacy provided important touchstones for this study: one by Barton and Hamilton (1998) carried out in Lancaster in England, and one by Heath (1983) in two communities in the USA. Although set in very different places at different times, they were also studies of people's experiences and understanding of literacy in specific places. Heath observed literacy practices and events in families over time, and the implications of children's experiences of language when they started school. She showed that literacy is not an abstract, autonomous set of skills that must be taught in a defined way, but is shaped and constructed by complicated social, historical and cultural factors. Barton and Hamilton found that, in a particular place and time there will be dominant literacy practices and discourses, such as those advocated by education and the media, but these will be intersected by the vernacular literacies that take place as part of everyday life.

Using research methods that are not able to take account of the social and cultural context of literacy practices will inevitably lead to partial and distorted findings. Whereas an ethnographic approach ensures that people's actions and accounts can be studied in everyday contexts rather than under artificial conditions created by the researcher (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). By experiencing first-hand the contexts where literacy practices and events could be found, I hoped to be able to represent the complex realities of mothers'

perspectives and experiences in a rich, sensitive and convincing way. In addition, I wanted to be able to "display the intricate ways individuals and groups understand, accommodate, and resist a presumably shared order" (Van Maanen, 1988, p.xiv).

4.3 Methods

Ethnography usually involves,

> participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts – in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry. (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p.3)

Participant observation was a key part of this ethnography as it allowed me to experience what my participants experienced, rather than just relying on their verbal accounts. I endeavoured to discover what was 'really' going on and, in doing so, I was the research 'instrument'. This approach meant sustained effort and close attention over an extended period of time and in different settings, in order to see whether findings were different in different spaces, or changed as time went on (Robben & Sluka, 2012).

The way I wrote and organised field notes was influenced by Becker (2012) who, in her study of a children's library, stressed the importance of taking detailed, field notes which included observations about the people she saw e.g. apparent gender, ethnicity and age, as well as their actions and interactions. Where possible, she directly quoted or paraphrased their dialogue and she added her own thoughts, feelings and later reflections to her field notes. As this approach gave her a wealth of data, I attempted to record field notes along the same lines. This can be problematic though. In order to be able to participate in activities and put participants at ease, it was sometimes necessary to record my field notes after the event which meant some detail was inevitably lost. However, I endeavoured to write up my notes as soon as possible after the event while it was

still fresh in my mind. Another concern was that whilst it was impossible to record everything, I wanted to start off making fairly broad notes, recording things that did not always seem relevant at the time but might be important later. Reassuringly, I was able to agree with Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) that as time went on, it was possible to refine what needed to be recorded as the research became more focused.

I also found that during periods of participation and observation, it was useful and appropriate to strike up informal conversations with people, especially if something was happening that I did not fully understand. Very often they were interested in what I was doing and wanted to ask me more about it, which in turn led them to offer their own thoughts and experiences. This meant that field notes also included comments and paraphrased conversations with both professionals and users in the settings. However, alongside participant observation and informal conversations, I felt it was important to interview key professionals to get a clearer understanding of what services and resources they provided and why, and to interview mothers to explore how they used and experienced what was on offer.

I used a semi-structured approach to interviewing; I had some themes I had identified in the literature and from my own experiences, as well as ones emerging from observations and visual data (see Appendix 1). I used these to ask initial questions (sometimes based on what I already knew about the participant) and supplemented them with further questions depending on the responses given. I was therefore able to prompt and investigate things that could not be observed such as values, views, feelings and perspectives (Wellington, 2000). I felt this was the most appropriate approach to take with a study that attempts to learn more about others' perspectives as I wanted them to feel that they could talk about what was relevant to them rather than just what I felt was important.

With the consent of participants, I recorded interviews using a small voice-recorder. This had the advantage of avoiding note-taking which can be off-putting to participants and incomplete (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). I was able to sit back and really listen to what the interviewees were telling me and then base my next question on their response, rather than having to focus on trying to write as much as possible and following a script. At the same time as making the interviews feel more informal and putting participants at ease so they would talk more freely, the use of the recorder also showed that I was interested in everything they had to say and did not want to miss anything. I found it particularly interesting that participants would often want to continue the conversation after I told them I did not have any more questions and switched off the recorder. I believe this showed that they were relaxed and wanted to share their experiences and opinions. Even though I cannot be sure that everything that my interviewees told me was 'true', it is important to recognise that we all construct our own stories to understand the world. How people **want** *[my emphasis]* to be viewed and what they are aware of can actually tell us much about how they see the world (O'Reilly, 2012).

I also used visual recording methods, including making diagrams and taking photographs in the places where mothers and young children were engaged in literacy practices. These methods helped me to record what resources were available, how they were used and how they presented young children's literacy. In her study of literacy practices using photographs from newspapers and in the local community, Hamilton (2000) was able to show how photographs provide valuable data about literacy events, particularly who is involved, where, what they are doing and what artefacts are being used. In addition, visual data can help to support other data such as field notes which may not be able to provide the same level of detail. In the case of the library, I found that, during interviews with staff, photographs were also a useful way of getting them to reflect upon their understandings of young children's literacy.

The flexibility of these various methods allowed me to adapt my approach in light of emerging themes. Observations and photographs brought to light what people did, whilst conversations and semi-structured interviews elicited people's reasons and explanations for their actions and decisions.

4.4 Time frame

At the start of the study, I was unable to produce a strict timetable of where and when I would visit particular settings as I recognised the need to be able to fit my time around the workings of different groups as well as respect the fact that there might be times that were unsuitable for me to be present. The timings of observations therefore depended not only on when literacy events were taking place, but also on where and when I was able to gain access. In some cases, different activities were running in different places at the same time, or in the same place at different times. It was therefore important that I identified these quickly so I could plan my time as efficiently as possible and move smoothly from one setting to another. Arranging interviews also depended on recruiting mothers who lived in Embervale, were willing to take part, and when they were available. With this in mind, I set out to be in the field for around 12 months to ensure I had plenty of time to spend in different settings, build up rapport with the mothers who attended these settings, and follow up any questions that arose during the field work.

4.5 Place

Prior to starting the sustained period of fieldwork required for this study, I had conducted a smaller, pilot study in the town library earlier in the year (for my Masters dissertation). As well as trying out the ethnographic methods required for this study, I was able to explore ideas around literacy for young children in this particular setting and to find out more about the town of Embervale.

Soon after this, I started searching internet sites to map out the location of other sites within the town that might provide literacy resources and activities for children under five, in order to focus my

study on settings that I thought would yield the most valuable data. In addition to the library, I found pre-schools, playgroups, Sure Start Children's Centres, and parent-and-child classes. I began with the idea that I could focus on five different settings: the library; one of the Children's Centres; a pre-school/nursery; a playgroup; and a privately-run parent-and-child class. However, I soon found that there were more than one setting that fitted into each category, so I had to decide which ones to focus on.

To assist me with this, I began to explore Embervale further (on foot and by car) and through this exploration I began to discover different, distinct areas within the town. At this point I knew I wanted to include sites in the east of the town as well as in the town centre as these appeared to be two contrasting areas. I therefore needed to adopt a flexible design so as not to limit my understanding of how the location of particular resources might affect how mothers used and experienced them. I decided not to limit myself to one setting in each of the five categories but to allow the study to evolve as my understanding of the town and its resources grew.

4.6 Access

In the course of trying to find out more about Embervale at the start of the study, I had made contact with the local MP in order to hear his views about the town. Following on from this meeting, one of his assistants put me in touch with an employee of the area's branch of Home-Start (a charity providing support for families with children under five). We met for an informal chat about her work with families on the two estates on the east side of the town. She explained that she had some funding for running *Baby Giggles* groups at the two Sure Start Children's Centres that were aimed at increasing interaction between parents and their babies. I asked if I could observe one of these groups, and she allowed me access to the one that ran from the Children's Centre on the east side of the town. This enabled me to make contact with other professionals that worked in this Centre and find out what else was going on here.

At the same time, I made contact with the owner and creator of a private class for children up to five years old and their carers. I already knew her from when I used to take my own children to her classes (in a different location) several years previously. This contact proved to be very useful as she enthusiastically agreed to be interviewed and for me to attend a class operating between the east side of the town and the town centre. She was also able to tell me that the Coordinator of the Children's Centres (whom I had been having difficulty getting hold of in order to gain access to other groups) was often absent from work due to a long-term health condition, and that it would be more fruitful to contact a different member of staff. She made an introduction for me and very quickly I was able to secure an interview with her and was granted access to groups in the town's two Children's Centres (one on the east side and one in the town centre). At the same time, I was told that they were always on the lookout for volunteers to assist with groups. I agreed to do this as I felt it would give me another insight into what was going on, help me get to know more of the staff and visitors to the Centres, and enable me to 'give back' to my research participants. I therefore started to volunteer at a weekly playgroup.

It soon emerged that the programme of activities in the Children's Centres had recently undergone some reorganisation with new 'pathway' groups being formed that involved collecting together expectant parents who were due to give birth to their babies within a few weeks of each other. The idea was that they would continue to attend their group once their babies were born and a programme of activities would be delivered that the staff felt were most appropriate. Getting access to one of these groups in either of the two Children's Centres was not possible (in most cases the Family Outreach Workers that ran these groups were keen to keep them as private as possible so the parents felt safe and able to discuss any concerns they might have). However, I was offered the opportunity to attend a group as a volunteer in a different Children's Centre (outside the town but within the same council area and overseen by the same Coordinator).

I agreed to this as I felt it would give me insight into how a 'pathway' group operated.

Having already conducted the pilot study in the library, I was quickly able to re-establish contact there and was welcomed to visit any groups I wanted to. During the months I spent visiting these different groups and settings, other settings had come to my attention. During interviews several mothers mentioned pre-schools and another private parent-and-baby class. After feeling that I was no longer gaining any new data, I decided to withdraw from the settings I had so far explored in order to seek access to these different settings and follow-up ideas that had emerged during the interviews.

In terms of pre-schools, I initially tried to get access to the only one in the town that is run as part of a primary school and to the two private nurseries that exist in the town, but they either failed to respond or declined. O'Reilly (2012) explains that access can often depend on how people see you. I had told them that I was a former primary school teacher and that I had already successfully spent time in other settings around the town. I hoped that this would reassure them that I could be trusted as well as being knowledgeable about what they were trying to achieve. Although I am unlikely to ever know the reasons for their refusal, in hindsight they may have felt threatened by the thought that I could report back my findings to competitors or other educational professionals. As has been discussed in Chapter 3, neo-liberal education policies have subjected schools and teachers to increasing scrutiny through testing and inspection regimes. It is possible that these settings were in fear of being seen as not meeting government-imposed expectations.

I therefore decided to focus on the more informal pre-schools that ran in church or community buildings. Unannounced visits to one that ran from a church in the town centre and another that ran from a church on the east side of the town proved successful. The managers of these were both happy to let me visit, observe and make contact with mothers of children attending the pre-school. The pre-school in

the town centre also ran a playgroup once a week that they were happy for me to visit so I was given an ideal opportunity to explore what happened here too. At the same time, I made an unannounced visit to the other private parent-and-baby class that I had heard about and was immediately granted access by the leader of this group.

After several weeks observing and interviewing people from these new settings, I felt the data had reached saturation point. I had spent time in a variety of settings across the town and interview data were not revealing any new settings or themes (Small, 2009). I therefore decided to stop. Including the pilot study and time spent researching the town, I had spent fourteen months in the field over a nineteen month period.

4.7 Sample

Having already described how the different settings were sampled, I now turn to how I sampled participants. Sampling strategies in ethnographies tend not to be for representativeness, but instead are theoretically-informed and based on practical considerations (O'Reilly, 2012). In my study I needed to choose mothers who visited the settings I was observing in. After attending the different groups for several weeks in order to become familiar to the mothers and children there and build up some rapport, I approached mothers that lived in Embervale and asked them if they would agree to an interview. As the sample group grew, my sampling approach became more purposive. I targeted mothers who might offer a different perspective, such as those with older or younger children, those with multiple children as opposed to being a first-time mother, mothers with different ethnic origins, lone-parents and ones who lived in different parts of the town. I conducted thirteen interviews in total. Despite the possible lack of generalisability in the findings, Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) argue that small samples within narrowly focused research can still make significant contributions to knowledge. Just because a group is small, does not mean that other

groups may not find issues that apply to them. Therefore studies such as this can still contribute to theory building and/or have policy implications (O'Reilly, 2012).

4.8 Positionality/Reflexivity

A key aspect of ethnographic research is the reflexivity of the researcher who needs to be honest about the role they play in generating the data; who they are in terms of their background and interests as they may have a particular view on the area they are researching; and through whose eyes the data is interpreted (Purcell-Gates, 2006). As the research 'instrument', the researcher is all-powerful in deciding what data to generate, and how to organise, analyse and present it. Therefore, whilst being committed to representing the voices of the mothers and professionals I met and talked to, I recognise that how I understand myself will influence how I understand others (Krieger, 1998).

As a mother, former primary teacher and tutor of parents, I was careful not to share my own views about young children's literacy, the role of mothers or the community, as this would undoubtedly have influenced their responses. However, it was important to build relationships with both the professionals and mothers in each setting so they felt they could talk freely with me. Therefore I shared other experiences I had had as a mother or teacher that provided some common ground but was unrelated to what I was researching. This proved to be effective in reassuring people that I was someone they could relate to and be open with. I also learnt that approaching gatekeepers in person in order to gain access to various settings was often more successful than telephone or email contact as they were able to 'see' that my age, gender and friendly, respectful nature would help me to 'fit in' and be accepted within the groups I wanted to visit.

Whilst I cannot be sure that my presence did not affect participants and compromise the authenticity of the data, I felt that my age and gender particularly helped me to fit into the different environments

and to build trust and rapport with my participants. By participating in activities, I was also able to integrate and immerse myself in the setting rather than sit as an outsider looking in, which participants could have found disconcerting or intimidating and might subsequently have caused them to behave in 'unnatural' ways. Being taken on as a Children's Centre volunteer meant that my presence in various groups was not questioned or seen as 'out of place'. I also hoped that by spending a prolonged period of time in each setting, participants would become used to me being there so they would soon forget to alter their behaviour if they had done so initially.

There were times when it was more difficult to fully participate as I did not have a child under five with me. This may have flagged up that I was not really the same as them. However, being both a participant and an observer may not necessarily be a problem, as the fine balance between

> being both insider and outsider, strangeness and familiarity, is in fact a very creative and distinct way of being in and learning about the world […] it is what gives participant observation its strength. Participation enables the strange to become familiar; observing enables the familiar to appear strange. (O'Reilly, 2012, p.106)

Because I was not always able to fully participate in the setting, it meant that it did not become so familiar to me that I stopped noticing what was going on.

Another concern that needs consideration is how far my own experiences as a mother and educator affected what questions I asked, what I noticed, what I recorded and therefore what data I generated. My own children are quite a few years older than the ones in the study and my experience as a teacher was predominantly with children over the age of five. These factors meant that I had not directly experienced most of the groups and services that I visited, and if I had had some experience, it was in a different location. Therefore, by focusing on mothers of children under five in settings that I had not visited before, I felt I was able to strike a balance

between making the strange familiar, and the familiar strange. This was evidenced when I came to writing up and analysing my findings. I was surprised that I did not find what I thought I might, and that I had not anticipated what later turned out to be significant.

4.9 Ethics

> Ethical ethnography involves awareness of your effects on the participants and on the data and conscientiously attempting to ensure that you cause as little pain or harm as possible. (O'Reilly, 2012, p.66)

In order to minimise any potential harm to my participants, I followed the BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2011) and applied for ethical clearance from the University on two occasions. Initially I was given permission to approach settings through relevant gatekeepers by providing written information about the study and evidence of DBS clearance (if required) so that I could carry out my observations overtly. When I visited a new group, I was introduced by the leader of the group and I explained to everyone that I was interested in finding out about the services and resources provided to support parents who had children under the age of five. I assured them that their identities would be anonymised and that I would not take any photographs that included people. In all cases, they were happy to involve me. As Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) state in their ethnography of literacy in inner-city families, it is important to make sure that access is not seen by participants as an intrusion since data generation depends on their cooperation and support. Most of my observations were carried out as a participant, as I felt this would help me to better understand what was going on, build rapport with the participants and minimise the 'researcher effect'. However, when I visited the children's library I sometimes observed people without them knowing who I was. As this was a public place I was able to sit in the area and just observe what was going on (although the staff knew who I was and I had been granted access by the library supervisor).

The second time I applied for ethical clearance, I was given permission to approach mothers for interview and to make sure I gained their full consent by providing written information and asking them to sign a consent form (which assured them that all data would be stored securely and that they would not be identified in the outcomes of the research). If someone declined an interview (which happened on two or three occasions) I respected their privacy and did not pressure them to change their mind. I only interviewed mothers who were willing to share their views, but I did explain that they could withdraw from the study at a later time if they wanted to. When it came to arranging the interviews it was important that the mothers chose times that were convenient for them and places where they felt comfortable. In many cases they preferred me to visit them at home, sometimes with the child present or at a time when the child was being looked after elsewhere. In other cases they chose a public place such as a café or the library. At the start of each interview I made the point of telling each mother that I was not judging them in any way and that, as a mother myself, I understood some of the difficulties of being a parent and juggling different roles and responsibilities. I therefore asked them to be as honest as possible and reassured them that I would not be sharing what they told me with anyone else involved in the study. I felt this was particularly important for the mothers that I met in the Children's Centres as they had usually been referred there due to being seen as 'vulnerable' and 'in need of support'.

Whilst writing up my findings, I realised that ethnographic writing requires rich description and therefore the authenticity of a place-based study depends on detailing specific characteristics of a particular place through words, pictures and maps. Without precise description it would have been impossible to reach an understanding of how the cultural, economic and social history and geography of the town influenced what resources were on offer, and how the different ways they were organised influenced how they were used and experienced. As Broome states in the foreword to Barton and

Hamilton's (1998) study of literacy in a particular place, "it is no longer possible to describe literacy credibly without also describing the people involved and the places in which it occurs." (p.xii). Whilst I have tried my best to protect the anonymity of the participants in this study by adopting the pseudonym of Embervale for the town, I recognise that I cannot guarantee this.

4.10 Dataset

The dataset consists of:

- Interviews with professionals
- Interviews with mothers who have a child under the age of five
- Photographs and diagrams
- Documentation
- Field notes – including conversations with the local MP, Home-Start employee and a local historian.

More information is included in the table on the next page. Some mothers appear multiple times. This is because they use (or have used) more than one setting.

Setting Type	Area	Dates of visits	Professionals' Interviews	Mothers' Interviews	Field notes
Private Classes	Edge of the east side and the town centre	28.1.16 4.2.16 11.2.16 3.3.16 10.3.16 17.3.16	Mrs Pink	Lydia Marie Anna Natasha	1. Observations 2. Conversation with group leader
	Town centre	11.10.16 25.10.16 8.11.16	Mrs Hazel	Suzy Rose	1. Observations 2. Conversation with mothers
Pre-schools	Town centre	12.10.16 24.10.16 1.11.16 4.11.16	Mrs Ebony Mrs Scarlet	Beth Natasha Kate	1. Observations of pre-school sessions 2. Observation of a playgroup session
	East side	13.10.16 27.10.16	Mrs White	Natasha	1. Observations 2. Conversations with mothers
Children's Centres	East side	2.3.16 9.3.16 16.3.16 13.4.16 26.4.16 3.5.16 10.5.16 17.5.16 23.5.16 20.6.16 4.7.16 11.7.16 12.9.16 19.9.16 26.9.16 10.10.16	Mrs Green	Suzy Tessa Natasha Kate	1. Observations of 3 different groups 2. Conversations with group leaders, family outreach workers, Volunteer-Coordinator and mothers.
	Town centre	18.4.16 25.4.16 9.5.16 16.5.16 14.6.16 21.6.16 28.6.16 5.7.16		Eve Claire Anna Jenny Beth	1. Observations of 2 different groups 2. Conversations with family outreach workers, community nursery nurses and speech and language therapist.
Library	Town centre	11.5.15 12.5.15 14.5.15 18.5.16 26.5.16 14.4.16 21.4.16 28.4.16 12.5.16	Mr Red Mrs Blue Mrs Teal	Suzy Lydia Eve Rose Jenny Fiona Beth	1. Observations of a group 2. General observations 3. Conversation with childminder and members of staff.

By organising the data around the four different types of settings (private classes, pre-schools, children's centres and the library) that offered literacy support, I was able to paint four portraits detailing how literacy was presented in each setting and how mothers used and experienced the resources provided there. The existence of similar types of settings in both the town centre and east side of Embervale also enabled me to compare and contrast them according to where they were situated.

4.11 Theory and analysis

Another characteristic of an ethnographic study is that the researcher does not have a pre-decided theoretical framework at the start of the research. Theories can only be applied once data has started to be generated otherwise the researcher is at risk of only looking for data that fits with their preconceived ideas. Therefore I took an inductive (grounded theory) approach in order to try to keep an open mind and allow theory to emerge from the data rather than the other way round (O'Reilly, 2012).

> The strengths of grounded theory are the emphasis on open-mindedness and a willingness to listen, hear and act on the results at all stages of the research process, grounding the analysis in the research data rather than trying to fit the data into an a priori framework (Parr, 1988, p.80).

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) argue that because inductive reasoning draws on multiple data sources and is flexible, any theory that is arrived at is likely to be more reliable than studies where the researcher starts with preconceived ideas.

The generation of data that required immersion in the field meant that I soon began to notice differences and similarities in the ways that resources were offered in different places which seemed to impact on how mothers viewed and engaged with these resources. By reading and re-reading the wealth of data that had been generated, it became very familiar to me and I was able to discover interesting patterns, things that stood out, and accounts that

contradicted each other (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Interviews were transcribed and emerging themes were identified and coded (see Appendix 2). These were triangulated with other data and relevant literature. The 'painting' of the four portraits also helped me to explore the different themes within each type of setting and between settings. Lefebvre's concepts of social space provided another layer to these descriptions. Having already utilised them to gain a sense of how Embervale had been constructed and understood, they were used again to explore the way different settings were organised and experienced.

The act of producing 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) that is characteristic of ethnographic writing helps the researcher to start to identify theories that seem to 'match' with the findings and therefore provide useful analytical frameworks. The first theme to emerge was that the way mothers supported their children's literacy development and experienced support from professionals differed depending on where they went. This linked with earlier ideas expressed in Chapter 2 and 3 around the different ways places and spaces are experienced and how policy constructs discourses that position mothers differently. A deficit discourse constructed some mothers as not knowing how to engage their children in the 'right' literacy practices associated with 'school readiness' and 'school' literacy. These mothers were seen as needing to be educated by professionals employed by the state (so that their children would have a better chance at being 'ready for school' and able to succeed) and were subject to particular pedagogies. Meanwhile other mothers experienced spaces within the town differently and experienced different pedagogies. These findings linked with Bernstein's (1975, 1990) concepts of visible and invisible pedagogies, so initial analysis of the data was focused around these ideas. Another theme to emerge was that the resources that mothers had access to, and the literacy practices they were engaged in were often influenced by their economic, social and cultural capital. For example, mothers whose cultural capital meant they recognised 'school' literacy as being

important for educational achievement, accessed and used particular resources in order to help their children be 'ready' for school. Mothers who had more economic capital were able to access resources that incurred a cost and which poorer mothers couldn't. Bourdieu's (1984, 1986) theories of capital therefore provided a second analytical framework.

Utilising the concepts of others as tools to think about the data, enabled me to answer the original research question around how the resources of a small town are used by mothers to support their young children's literacy development. Additionally, the analysis shed light on broader processes and practices that could help to explain the persistence of educational inequalities in Embervale and further afield.

In keeping with the ideas expressed in Chapter 3 around the concept of place/space and how it holds different meanings for different people, the next chapter describes how different spaces within the town were constructed and experienced by the people who worked in them and the mothers who visited them.

Chapter 5 – Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the study. It incorporates observational, visual and documentary data; interviews with mothers and professionals; and field notes, to paint four portraits. It is worth noting that although I met mothers in particular settings, they often mentioned other settings that formed part of this study. This data is incorporated into the portrait that is most relevant.

The portraits are organised around the four different types of settings that the town provided to support young children's literacy development: the public library, Sure Start Children's Centres, pre-schools and private parent-and-child classes. As has already been discussed in Chapter 2, the library and Children's Centres are public services and their practices are constructed through local and national policy. Similarly, pre-schools are a form of childcare and are therefore subject to government policy in the form of statutory curriculum guidance and funding for places. However, private classes are different. They are run as private businesses and as such as not controlled by government policy, although they may be influenced by it.

I have chosen to begin with the library portrait as this was the setting most closely associated with literacy and therefore how the space had been constructed to promote particular literacy practices was more visible. Although the other settings recognised and promoted certain literacy practices, these were not their only focus.

5.1 Library portrait

At present local authorities in England have a statutory duty to provide a public library service for both adults and children in their area. This has meant that, as well as large city libraries, a network of public libraries has developed in towns and villages across the country. However, fluctuating levels of use and substantial funding cuts to local authority budgets over the last few years have meant that many smaller library branches have been closed or taken over by community groups (often with reduced opening hours). According

to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) who compiled their own dataset from two hundred and seven local authorities across the UK, over the last six years almost eight thousand jobs in libraries have disappeared, three hundred and forty three libraries have closed and two hundred and thirty two have transferred to other organisations, with further reductions still planned (BBC News, 2016). Therefore the central town and city libraries that remain must service a larger and more diverse population. This has included running events and activities to encourage children and families into the library.



Figure 14 - Outside the library

Like the libraries in other small to medium-sized towns in England, the library I studied services not just the town population but also that of its surrounding villages. It is located near a crossroads at one end of the town centre, next to one of the Sure Start Children's Centres on a high street of shops and other businesses. This makes it very visible to pedestrians and road-users (Figure 14). At the time of the study it was open six days a week (including Saturday), and ran two *Wriggly Readers* sessions (for half an hour every Monday afternoon and Thursday morning). These are described as "fun, informal sessions where babies and children aged 0-4 years and their

parents/carers can join in with stories, songs and rhymes" (LCC, 2017). They were led by different staff members on a rota basis. On the occasions I observed, the sessions were busy with around thirty to fifty people (adults and children) in attendance.

5.1.1 Constructing a literacy space

In terms of space within the library, there was a separate section labelled 'Children's Area'. As Mrs Blue stated**,** "It's a closed area – they have got their own space. It's part of the library but, if you like, a separate part of the library" (Figure 15).



Figure 15 - Children's area within the library

As well as enclosing the space, the placement of objects in the area such as rugs, toys, child-size furniture, a colouring table, shallow book-boxes (kinder-boxes) and bright colours marked out this space as different from other spaces in the library. The idea of children needing a separate space in the library was further reinforced by the books for older children being positioned on the reverse of the fiction shelves so they faced towards the adult section of the library and books for teenagers aged 14+ being shelved with the adult fiction. This suggested that it was only primary-aged children and younger that were considered to belong inside the children's area (where their books and toys are kept); as children got older they had to move outside of it until eventually they inhabited the adult space. My

observations confirmed that during school hours, only children under five and their carers used the 'Children's Area'.

How items had been organised within the children's area also made different forms of literacy more prominent than others. In the case of this library, fiction books (including audio-books and reading scheme books) were the most visible, while non-fiction was less visible, and other types of text e.g. film and computers were absent from the children's area. This meant that the choice offered to young children and their carers was mainly between different books rather than different modes of literacy. Parents often focused on the picture-books that were kept in the low kinder-boxes, encouraging the children to look at these and borrow them from the library. In addition, staff chose to read a mixture of picture books, including board books, when leading *Wriggly Readers* sessions. These often featured favourite characters (e.g. 'Spot' books by Eric Hill), rhyming text, and interactive properties such as flaps to lift.

When a child suggested books to their parent, the parent would often vet their choices and discard ones they thought were not suitable. In one case, a mother rejected her son's choice of an audiobook on the basis she did not think they were for children, and discouraged him from looking at the chapter books saying "they're for bigger children". Instead she collected some picture books that she thought were appropriate. In another case, a mother was keen to choose books she recognised from her own childhood ('Rosie's Walk' by Pat Hutchins). My observations did not include anyone accessing books from the non-fiction shelves, and the librarians thought that children and adults would only look at this section if they had a school project to do (although I suspect the internet has replaced the need for these types of books). By placing the picture books, reading scheme books and other forms of fiction in the most prominent positions within this space (whilst non-fiction was marginalised), certain forms of literacy for young children were being promoted (Figure 16). Children and parents were offered predominantly printed forms of text. This matches what government policy has favoured in relation to early

years' and primary literacy curricula, and shows how discourses from other places construct 'conceived space' which then contributes to the construction of 'perceived space' (Lefebvre, 1991).

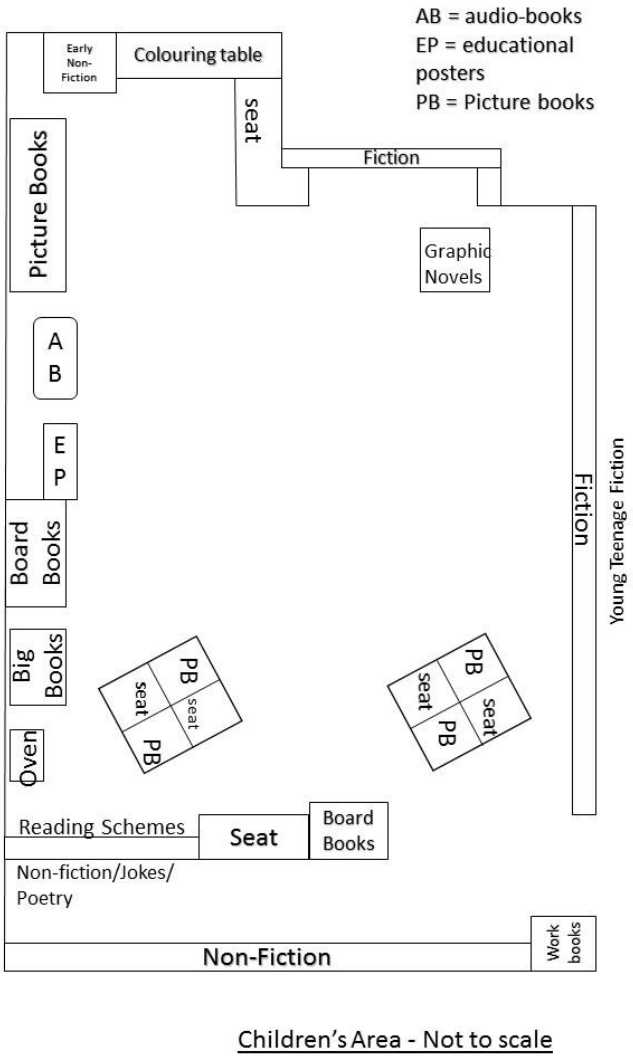


Figure 16 - Plan of the library's children's area

A further example of this is the *Summer Reading Challenge* that is run in libraries across England and Wales, including this one, to encourage children (aged four to eleven) to read over the summer holidays. The children are incentivised to read six books and receive various free rewards for doing so, such as stickers and medals. Children are able to read any sort of book (including reading a board-book to a younger sibling, picture books, reading scheme books, teen books etc.) and can also listen to audio-books. Mrs Teal believed that

children would feel they had a real choice and would see the range of books the library had to offer. She said that using computers, tablets and mobile-phones did not count because although people think these are reading and educational, they are "distracting… [and] not the same as having an appreciation for a book." This can be seen as another example of the library promoting a particular type of children's literacy that places book-based modes of literacy above other forms, whilst believing that it offers children and parents a good choice.

The dominance of females in this space, particularly mothers and staff that ran events, constructed a 'female space' which may have presented literacy to young children as a predominantly female practice. Librarians commented that the adults that brought children to events and to use the children's library were predominantly mothers (with some grandmothers) and all my observations confirmed this. The few males that I saw in the children's area did not seem as comfortable here. One quickly chose some books for his child and then left. Another seemed to be fixing a pushchair wheel while mother and daughter sat together at the colouring table. Another let his child play while he checked his phone, then quickly read a book to his child before leaving empty-handed. The relative absence of males within the children's space was likely to be indicative of working patterns where fathers are more likely to work full-time and females are more likely to be the main carers of children. However, the behaviour of those men that were able to use the library suggested that a 'counterspace' (Lefebvre, 1991) had been constructed that they were not comfortable in and stayed away from. This also reinforced the idea that mothers were primarily responsible for their children's care and learning.

The mothers I met at the library talked about how they read with their children at home. Eve said that from a young age she and her husband had read with both their sons every bedtime - "they share a bedroom at the moment so they both go to bed at the same time. They either choose their own book or they'll have the same book, so

we let them decide." She was keen on letting them choose, and showed me some 'Scooby Doo' books (based on a popular TV character) that her youngest son had chosen himself from the library. Fiona also mentioned that her eleven month old son was "lucky" as he had a lot of books given to him by other family members so she was able to read him lots of stories and he loved books. Rose, on the other hand, said that it was her mother (her daughter's grandmother) that did most of the reading with her daughter – "my mother's quite good at reading with her. So they do a lot of reading together. And my mother tries to get her to memorise some of the words, and they sing songs together. And they repeat after each other." Because her mother had experience of working with children with special needs in a school, Rose felt that she was better than her at getting her daughter to join in. For Beth, who was Polish, the library offered her books that were written in Polish as well as English. She described how she visited the library every week with her children and collected some Polish books as well as English ones. She would then translate the English stories, such as 'The Gruffalo' (by Julia Donaldson) into Polish (although she would keep the characters' names the same) as she read them to her children. In this way, book-based modes of literacy seemed to be the preferred mode of literacy for mothers of young children, and mothers seemed to take most of the responsibility for visiting the library and reading to their young children.

However, unlike the library staff, mothers saw a role for other technologies in promoting their children's literacy. Eve talked about giving her sons screen time on a tablet as she felt it had a place in helping their learning, although she did stress that she limited the amount of time they spent on it. She mentioned two apps they used: 'Alphablocks' and 'Numberjacks' (the first links letters with their phonic sounds, and the other helps with recognition of number and counting; both are based on popular TV programmes). Rose also mentioned watching television as a way to promote her daughter's learning. Alongside technology, Eve talked about letting her sons

write on a whiteboard which she thought was better than pen and paper as they could easily rub out any mistakes rather than having to start over again and was probably easier to write on. She also said that she had taught her son the alphabet by singing a song to him whilst he was in the pushchair. Rose mentioned trying to do some writing with her daughter but she was not very good at holding a pencil. For Rose, talk and language seemed to be her main concern for her daughter's literacy development. She talked about playing together with little plastic figures and making up what they were doing, her daughter talking to the dog and telling him off, and letting her daughter 'read' a book by looking at the pictures which she often found her doing independently. She was proud of her two and a half year old daughter's vocabulary and felt she was already using language that was beyond what most children of her age could use. Oral language was also important for Fiona, who believed her role was to spend lots of time talking to her son and singing nursery rhymes which he loved. She was proud that her eleven month old son seemed to be making a new sound each week and was already babbling. Therefore, while these mothers subscribed to the librarians' view of young children's literacy as something they could support through reading stories and singing songs, they also recognised other aspects of their development that they were keen to support such as talking, using a range of vocabulary, recognising and using different sounds, writing and interacting with technology (tablets and television).

5.1.2 Getting 'ready for school'

The librarians felt that the library played an important role in supporting children's school learning, and they were keen to promote this. They talked about literacy as something that children need to be immersed in from a very young age so they will find it less of a struggle when they are learning to read at school. These ideas were reinforced by the presence of reading scheme books, educational posters, workbooks and posters relating to the educational benefits of reading and the homework help service, which further emphasised

the children's area as one that promoted a type of literacy associated with school and learning (Figures 17 and 18). This demonstrates how policy discourses around 'school readiness' and 'school' literacy have infiltrated this space.



Figure 17 - Reading scheme books and wooden oven in the library



Figure 18 - Educational posters in the library

Eve said she borrowed reading scheme books for her four year old son who was in his first year at school "because he is fairly good at reading, we do come to the library every week and they've got the 'beginner books' just there. So we do get additional books out alongside the school books which I think helps." She also thought that it was important that her children had been exposed to books at a young age and "that they know they can come to the library and get a book of their choosing. I'll even come on a Saturday morning… and they will sit and choose books, and we'll sit and read books as well. So I think it's important… they are just being exposed to books."

One mother that was visiting the library with her young daughter showed her concern for her development when she watched another child sitting at the small colouring table. She commented to his mother, "He's drawing. I keep trying to get my daughter to do that but she just wants to dance around." She also asked how old he was, and when the mother replied that he was two and a half, she replied, "My daughter is nineteen months but not speaking like him. I really want her to say more sounds." The boy's mother reassured her that the Health Visitor had told her not to worry about talking until a child is three. Another mother who was concerned about her child's development and getting her 'ready for school' was Rose who attended *Wriggly Readers* with her two and a half year old daughter because,

> I want to get her to quite a basic level before she goes to school. Because her birthday is the 29th of August, I feel that there is going to be quite a difference between her and the children that are obviously born in September. So I try to read to her as much as possible. I do try and do things with flashcards with her but she's not quite ready for letters. She is at home with me all the time. So she'll start pre-school in September. So yeah, I'm just trying to improve her vocabulary – make sure she can talk to people and interact.

In this way, Rose saw the library as a place that could help her support her child's development. *Wriggly Readers* offered an

opportunity for her child to interact with others as well as share books so that her vocabulary might be improved before starting school.

5.1.3 Parental responsibility

One librarian thought she worked in the most deprived town in the UK with high levels of illiteracy and that the children's library was really important in trying to tackle that. The idea of literacy being beneficial was reinforced by other staff who felt that children needed to be exposed to it and ready to learn from a young age, but that many parents lacked the skills and education needed to provide this. This view shows the way policy discourses construct literacy and parents in particular ways. Literacy was talked about as a noun in the same way policy has been seen to present it – a set of skills that can be learnt autonomous of context. Parents were accused of being deficient. Mrs Blue felt that some children were not used to engaging with live "entertainment" as they were often sat in front of a television, told to "sit still and be quiet" and ignored. This deficit discourse was used by the librarians to understand and legitimise the inclusion of particular practices in the library. The staff who ran the *Wriggly Readers* sessions tried to create a pedagogical space in which young children could interact with others (adults and children) and learn to behave in appropriate ways, which the librarians believed would help to reduce the effects of their deprivation. Here, children's literacy was no longer just presented as the responsibility of parents, but also of staff who saw their role as setting an example to parents and children through providing resources, demonstrating skills and modelling the types of behaviours they thought were important for children's learning and development.

> And you interact with the kids on anything from them turning the pages, to feeling them if it's touchy-feely, down to if it's somebody's birthday. We sing 'Happy Birthday' for them. With the stories and rhymes you do, you're singing anyway so it's just joining them in, and also with each other, because some kids come along and they don't see other children until they get here. Sometimes, it's pre-nursery, pre four-plus, so they've not had the other interactions so

> it's also about them interacting with each other as well which is the key thing. (Mrs Teal)

Staff therefore sat on a chair in order to be seen by the children and adults who sat on the floor amidst various cushions and soft toys. My observations showed that the books with flaps did engage the older children (who were walking) as they could approach the leader of the session and join in with lifting the flaps. Songs were chosen by the staff member, and consisted of nursery rhymes, such as 'Twinkle, Twinkle', 'Grand Old Duke of York' and 'Row, Row, Row Your Boat', and songs such as 'Dingle, Dangle Scarecrow', 'Five Little Monkeys' and 'Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes'. Although these varied slightly depending on who was leading the session, all the songs and rhymes involved some sort of action and movement. This particularly engaged the older children who were able to move and do the actions independently. 'Old MacDonald' was very popular as the leader had a bag full of animal puppets and soft toys that were produced as each animal was introduced in the song. The toy would then be given to a child to look after, and the chosen child could proudly show it to their adult. In this way, sessions were constructed to encourage particular forms of communication and interaction.

The librarians talked a lot about parental responsibility, in terms of reading to children, bringing them to the library, acting as good role-models, helping them to learn and interact, and to choose and borrow books.

> It's a real family experience to use a library. I think a child gets the most out of using a library when their parents encourage it and model good behaviour and so on, and not just leave their child there and go somewhere else. You need to focus on the child and then the child will gain the most from coming here. (Mrs Blue)

> You do need parents too. Not just a school. And I know that some parents think it's down entirely to the school to do this, but actually if kids don't get the example set in a home environment of some sort. I mean books or reading stuff around, like the newspaper, if

> they don't see parents doing it. Like from nought to five, then I think you are standing an even harder struggle unfortunately. (Mrs Teal)

This was reinforced by a wall display that encouraged sharing a story and recommended popular, well-known picture books thereby emphasising a particular form of printed literacy as the best to read with young children (Figure 19). Various incentives, such as raffles and certificates, were also promoted in *Wriggly Readers* to encourage parents to borrow books so they could continue to read with their children at home.



Figure 19 – Library wall display

My observations in the library at times other than *Wriggly Readers*, showed that some adults did try to encourage their young child(ren) to sit and look at a book or to join in with choosing books to borrow, but not always successfully. Some of the young children listened to a story for a short period of time and liked collecting books for the adult to read, but in most cases they lost interest before a book was finished and went off to play instead. In a couple of cases children were heard to say that they recognised a particular book from nursery and were keen to point this out, but they did not then go on to read or borrow the book. A few children 'read' to their adult or to themselves by describing the pictures on the page or, if it was a familiar story, trying to repeat phrases they remembered, but often discarded the book before the end. However on one occasion, a boy

was so engaged with sharing and reading the picture books with his mother that he did not want to leave the library.

> The boy and his mum finish reading one book and the boy goes off to get another. "Which one do you want mummy?" He finds a book and mum says "That's Harry and the Dinosaurs". He says "How do you know?" and mum replies "I can read it." The boy goes back to sitting on his mum's lap while she reads to him. When that book is finished, mum suggests they leave, but he says "one more!" He finds Stick Man and says "Look it's the branch. You can't catch me, I'm the Gingerbread branch!" Mum chuckles and says "Why don't you read it to me? Look at the pictures." They read it together with mum asking questions about the pictures to help him along. At the end, he puts the book back saying "I love that story". He wants to stay in the library longer but mum hurries him along. (Field notes)

Alongside understanding how the staff saw their role and how they organised the space to reflect this, I observed practices that did not necessarily fit with how they intended the space to be used. For example, whilst parents were seen as having responsibility for their young children in terms of introducing them to literacy, sharing books and interacting with them, in many cases there was little interaction between them. Children were more concerned with playing and the adults were often seen chatting to each other or using their phone. Nearly all the young children I observed spent most of their time playing with the toys. A particular favourite was a wooden oven in which the children often enjoyed cooking the books (Figure 17). Other games included rolling around and doing acrobatics on the rugs, and spinning the audio-book stand around. Jenny described what she did with her children when they visited the library – "They like to play on the big rug. They have the rug with all the shapes on it. And we'll pick some books for the week and sometimes they draw, sometimes I'll read them a story." It seemed that, because the children's area provided an enclosed, comfortable space, many of the visitors used it as somewhere to socialise and play, rather than just engaging in the literacy practices the staff were keen to encourage.

In this way, they were able to create their own 'lived space' within the library (Lefebvre, 1991).

Another example of this was at the *Wriggly Readers* sessions where not all parents joined in with the singing, actions or listening to the stories. When the leader of the session was sharing books with the children many of the adults began to talk amongst themselves, to the point of making it hard to hear the story unless you were very close to the book. It was clear that there were small groups of mothers that met up here each week. Suzy mentioned that going to *Wriggly Readers* had been great for her as she had made friends with a group of mothers and they always went out for something to eat afterwards. She had also bumped into an old friend from school whom she had lost contact with but who had a son the same age as hers and lived very close by. She was really happy about this as it meant her son would have a close friend when he started school who would be in the same class. She was also pleased that when she returned to work (part-time) she would still be able to take her son to *Wriggly Readers* and meet up with her friends.

The older children often stood in front of the leader in the hope of lifting flaps or collecting a toy, but obstructed the view of the rest of the audience. This meant that children who were sitting further away quickly became disengaged: several just wandered around, some looked at a book on their own, others played with toys, and the youngest children could only see or hear a story if their carer read them one at the same time (which a few did). Some parents did join in with the songs and actions, often halting their conversations in order to sing along but quickly resumed them when another book was brought out. It seemed that the staff were forced to choose short, simple picture books to read, and to intersperse them with action songs, in order to try to keep everyone's attention. One member of staff remarked that it was hard to get the children's attention, but that it was easier in school holidays when older children would come along as they helped with the singing and encouraged the younger ones to join in.

In this way, *Wriggly Readers* sessions were transformed into something other than what was intended – a 'counterspace' (Lefebvre, 1991). They seemed to be mainly spaces for mothers to socialise while their children were being entertained by others. Staff were aware of this, with one commenting that they had a problem with mothers chatting during the session but there was not a lot they could do about it as they did not want to put people off coming. However, it was not just the staff that remarked on this as I overheard some mothers complaining about others chatting throughout the session. Suzy commented that she had tried taking her older son to *Wriggly Readers* when he was a baby but had been put off by how busy it was. As she had heard that the sessions were still as busy as ever, she had been put off taking her second child. Jenny also commented that she had gone with her older children, but that now she had twins she found going to organised groups too stressful. However she liked visiting the library with her children at other times. For Beth, the session had suited her daughter but her younger son did not like singing and therefore did not want to join in. She, along with Rose, felt that certain leaders were better than others and that the sessions were better for very active children as they were more engaged.

5.1.4 Place and time

Whether or not mothers felt comfortable and whether they thought their child would benefit from the session were important factors in their reasons for going. However, they were not the only considerations. Fiona and Eve said that their children really enjoyed it, but Eve also commented that she was glad the sessions still ran in school holidays as it meant her oldest son (who was at school) could enjoy them too. Kate explained,

> If you have your baby in the summer holidays, it's going to be a long time before you realise there's anything going on. I think the library groups might still run. *Wriggly Readers* is the one thing I wanted to do and it's the one thing I never manage to get to. I think we'll do that in the summer holidays.

The fact that lots of other groups closed down in school holidays or would not allow older children to attend was another reason for the popularity of *Wriggly Readers*. Being able to take children of differing ages was important to some mothers, as well as the fact that it was a free activity. I observed several mothers and a childminder with children of different ages. A few mothers that I spoke to over the course of the research commented that finding groups where they could take an older pre-schooler and a baby was particularly difficult, as well as the cost of attending different groups. As Eve stated, "I could find things and pay for it but again, you've not got that disposable income, especially when you've got two [children]. So now the summer's here, we obviously come here, I take them swimming an awful lot, we go to the parks and things like that. I'm all up for trying to find things that are free. You just can't afford it."

Fiona also liked the flexibility of the group; she could turn up whenever she liked, and go in and out of the session as she pleased. She had not gone to any other groups with her son as she thought she would feel awkward attending to her son's needs during a session. She said she had felt embarrassed about breastfeeding in public, and as a result she now felt guilty that she had not taken her son to more groups but was glad they managed to go to *Wriggly Readers* nearly every week. Rose also described feeling guilty that she had not taken her daughter to more groups as she felt that she was now quite shy and quiet around others. She blamed herself for not liking the big playgroups which she described as a "free-for-all" and for not being able to afford to do lots of things because she was not working.

Some mothers mentioned other constraints such as parking costs and difficulties parking nearby. Although describing herself as an avid reader, Marie had never visited the library as she did know where she was supposed to park. However, she was interested in taking her daughter to a *Wriggly Readers* session as well as seeing what books were on offer, and thought she might try to make the effort soon.

In summary, the library constructed a space that presented a particular understanding of literacy to young children and their carers. This often matched policy discourses with an emphasis on literacy as a set of skills to be learnt and the importance of supporting 'school' literacy. 'School readiness' was a concern for the librarians and this was reflected in the way the library had been organised as well as how they viewed parents. For example, some parents were seen as deficient and needing to be shown how to engage their children in particular literacy practices that would support their learning. Printed forms of text dominated the space and were promoted through incentive schemes and literacy events.

Mothers were seen to take prime responsibility for their children's literacy, often subscribing to the types of literacy practices encouraged by the library professionals and policy discourses. However, they also recognised a role for technology in the form of electronic devices and television. Mothers who did not necessarily subscribe to the literacy practices that were promoted by the library professionals were able to create their own 'counterspaces' within the library that conflicted with how the space was intended to be used. Factors that affected whether mothers chose to visit the library were whether they thought their child would benefit and enjoy it, how comfortable they felt there, and because it was one of the few places in the town that was cost-free, open to all ages and available throughout school holidays.

Following the same pattern to the first portrait, the next one moves on to consider how the Sure Start Children's Centres constructed literacy spaces, as well as the importance of the concepts of 'school readiness', parental responsibility, place and time.

5.2 Sure Start Children's Centres portrait

There were two Sure Start Children's Centres: one in the town centre next door to the library and one on the edge of a social housing estate on the east side of the town next door to a nursery and primary school. The Centres ran a timetable of free weekly activities. Some of these were run by outside professionals such as health workers who organised antenatal sessions, midwife appointments and child development checks. Others were run by outreach and pathway support workers and were only available to families who had been referred to them by other services, such as the police, midwives, health visitors and social services. Home-Start, a charity that also offered referral-only support in the home for families with children under five, ran some sessions for parents with young babies. A few groups provided opportunities for parents and their young children to meet and play without the need for referral. These were run by volunteers who tended to be mothers who had previously accessed services within the Centres. The sessions were designed to be open to all but as Mrs Green explained,

> from there we might identify people that may have become more vulnerable. Because they are not all vulnerable at the beginning. They have vulnerabilities at certain points, so I suppose our eyes and ears are midwifery, health visitors, people that come into contact with families.

Furthermore, the Sure Start Children's Centres were established to provide services for families with children up to the age of four, but Mrs Green stressed that their focus was now very much on targeting families from before the birth of their child until the age of two and therefore the majority of families that came to groups had children within this age range (Figure 20).

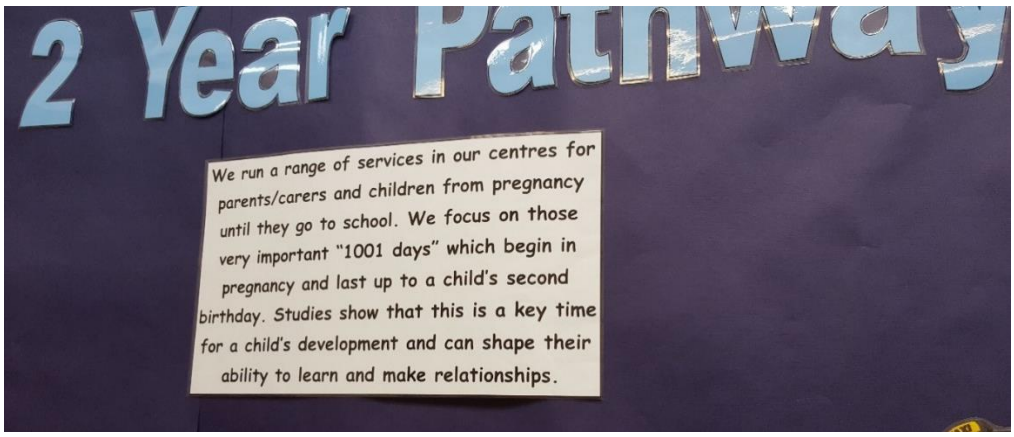


Figure 20 - Children's Centre display

After this time, she explained that most parents accessed funding for free childcare which they were keen for them to do. Information posters and small cards that parents could take away were readily available throughout the Centres (Figure 21).



Figure 21 – Childcare information card

Groups were therefore based around the idea of a two year pathway starting with ante-natal classes and moving on to topics such as communication and the home learning environment (Figure 22). Claire, whose daughter was not quite two years old but had recently

started going to a private nursery two mornings a week, had been in a pathway group since the beginning. She commented that she was now struggling to fit it in and was not expecting to continue coming to the Centre especially once her daughter turned two. She was eligible for the free funding and was hoping to increase her nursery hours. It therefore seemed that once children were in some form of childcare and/or reached the age of two (when the only groups available to them were the volunteer-led play sessions) parents were less likely to access services in the Children's Centres.

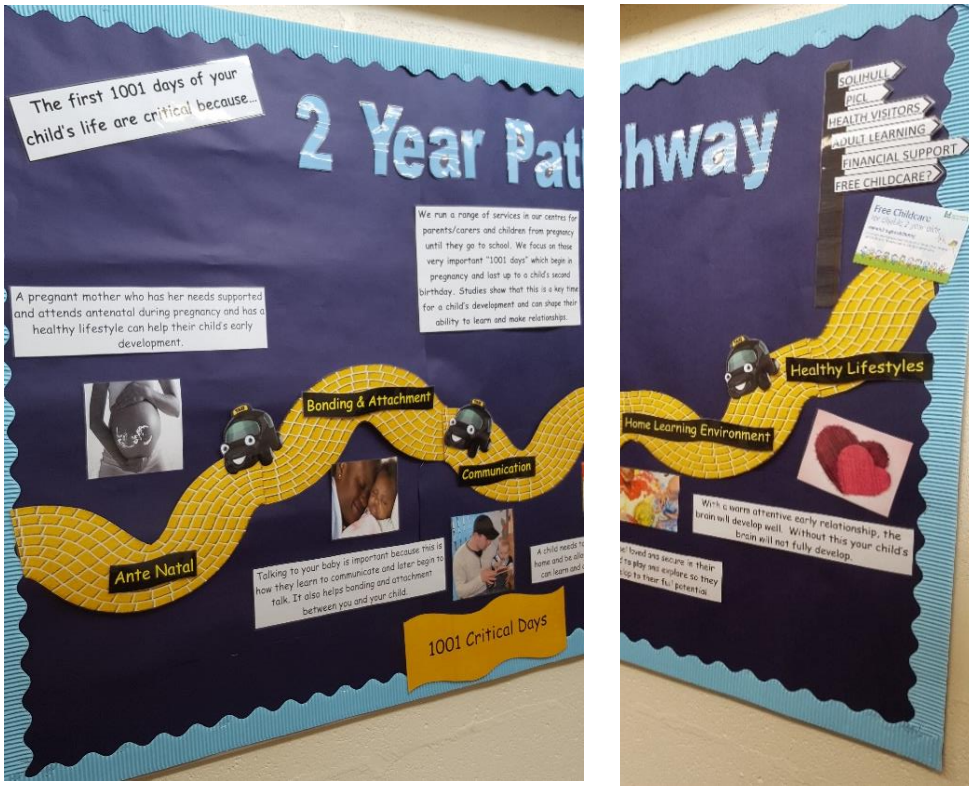


Figure 22 - Children's Centre display

Of the various groups that were available across the two Centres, I wanted to focus on those that appeared to offer support with young children's literacy development. I therefore visited the following three groups at the Centre on the east side of the town: *Baby Giggles (*run by Home-Start), *Parents Involved in their Children's Learning* (*PICL*) and *Jelly Tots* (a *Stay and Play* session run by volunteers, including myself). At the Centre in the town, I visited *Solihull* and *Let's Get*

Talking. I also volunteered at *Lilies* (a *pathway* group in a Centre within the same local authority but not located in Embervale).

5.2.1 Constructing a literacy space

5.2.1.1 Baby Giggles

This group ran for one hour a week for five weeks and was attended by three mothers and their babies who were all less than six months old. It was a stand-alone course for mothers who had been referred to the group because they had already accessed services at the Children's Centre or were receiving help from Home-Start. It was advertised as helping parents develop an understanding of how to interact with their children and the milestones for speech and language. The Home-Start employee reported that data collected by the Health Visitors showed that there was an acute problem in the area with children starting school with very poor language skills.

In the first session, the leader explained that the course was designed to help the mothers understand their baby's development and how they could support this at home. Milestones for different aspects of development were shared each week and the mothers were encouraged to complete a 'Learning Journey' for their child so they could track when they met each milestone. They therefore spent some of each session organising a personal scrapbook ('Learning Journey') that they had been given on the first week – they added photographs that had been taken of their baby in the sessions and attempted to match them to the different milestones. Handouts were given out every week to help the mothers understand and record different aspects of development, such as words their child reacted to as well as ideas for how they could/should interact with their baby. These often led to discussions between the mothers and leader about what they were already doing at home. Each session ended with the leader sharing out some simple musical instruments, such as shakers and drums, and asking mothers to select a traditional nursery rhyme from a set of titles she had prepared. The adults then attempted to sing the rhymes to the babies. Mothers were familiar with shorter

rhymes such as ‘Twinkle Twinkle’, ‘Hickory, Dickory Dock’ and ‘Row, Row Your Boat’, but struggled with longer ones such as ‘Sing a Song of Sixpence’.

Speech and language was a particular focus of one of the sessions. The handouts detailed how hearing, understanding and talking should develop from birth to one year of age, and there were eight sheets of activities for how to promote these. These included talking and commenting to the baby whilst completing everyday tasks, pointing at and describing pictures in books, singing nursery rhymes and repeating noises the baby makes whilst making eye-contact (Figures 23 and 24).

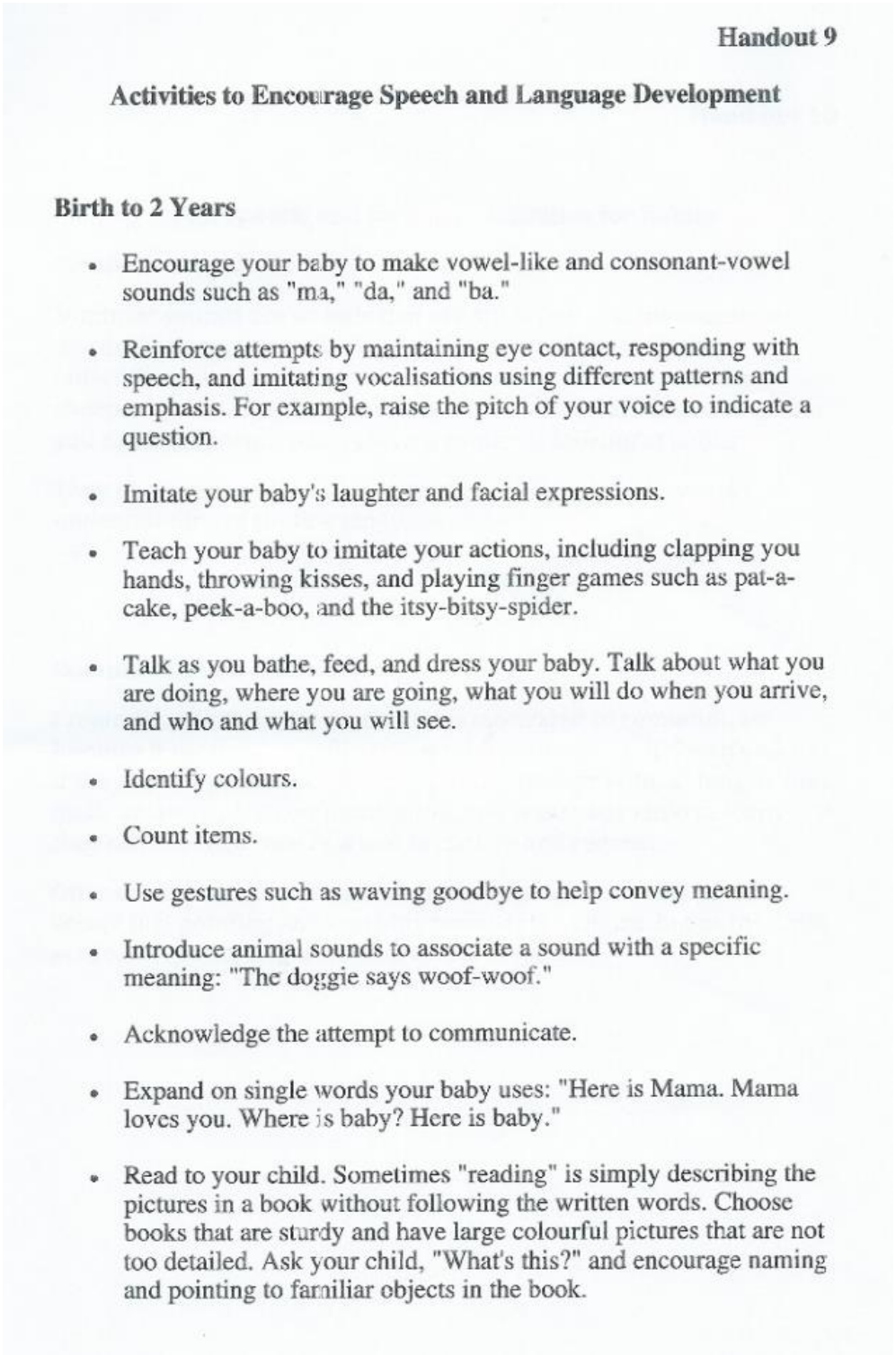


Hand out 8

Speech and Language Milestones Birth to 1 year

Hearing and Understanding	Talking
Birth–3 Months • Startles to loud sounds • Quiets or smiles when spoken to • Seems to recognize your voice and quiets if crying • Increases or decreases sucking behavior in response to sound	**Birth–3 Months** • Makes pleasure sounds (cooing, gooing) • Cries differently for different needs • Smiles when sees you
4–6 Months • Moves eyes in direction of sounds • Responds to changes in tone of your voice • Notices toys that make sounds • Pays attention to music	**4–6 Months** • Babbling sounds more speech-like with many different sounds, including *p, b* and *m* • Chuckles and laughs • Vocalizes excitement and displeasure • Makes gurgling sounds when left alone and when playing with you
7 Months–1 Year • Enjoys games like peek-a-boo and pat-a-cake • Turns and looks in direction of sounds • Listens when spoken to • Recognizes words for common items like "cup", "shoe", "book", or "juice" • Begins to respond to requests (e.g. "Come here" or "Want more?")	**7 Months–1 Year** • Babbling has both long and short groups of sounds such as "tata upup bibibibi" • Uses speech or noncrying sounds to get and keep attention • Uses gestures to communicate (waving, holding arms to be picked up) • Imitates different speech sounds • Has one or two words (hi, dog, dada, mama) around first birthday, although sounds may not be clear

Figure 23 - Handout detailing the speech and language milestones



Handout 9

Activities to Encourage Speech and Language Development

Birth to 2 Years

- Encourage your baby to make vowel-like and consonant-vowel sounds such as "ma," "da," and "ba."
- Reinforce attempts by maintaining eye contact, responding with speech, and imitating vocalisations using different patterns and emphasis. For example, raise the pitch of your voice to indicate a question.
- Imitate your baby's laughter and facial expressions.
- Teach your baby to imitate your actions, including clapping you hands, throwing kisses, and playing finger games such as pat-a-cake, peek-a-boo, and the itsy-bitsy-spider.
- Talk as you bathe, feed, and dress your baby. Talk about what you are doing, where you are going, what you will do when you arrive, and who and what you will see.
- Identify colours.
- Count items.
- Use gestures such as waving goodbye to help convey meaning.
- Introduce animal sounds to associate a sound with a specific meaning: "The doggie says woof-woof."
- Acknowledge the attempt to communicate.
- Expand on single words your baby uses: "Here is Mama. Mama loves you. Where is baby? Here is baby."
- Read to your child. Sometimes "reading" is simply describing the pictures in a book without following the written words. Choose books that are sturdy and have large colourful pictures that are not too detailed. Ask your child, "What's this?" and encourage naming and pointing to familiar objects in the book.

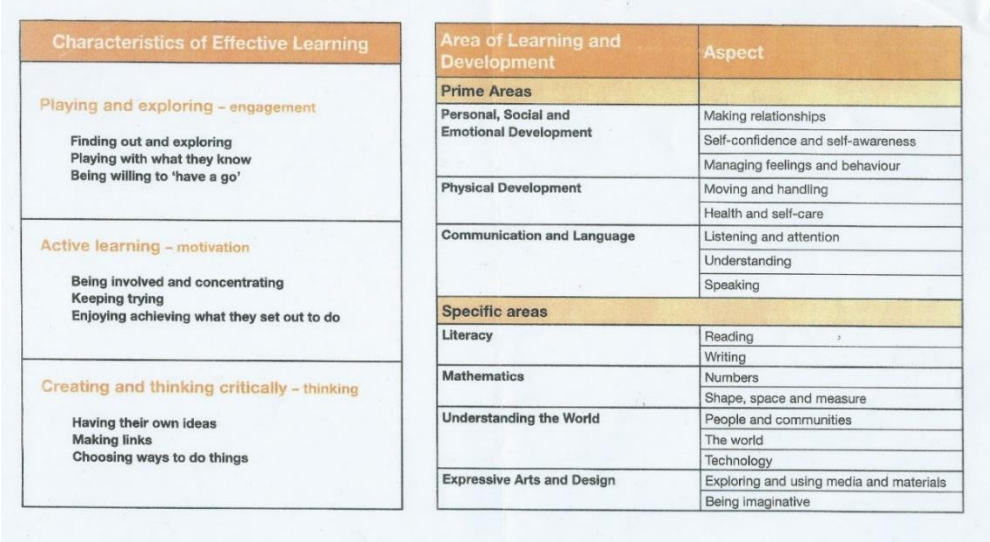
Figure 24 - Handout with ideas for promoting speech and language development

From six months old, mothers were told to read several times a day for short periods of time and to make books accessible to their child. The leader explained that lots of children were turning up at school not knowing what to do with a book so it was really important that

they were encouraged to share and enjoy books from a young age. Suzy, a mother of a four year old and a nine month old, had previously attended the *Baby Giggles* group after being referred for support due to post-natal depression. She recognised the importance of reading to her children from a young age and stressed that she or her husband read bedtime stories to her older child every night. Her younger child was now bringing her books to read and she was reading to him at an earlier age than she had done with her older one; she had assumed he would not have been interested at such a young age.

5.2.1.2 PICL

This was a six week course that ran for two hours a week and was intended for parents who were nearing the end of the two year pathway, although other parents could also be referred on to it. Whilst parents were in the session their children were looked after in a free crèche provided in a different room. One father attended with his female partner but stopped attending after two weeks. His argumentative, challenging behaviour had suggested he did not want to be there and he refused to attend any further sessions. Consequently there were approximately seven mothers that attended regularly. The course was designed to help parents understand how children learn so they could support them as they moved onto pre-school. Mrs Green thought that it was "quite empowering for parents to understand the language of professionals and understand where they're coming from." Just like *Baby Giggles*, parents were given a 'Learning Journey' scrapbook to record their child's development. They were also given a list of the seven areas of learning from the *EYFS Framework* (DfE, 2017c) which were glued in at the start of the book (Figure 25) and annotated photographs that the crèche workers prepared for them.



Characteristics of Effective Learning
Playing and exploring – engagement Finding out and exploring Playing with what they know Being willing to 'have a go'
Active learning – motivation Being involved and concentrating Keeping trying Enjoying achieving what they set out to do
Creating and thinking critically – thinking Having their own ideas Making links Choosing ways to do things

Area of Learning and Development	Aspect
Prime Areas	
Personal, Social and Emotional Development	Making relationships
	Self-confidence and self-awareness
	Managing feelings and behaviour
Physical Development	Moving and handling
	Health and self-care
Communication and Language	Listening and attention
	Understanding
	Speaking
Specific areas	
Literacy	Reading
	Writing
Mathematics	Numbers
	Shape, space and measure
Understanding the World	People and communities
	The world
	Technology
Expressive Arts and Design	Exploring and using media and materials
	Being imaginative

Figure 25 - Handout relating to the seven areas of learning from the EYFS Framework

While they were sticking these into their scrapbooks, the leaders of the session encouraged them to identify what their child was doing in the photograph and which area of learning it might relate to. The crèche workers explained to me that they hoped by sharing photographs of what the children liked doing, the mothers might be spurred on to provide the same types of activities at home. In one session the mothers were encouraged to think about what they could do to support their child's learning in the three prime areas (Personal, Social and Emotional Development; Physical Development; Communication and Language) so they would be ready for pre-school and school. However their ideas were not shared or discussed in the session. Like *Baby Giggles,* mothers were given handouts and worksheets to complete each week, either in the session or at home. These outlined the key teaching points of the session and encouraged them to reflect on how they may relate to their own child. For example, in the session on 'Involvement', they were asked to think about a time when their child was completely absorbed in an activity and how they knew this. In the following session, the mothers were directed to play with their child in the crèche while the leaders videoed them. Although they were told to ignore the cameras, it was clear that the mothers felt uncomfortable. The film clips were then

used later in the session to assess the children's levels of involvement. Responses to tasks were often recorded on the flipchart so they could be referred to in future sessions.

Although literacy was not a specific focus of any of the sessions, a DVD clip, which was used to illustrate how a parent could support a child's learning through role play, elicited a discussion about speech development. In the clip the mother was seen questioning her child about what he was doing and sometimes repeating what the child said. At times the child had trouble pronouncing the words he wanted to say. Some of the mothers were concerned that their child was also saying words incorrectly and asked the leaders of the session what they could do to help them. They suggested speaking to the health professional that would carry out their child's two year development check (when they would ask if the child was using at least fifty words) and who could refer them to the *Let's Get Talking* course if they thought it was necessary. They also mentioned that pre-schools would keep their own 'Learning Journeys' for each child and would therefore also be able to advise them if they felt there were any concerns with this aspect of their development. The leaders of the session used this, and other opportunities, to stress the benefits of sending their child to pre-school and to access the free funding they were entitled to. Information cards were given out (Figure 21) and parents were often reminded to contact the council to check their eligibility and to visit some pre-schools in readiness for when their child turned two.

Tessa, who was one of the mothers attending this course, had been regularly going to various groups at the Children's Centre since the age of seventeen when she had had her first child and had been referred to a young parents' group. She was hoping that by successfully completing this course she would be able to get the reference she needed to become a volunteer at the Children's Centre. She had four children ranging from seven years old to three months. She said that she did not read to her children, but her older daughter sometimes read to her younger sister (aged four). Although she said

they owned books, she thought the children were not interested in them. Therefore she did not see the point of going to the library. She described her children spending most of their time playing in the garden, digging holes and playing in tents and tunnels, and her two oldest children enjoying the craft activities she provided for them in the summer holidays. Tessa explained that having four young children made it difficult to give them one-to-one attention, and because she did not drive she was limited in where she could take them. For her, the Children's Centre on the east side of the town, near to where she lived, was the only place she regularly went to.

5.2.1.3 Jelly Tots Stay and Play

This group ran each week during term-time for one and a half hours. It was open to all parents and their children up to the age of five (no referral needed). However attendance was poor with the same four mothers and one father turning up sporadically, often after the session had started. Although this group was available for all children up to the age of five, they ranged from new-born to two years old. As sessions were led by volunteers, the toys and activities varied slightly each week. Some resources were available all the time e.g. home role-play area, large bricks, books, mark-making area, sandpit (Figures 26 and 27); other toys, such as musical instruments, vehicles and small-world toys, were kept in drawers and cupboards and were selected by the volunteers before each session.

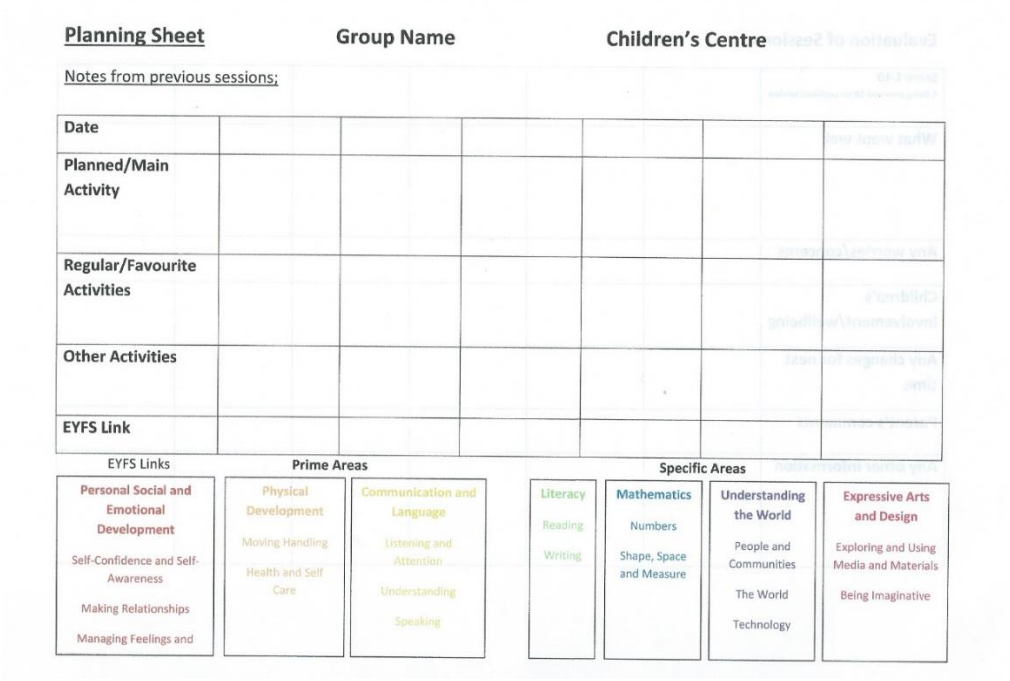


Figure 26 - Room used for Jelly Tots sessions



Figure 27 - Books available in Jelly Tots sessions

Although planning proforma were available (that outlined links that could be made to the seven EYFS areas of learning) these did not appear to be used by the volunteers (Figure 28).



Planning Sheet **Group Name** **Children's Centre**

Notes from previous sessions;

Date						
Planned/Main Activity						
Regular/Favourite Activities						
Other Activities						
EYFS Link						

EYFS Links	Prime Areas		Specific Areas			
Personal Social and Emotional Development Self-Confidence and Self-Awareness Making Relationships Managing Feelings and	**Physical Development** Moving Handling Health and Self Care	**Communication and Language** Listening and Attention Understanding Speaking	**Literacy** Reading Writing	**Mathematics** Numbers Shape, Space and Measure	**Understanding the World** People and Communities The World Technology	**Expressive Arts and Design** Exploring and Using Media and Materials Being Imaginative

Figure 28 - Planning proforma for volunteer-led groups at the Children's Centres

If craft activities were provided, they linked to key events, such as colouring in pictures of the Queen when it was her birthday, and colouring woodland animals and leaves to create an autumn display. Occasionally children were seen to collect a book and spend time turning the pages; sometimes parents would attempt to engage their child and read the book, but more often than not, the child quickly lost interest and went to find something else to do. One father asked if they could provide something like a bouncy castle or soft play as his son enjoyed more physical play but he was told by the volunteer that this was not possible. One mother wanted to do some singing but the volunteer laughed and did not take her seriously. However, the mother persevered and started to sing some action songs ('Wind the Bobbin Up', and 'Wheels on the Bus') which the older children happily joined in with while the younger children watched and listened. Despite this, the volunteer did not see the point in introducing it into any other sessions. In her opinion parents that came to this group just wanted to sit and have a chat whilst their children played around them. Another volunteer commented (on several occasions) that the mothers should take more responsibility for their children. She was particularly annoyed with one who had

apparently let her son run around with paint on his hands which he had then smeared up the wall. Observations showed parents getting involved if their child brought something to show them, asked for something or was upset. And if a craft activity had been set up, mothers were keen for their child to have a go and often joined in. The Volunteer-Coordinator for the Centres expressed the opinion that parents would like them to provide sessions like the private classes but they did not want to pay for them. However, they could not be expected to provide these types of activities for free, and she thought that the *Stay and Play* sessions encouraged parents to interact with their children.

Kate, the mother who requested singing, admitted that her two year old daughter enjoyed other groups she took her to where they did singing and thought that it helped her development. However she confessed that she did not do as much reading with her two year old daughter as she thought she ought to. They sometimes got books out at home and looked at the pictures but did not always read them because her daughter often lost interest after about two pages and wanted to do something else. Kate was adamant that she did not want to force her daughter to do anything at this age; she focused on things she enjoyed doing such as singing, drawing and gluing. She was also reluctant to use the library as she thought her daughter would destroy the books and she'd end up having to pay for them.

5.2.1.4 Solihull

This was a ten week course running for two hours a week while children were looked after in a free crèche in a separate room. The leader that ran the sessions explained that the course was about helping parents to understand their own style of parenting and the behaviour of their children, a chance to make friends and get support from other parents as well as time away from their children. It was offered at the end of the two year pathway in preparation for what the leader called 'the terrible twos', but other parents who were struggling with their child's behaviour were often referred onto the course by health visitors, community nursery nurses and social

services. At the start of the course eight mothers and one father were attending but attendance reduced over the weeks so that by the end only two or three mothers were turning up. The leader commented that she felt these were the mothers who had "got it". She could not understand why the ones whom she saw as needing it the most were not making the effort to attend. Unfortunately the father that attended was often quite erratic and confrontational in his behaviour. The leaders of the session considered barring him from the group as they sensed he was making the others feel uncomfortable, but he stopped turning up after the first few weeks.

Although there was not an obvious literacy focus, the leader explained that there was an emphasis on good communication and how children learn and develop. Like *Baby Giggles* and *PICL*, each week parents were given handouts and tasks to complete in the session and at home. Responses from discussions were written on a flipchart so they could be referred back to in future sessions. In one of the earlier sessions a discussion led on to bedtime routines and the father explained that this was different for each of his four children. One liked a bedtime story with his current favourite being 'The Lion King' (based on a Disney film) while an older child read to herself before going to bed. A mother said that if her daughter had behaved well during the day, she allowed her to watch a DVD in her bedroom at bedtime; her favourite was 'Frozen' (a Disney film).

In one session the leader asked the parents what their children were learning at the moment. Parents were then encouraged to think about what might prevent them from learning. This raised a discussion about the use of television. Some mothers thought that it was a distraction which stopped them from learning "because they're just sat there not doing anything", while another mother thought that "on *Disney Junior* they teach them stuff." One session involved the leader explaining the importance of young children (before the age of three) making connections in their brain. She said that the more experiences children have and the more they are repeated, the stronger the connections are. She gave the example of a child

wanting to read the same book over and over again. This showed they were making connections by anticipating what would happen next and being able to join in with the story. She also referred to five things that children should experience each day so they could make the connections they needed to thrive: play, talk, cuddle, relax and respond (Figure 29).

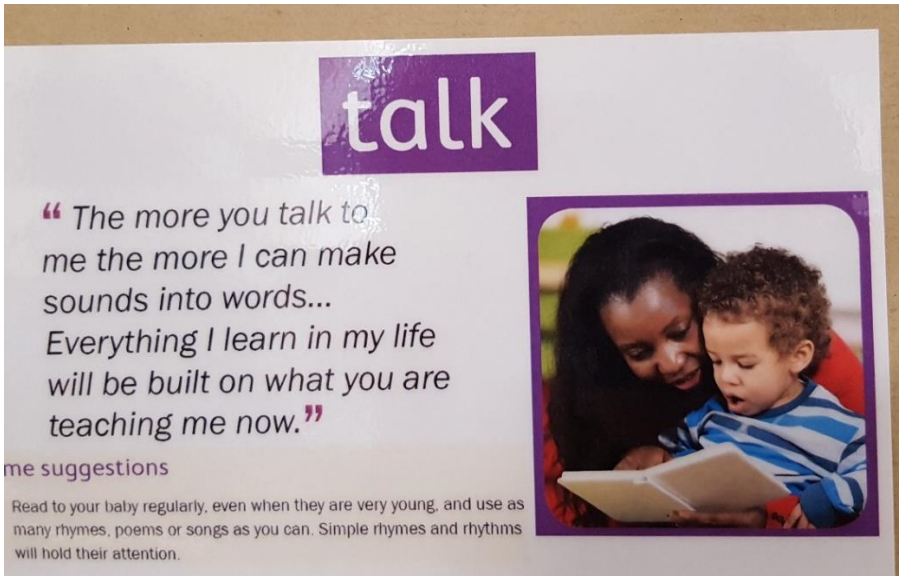


Figure 29 – Children’s Centre display

One very detailed handout that was given to parents to read (but was not discussed) outlined the developmental and emotional milestones a child was expected to achieve at various ages from birth to eighteen years. These included aspects of literacy such as copying speech sounds, developing a fine pincer grasp, listening eagerly to stories, writing letters and reading simple stories.

Claire, a single mother who attended this course as part of the ‘pathway’ programme, described how she read books with her nearly-two year old daughter most afternoons. She said she sounded out letters for her daughter while pointing to a letter in a word, and that her daughter liked to choose a book from the small collection of simple board books that were kept under the TV at home. While I was there the TV was showing an episode of ‘Peppa Pig’ which Claire said was her daughter’s favourite, but she seemed more interested in climbing on the furniture and playing with a tablet device. She

brought the tablet to her mother several times so she could select an app for her – there was the choice of a balloon popping game, a farm game, nursery rhymes and painting. Claire said that her daughter really liked the nursery rhymes and selected 'Row, Row Your Boat' for her. Her daughter was able to listen to the rhyme while watching it being animated and seemed to particularly enjoy it when a crocodile appeared at the end. She asked for this a further two times, then played balloon popping for a short while before asking for the nursery rhymes again. Claire told me that she was going to get her a tablet computer for her second birthday.

Anna, a single mother with a three year daughter had got onto this course after asking the community nursery nurse for help with her daughter's boisterous behaviour. In terms of literacy, she explained that she did a lot with her daughter.

> She's got a Leap Pad E-Reader Pen. So I sit with her and do them with her, because it's got sheets in that you can practise letters and all that kind of thing […] I do a lot of tracing with her as well… Because we like crafty things, she makes all of her birthday cards and things like that. So I make her write in the cards, and I sort of do, green dot, red dot. She does a lot of that […] We read every night. A book every night. And I don't read the same book. We read a different book. And I vary the types of books we have – some'll be quite fun books where she can take part, and we've got puppet books. And then I've bought some early reading books that have tasks in the back that follow on from the story. So she's had to sort of remember what's gone on in the story and answer the questions, there's sounding words, and there's pictures without any words. She can't read but she has to tell the story from the pictures, and she is very imaginative anyway so she does look at books, and she'll read them by looking at the pictures and start telling the story. It's probably, obviously, way-off from what the story's about, but she uses the pictures […] And we go on quite a lot of walks and go on little adventures – she's obsessed with 'The Gruffalo' and the 'Stick Man' [both by Julia Donaldson] so everywhere we go we have to collect sticks.

Jenny, a mother of five children, had got onto this course after asking the pre-school (that her three year old twins attended) if there was any help available for understanding the challenging behaviour of one of them. She also described how she valued reading books to her children from a young age.

> I've always read books with them...They all love books. I've never pushed any of the children to read because I think they will when they're ready […] I do limit the amount of television that they have – I'm a bit horrible like that, but they do generally have about half an hour while I'm making dinner […] And I've read with all my children, and I would say I like them to see me read, but whenever I sit down to read something, they all climb all over me. But I do think it's important that children see you read for pleasure, and not just read because you have to read. All the children like reading. I'm really lucky because they all like books.

Jenny and Anna were two of the mothers who completed the whole course.

5.2.1.5 Let's Get Talking

This course was run by two Community Nursery Nurses (CNNs) over four weeks, for one and a half hours a week. Four mothers and one father (who accompanied one of the mothers for the first two weeks) attended with their two or three year old child. They had been referred onto the course due to a concern with their child's speech development. In most cases this had been flagged up at the two year development check that was advertised in the Children's Centres through displays and information cards (Figure 30) and that all parents were invited to by their Health Visitor.

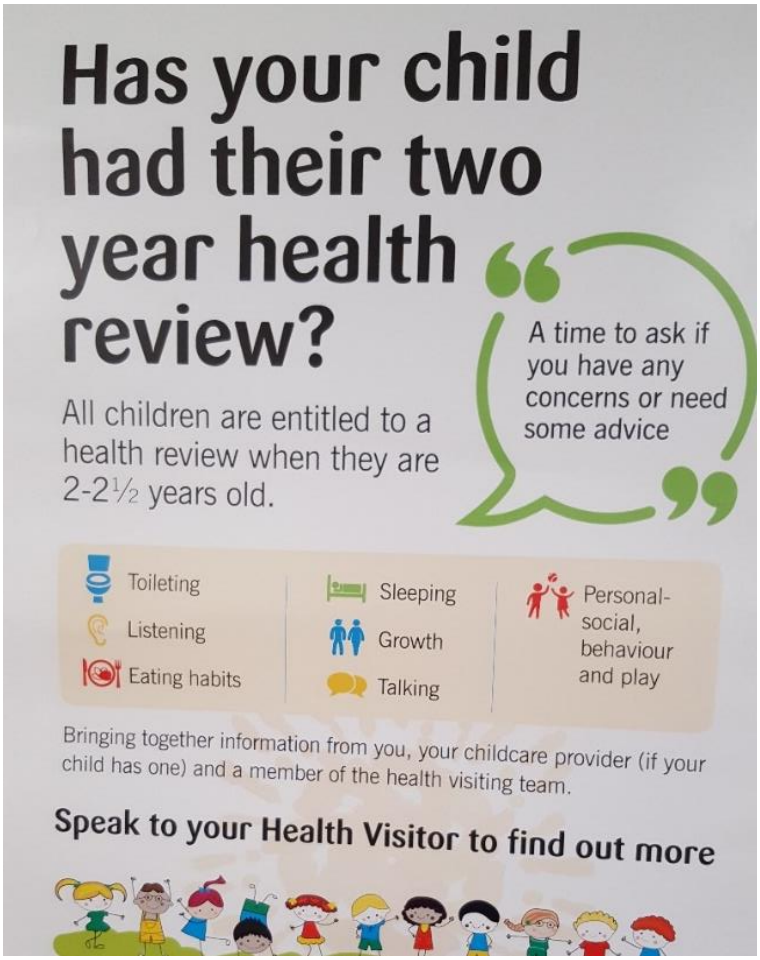


Figure 30 - Poster displayed in the Children's Centres

One family had been referred on to this course by their daughter's pre-school but it was felt by the CNNs that she did not really have a problem with her speech as she was forming sentences and was quite chatty with her parents, even though she was struggling to pronounce some letter sounds.

Mrs Green explained that this was a group "where they encourage parents to understand a bit more about how to communicate with their children and strategies they can be doing at home to help". One of the CNNs also commented that the course was run because parents could not access the Speech and Language Service until a child was three years old so there was the hope that the course might prevent the need for further help. Because resources were stretched, the Speech and Language Therapists preferred parents to have been on the course before they were brought in to help.

Sessions began with a 'hello' song where children were greeted by their names and encouraged to say "hello". Parents joined in but the children were reluctant. After a short game of rolling a ball between the children and encouraging them to say each other's names (which they would not do) they were allowed to go off and play. The room was normally used as a crèche so it had toys and books readily available. The CNNs also put out different activities each week such as jigsaws, vehicles and drawing equipment (Figures 31 and 32).



Figure 31 - Toys and books available in Let's Get Talking sessions



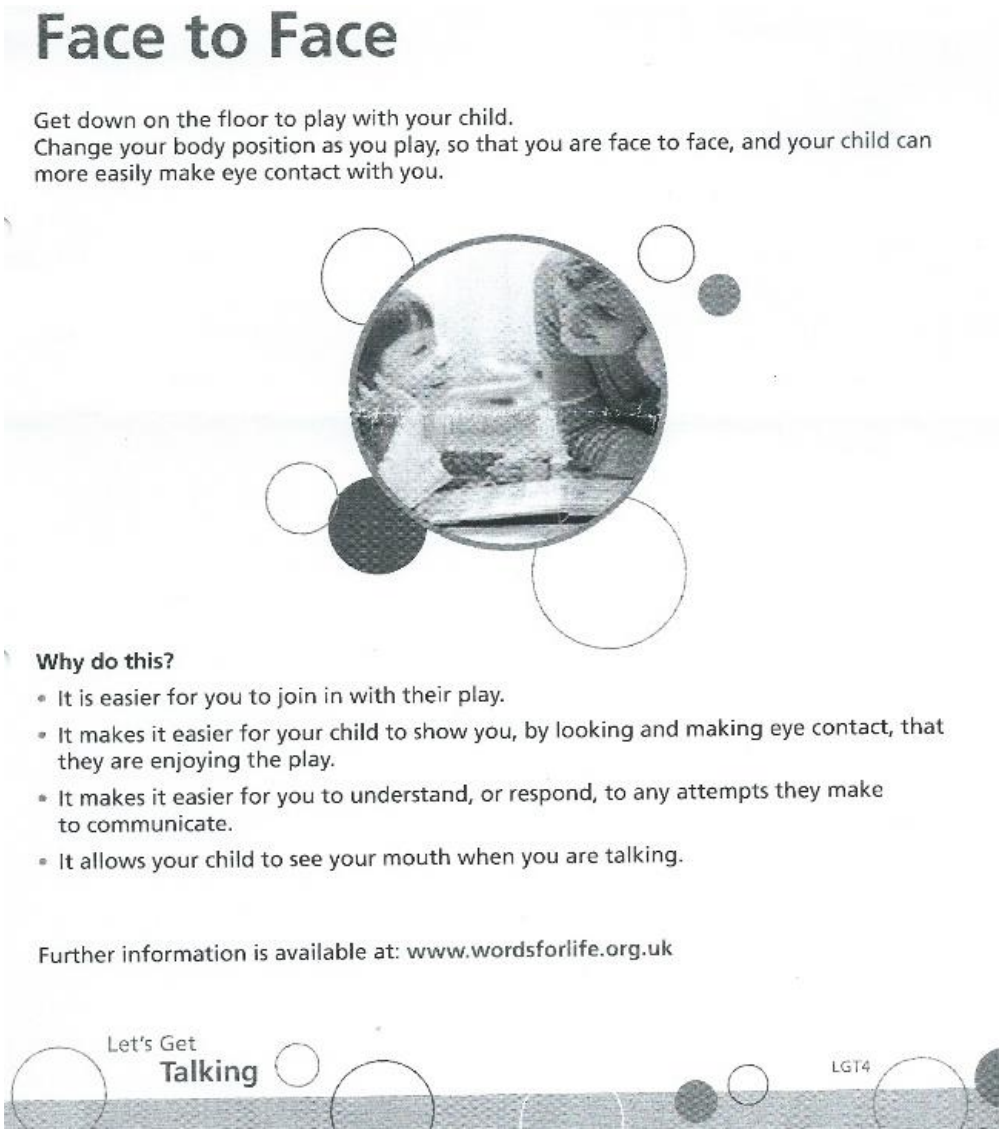
Figure 32 - Drawing equipment and jigsaws available in Let's Get Talking sessions

Although the children were encouraged to play and explore independently of the adults, they were reluctant to do so. In most cases they fetched a toy and tried to engage their parent in playing with them. However, one boy happily went off from the start of each session, picking things up and quickly discarding them. He also climbed onto furniture, made loud noises and threw objects around the room. Having children present therefore sometimes made it difficult for the CNNs to focus the parents on tasks that were designed to get them thinking about what good communication looked like and how they could support their child's speech development.

One task for the parents was to sit back-to-back and talk to each other about something they had done the night before and then to do the same thing face-to-face. This led on to a discussion about the importance of communicating face-to-face so their child could pay attention more easily and see the shape of their mouth when they were talking. Another task involved the CNNs introducing two unfamiliar objects and repeatedly naming one whilst it was passed around and played with, which the parents quickly learnt the name of (rainbow rings). However, the parents could not identify the object that had not been named or shared around (a guiro). This led to one of the CNNs explaining the importance of repeatedly naming things for children. She gave the example of how children often like to be read the same story over and over again so they can become familiar with the words.

In another session the CNNs asked the mothers how they felt when they were asked lots of questions, such as in an interview or when renewing insurance. She explained that children also felt anxious and annoyed when asked lots of questions and therefore it was better to describe things for them instead. One of the CNNs demonstrated this with a 'Spot' (by Eric Hill) lift-the-flap book. The text asked lots of questions about what was under each flap, but instead of reading the text she described each picture and used phrases such as "let's have a look who's here" and "I'm going to look under here". Two of the children who had been playing, came over to listen and watch until

the story ended. It was felt that exposing children to language in this way, without putting them under pressure to answer lots of questions, would help to build their confidence and vocabulary as words were given meaning through the pictures and actions involved in 'reading' the book. This was the same for parents commenting on, rather than asking about, their child's play. Handouts were given to parents each week that summarised the tasks and discussions as well as giving ideas for what they could do at home to support their child's speech development (Figure 33 and 34).



Face to Face

Get down on the floor to play with your child.
Change your body position as you play, so that you are face to face, and your child can more easily make eye contact with you.

Why do this?

- It is easier for you to join in with their play.
- It makes it easier for your child to show you, by looking and making eye contact, that they are enjoying the play.
- It makes it easier for you to understand, or respond, to any attempts they make to communicate.
- It allows your child to see your mouth when you are talking.

Further information is available at: www.wordsforlife.org.uk

Let's Get Talking

LGT4

Figure 33 - Handout summarising what had been taught in Let's Get Talking sessions

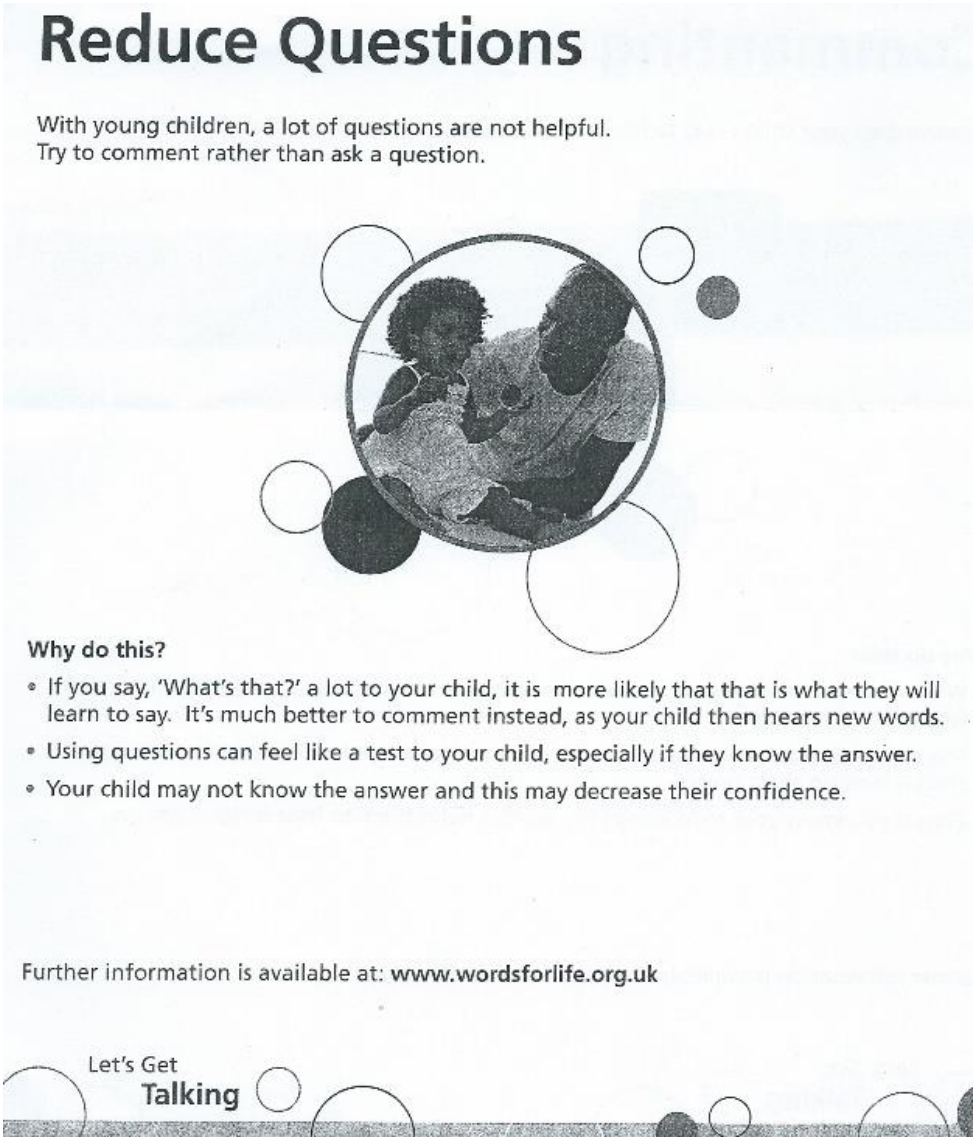


Figure 34 – Handout summarising what had been taught in Let's Get Talking sessions

In the final session, mothers were asked which strategies they had started using at home. This enabled the CNNs to recap what had previously been taught as well as assess to what extent the mothers had taken the ideas on board. One mother said that she was making more effort to speak face-to-face rather than shout between rooms. Another mother said that she was commenting a lot more and had started to find this easier. Another said that she had tried to ask fewer questions but was finding it hard. At the end of each session, the CNNs brought out some finger puppets and asked the children to choose one and say what it was. Everyone then sang a nursery rhyme that corresponded with the puppet, e.g. 'Incy, Wincy Spider' for the

spider puppet. Finally the CNNs sang a 'Goodbye' song encouraging the children to say "bye" before they left. Over time the children became more confident to join in.

During the sessions there was also time for the parents to play and interact with their children while the CNNs completed observation forms and discussed concerns individually with each parent. The CNNS were keen to reassure mothers that they were not being judged or criticised. For this reason they did not like to point out that dummies (which several of the children had) were hampering their speech development. However, they did express their opinions about the mothers (and father) after the sessions. The mother with the boy who was very disruptive was described as "anxious", "constantly apologising and making excuses for his behaviour" and "in need of extra support". A father who had come to the earlier sessions was described as "really good – he gets down on the floor and plays with his daughter with the small-world toys for nearly the whole session, encouraging and talking to her". They also noted that his daughter had been very tearful and clingy to mother, wanting to stay on her lap and demanding her dummy in the sessions he had not attended. It transpired that mother and father were separated. The mother (of the other girl) was described as "really on board with everything". It was felt that her daughter would make good progress and not need further help.

The disruptive boy that liked to climb and throw objects was quickly identified as a concern. His mother expressed the worry that he might be on the autistic spectrum as it ran in the family. After the session, the CNNs said that they suspected that the mother was right, as they had observed him flapping his hands, spinning around until his eyes spun and making little eye-contact with others. However they recognised they were not qualified to give a diagnosis and therefore did not share their views or observations with his mother. Instead, they expected that the Speech and Language Therapist, who attended the third session, would pick it up. She did. Her recommendations were for him to be referred to a paediatrician and

the Early Years SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) team for diagnosis. The CNNs were also concerned that the mother (who was heavily pregnant) was struggling to cope with her son's chaotic behaviour and lack of communication. She had confided in them that she was wary of taking him to any groups so they wondered about supporting her to go to some *Stay and Play* sessions. They also felt that it would be good for him to start attending one of the pre-schools and hoped that one of the other mothers, who had recommended her daughter's pre-school, would support her with this. The Speech and Language Therapist commented that pre-school should be encouraged for all the children. She had trained various members of staff in the local pre-schools to run their own speech and language sessions. After the course had ended the CNNs sent out information to any of the pre-schools that the children were already attending so they could be made aware of any existing concerns and follow them up.

For the other children in the group (two girls and one boy) the final assessment was that the girls were probably shy and would just need a follow-up appointment with one of the CNNs in three months' time. However it was thought that the other boy might also be on the autistic spectrum and should be referred to a paediatrician for further assessment. A conversation with the Speech and Language Therapist revealed that she had noticed a large increase in the number of children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) being referred to the service. Whereas their referrals used to come from schools, most now came from health (due to the 2 year development check) and pre-schools so children with a speech delay were being identified earlier (i.e. before they started full-time school). The summer was a particularly busy time for the service as pre-schools assessed children's 'school readiness'.

5.2.1.6 Lilies 'Pathway' Group

As already explained, I was unable to gain access to any of the *pathway* groups operating in the two Centres in Embervale. However, as there were eight Children's Centres overseen by the same

Coordinator, I took the opportunity to attend a group in one of the nearby Centres as a volunteer. I felt this would give me insight into how this type of group worked and where literacy development might fit in. The group ran for one and a half hours once a week and was attended by just three mothers with babies between four and six months old. One of these mothers was also attending a *Baby Giggles* group. Attendance varied with sometimes only one mother and her baby turning up, and mothers invariably arriving late. The leader of the group explained that she used information from the midwife team to invite and target mothers in the area who had given birth around the same time and who might be in need of extra support. This is an example of how policy targets particular mothers as needing extra support and intervention and constructs a deficit discourse. Mothers who do not see themselves in this way are not likely to engage with the support on offer. However, the leader could not understand why more did not come. She explained that before *pathway* groups had been introduced, specific groups had been offered at different times and on different days. She felt that mothers found it difficult to keep track of what was going on, and running groups made up of children of varying ages was not ideal. By instigating *pathway* groups instead they were able to deliver different programmes when they felt they were most appropriate to the children's stage of development at the same time each week. If a parent was referred to the Children's Centre for support with an older child, they could be slotted into the *pathway* group that had children of a similar age.

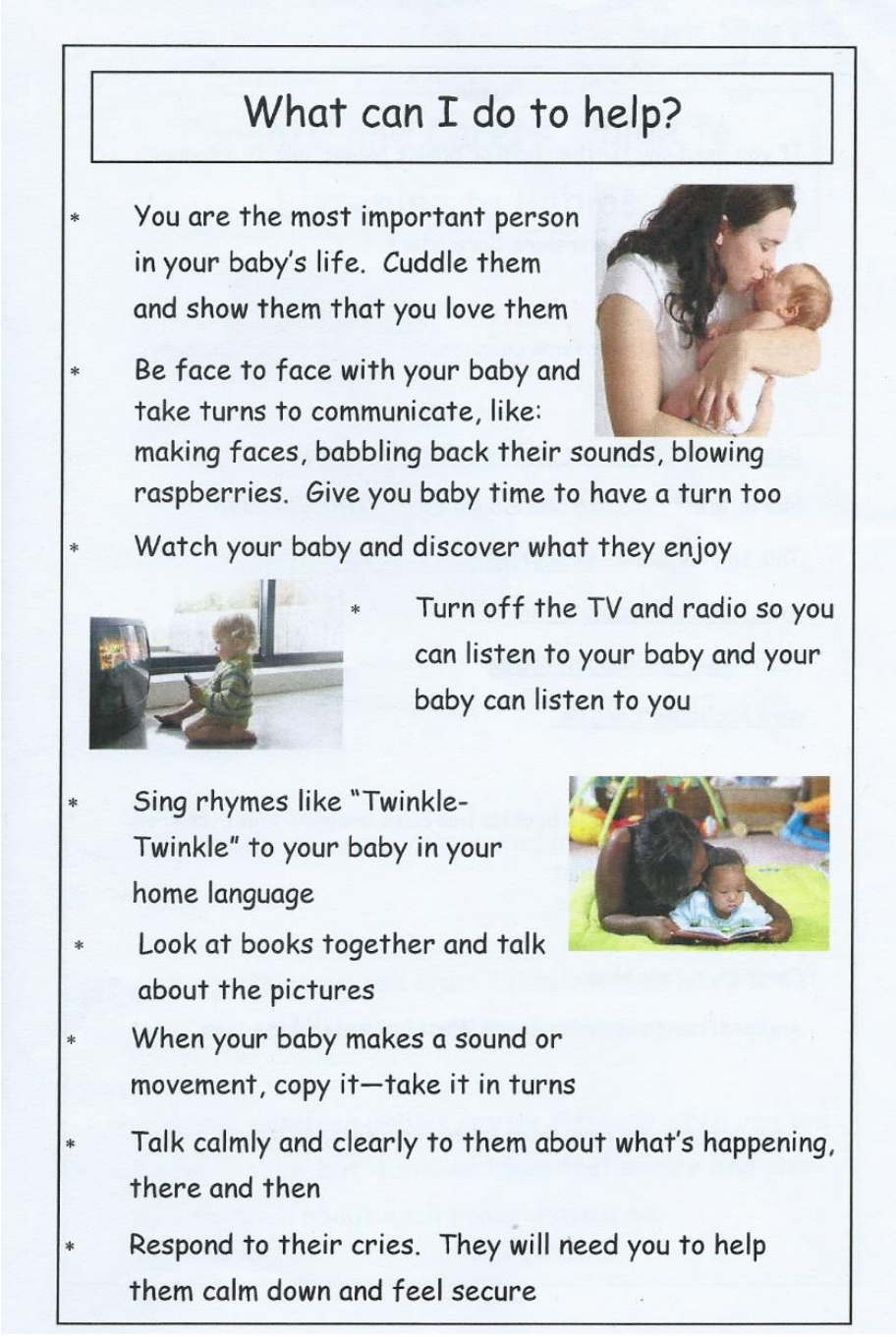
However, it had been noted that mothers were increasingly dropping off before the end of the pathway as they went back to work. Suzy, who was attending a different *pathway* group at the Children's Centre on the east side of town, said that she was not sure if she was going to continue going with her nine month old son - "the group has been getting smaller and smaller and smaller. To be fair, some people have gone back to work - you know nine months is a funny time when mothers are going back to work and everything as well. So I'll probably go and see what it's like and see who else is going, and then

decide what I'm doing." Another reason for low attendance might have been that some mothers did not feel that it was a place for them - one mother who I met at the private baby signing class was attending a *pathway* group at the Centre in the town centre but complained of not fitting in. She said that even though there were twenty mothers there, they were not people she could see herself being friends with. She felt that all she had in common with them was the age of her baby. She wondered about seeing if she could attend another group at a Children's Centre in a more affluent town nearby.

Like *Baby Giggles* and *PICL*, mothers were given a 'Learning Journey' scrapbook and photographs were taken each week of their babies taking part in different activities that could be added to the book. Part of each session was spent sorting, sticking in and labelling these photographs. The rest of the session involved mothers sitting on the floor around a colourful mat with their babies on their lap or in front of them, and included singing nursery rhymes whilst shaking and banging simple musical instruments. There was also a focused activity and general chatting between the adults while the children played with toys that had been put out beforehand, fell asleep or were fed. The leader explained to the mothers that each session involved some singing "because babies like it" but rather than do it at the end when the babies were tired, she preferred to do it at the beginning. She asked the mothers for suggestions for songs as well as including her own. Favourites included 'Grand Old Duke of York' where she encouraged mothers to move their baby up and down, 'Row, Row Your Boat' with lots of different verses involving a lion, bear, crocodile and a cuddle, 'Incy, Wincy Spider', 'Wind the Bobbin Up' and 'Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star'.

Once the babies were between seven and nine months, the leader of the group introduced a programme called *Tiny Talkers*. She told me that by making sure mothers were interacting with their baby from early on, later problems could be avoided. She explained to the mothers that for five weeks they would focus on how babies'

communication and language could be supported. Mothers were asked what they could do to encourage their baby's communication (answers included "repeating words", "singing", "talking", "using facial expressions") and their responses were written on a flipchart. They were also given a leaflet with more information and ideas (Figure 35).



What can I do to help?

* You are the most important person in your baby's life. Cuddle them and show them that you love them

* Be face to face with your baby and take turns to communicate, like: making faces, babbling back their sounds, blowing raspberries. Give you baby time to have a turn too
* Watch your baby and discover what they enjoy

* Turn off the TV and radio so you can listen to your baby and your baby can listen to you

* Sing rhymes like "Twinkle-Twinkle" to your baby in your home language
* Look at books together and talk about the pictures
* When your baby makes a sound or movement, copy it—take it in turns
* Talk calmly and clearly to them about what's happening, there and then
* Respond to their cries. They will need you to help them calm down and feel secure

Figure 35 - A page taken from the leaflet given to mothers in a Pathway group

In the next session, mothers were given a written task to add symbols above particular letters in some nonsense rhymes. While they were doing this the leader of the session created a lot of noise and interruptions. As a result, the mothers failed to complete the task and the leader made the point that babies also find it difficult to concentrate if there are lots of distractions. They were told that it was important to turn off the radio and TV, to use baby's name to get their attention and to make eye-contact before talking to them. In the third session the leader gave out some of the handouts from the *Let's Get Talking* course, and introduced the ideas of giving a child time to respond, not talking *for* them, and making sure communication is face-to-face. She also gave out three different booklets containing ideas for helping a child to talk and listen (Figure 36).



Figure 36 - Example from one of the booklets given out to mothers in a Pathway group

Session four focused on books. A selection of board books had been put out beforehand. The leader explained that at this age babies chew books but this should not stop them introducing them; even the library would rather they returned chewed books than not borrow any at all. She also said that, at this stage, reading should just be about pointing things out in the pictures and naming them, although children also needed to be shown how to read by pointing from left to right and top to bottom. During the session the babies spent most of the time tasting the books while mothers tried to engage them by

pointing things out such as glittery or touchy-feely pages. The babies showed limited interest and one of the mothers commented that she usually read to her daughter while she was in the highchair as she could not crawl away. The leader brought out the book 'That's Not My Dolly' (by Fiona Watt) and a selection of dolls and suggested to the mothers that they could start collecting toys to go along with books to make reading more fun and interactive. The final session did not introduce any new ideas, but mothers were given a bag of books to take home and some finger puppets (provided by the Book Trust charity) which they were encouraged to use during the singing time in order to focus their baby's attention. They were also asked what they had learned and what they would do more of as a result. Mothers only managed a limited response and seemed surprised at being asked this. By introducing the idea that they should have learned something and attempting to assess what this was, the leader seemed to transform the environment from one where mothers could informally share experiences and offer each other advice, to one where the leader positioned herself as the teacher and them as the students. This was reinforced by the use of a flipchart to record their responses.

In addition, once their babies reached nine months, the mothers were given a sheet to track how far their baby had developed in terms of social skills, physical skills and communication. They were asked to tick the statements that they thought their child had achieved (Figure 37). This was then collected in by the leader so she could transfer the information onto a more detailed grid showing all the statements for the three prime areas (Language and Communication, Physical Development and Personal, Social and Emotional Development) up to the end of the foundation stage, which she filed away. She explained to me that this would be done again when the babies reached twelve months old, both in the group and by the Health Visitor (who would also carry out a two year development check). The leader felt it was important to track the children's development so extra services could be brought in if they were needed.

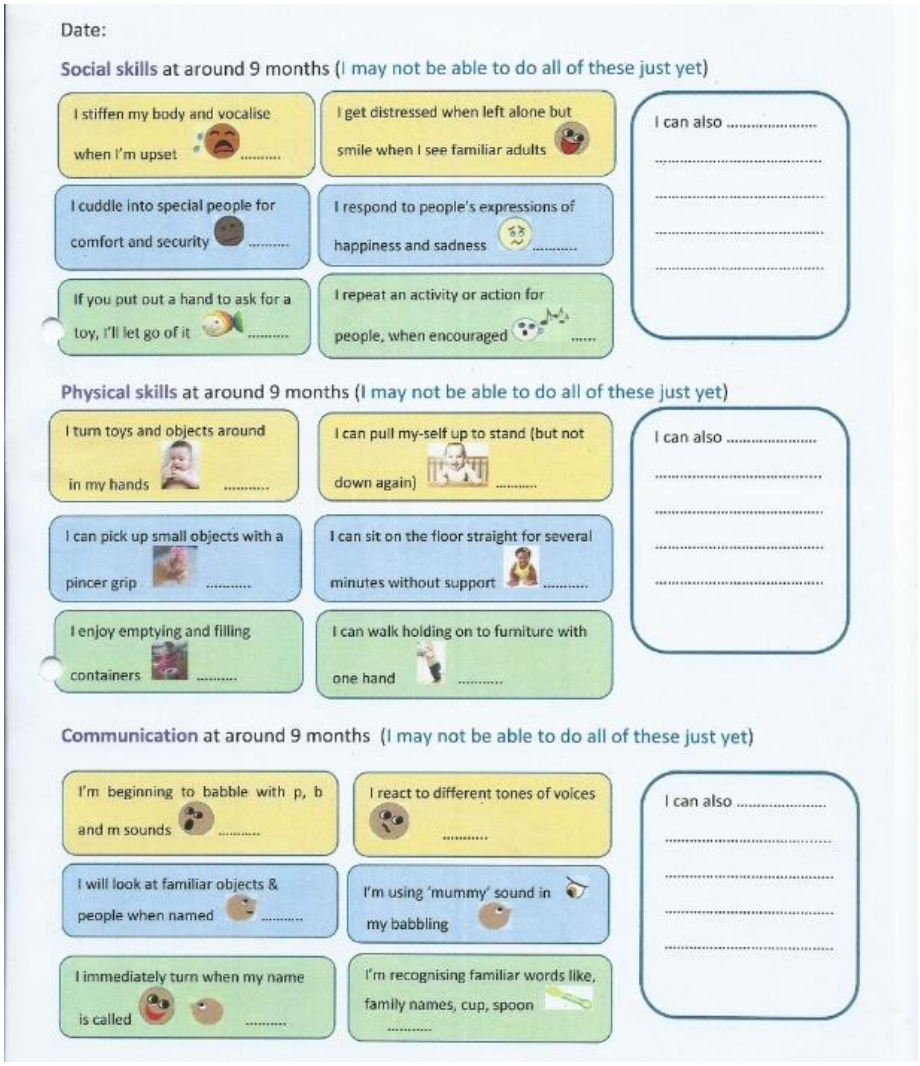


Figure 37 - Tracking sheet given to mothers to complete in a Pathway group

Suzy, who went to a different *pathway* group, commented,

> I don't particularly like the new instructor that we've got, the new lady that's leading it. And I know a couple of the other mothers have said the same. I don't know what it is but she's not very baby friendly, I would say. Sometimes I feel like she doesn't really understand them that well. I don't know – she's very kind of school-mistressy and there's a lot of talk about learning, development and these learning objectives for each week. It's like being at school. Whereas I prefer the kind of, where we're learning but don't necessarily even realise we're learning or they're learning, it's learning through play. And it's a shame, because the next module I know, after Easter is supposed to be about speech and

> communication. I don't know if I'm going to go. I'll probably go the first week and then decide.

Her use of the terms 'instructor', 'school' and 'module' suggest that the way these sessions (and others) were delivered may have alienated mothers who were put in the position of a 'learner' who needed to be taught how to parent and who could be assessed in terms of how well their child was developing.

5.2.2 Getting 'ready for school'

Some mothers that attended groups at the Children's Centres sought out the opinions and advice of professionals. One mother that attended *Let's Get Talking* sought reassurance from the CNNs that her daughter would be 'ready for school' and wished that the course could continue after the four weeks so she could be supported for longer. The advice that they gave centred on the importance of pre-school for continuing support. The mother seemed satisfied with this and said that her daughter had been attending a pre-school that had recently been closed down by Ofsted but her daughter loved the new one she was attending and was growing in confidence. As a result of her recommendation, the other mothers in the group became interested in sending their children to the same pre-school even if it meant swapping from the one they were currently at. Similarly, Claire, who attended the *Solihull* group, commented that she chose the nursery her daughter went to because her relatives had all sent their children to the same one even though it meant a half hour walk there and back.

Grandparents were influential too. Anna's mother had been a learning support assistant in a special school and introduced her granddaughter to lots of different activities, such as painting with celery stems, mixing paint colours and baking. When she read to her she put on different voices and made the story come alive which her granddaughter loved. Kate was also influenced by her mother who had been a crèche worker, and who had told her that most mothers put their children into childcare because they did not want to look

after them and take them to lots of different groups like Kate did. Kate therefore felt she was a better mother by choosing not to work and by offering her daughter lots of different activities and one-to-one attention. As a result she believed that her daughter was very forward for her age. She gave the example of some drawing that her daughter had done - "My friend said 'you'd best take pictures of them and show them when they get to the two year check because they're not going to believe she can do that yet.'" For Kate, childcare was about,

> controlling the masses […] it's not teaching them anything. I could be wrong in thinking this, but that's what I think you'd get out of nursery or a big pre-school. So long as they're in the room and they're where they're meant to be, that's all that really matters. Yes they do all these Learning Journals and stuff but surely it should be about their happiness, not about ticking the boxes? […] There is really no point. You might as well be at home bringing your own child up. Because how you do it and how someone else is going to do it, is never going to be the same.

Kate also remarked that she did not understand the hurry to get children into pre-school as friends of hers had told her that schools did not want children already learning letters, numbers and reading as it would confuse them when they started school. She believed that schools preferred children to start school being able to behave well, take turns, listen and use good manners, which she was focusing on with her child.

For other mothers, professionals influenced what they did and how they viewed their child. Claire received a daily report via email for her daughter (Figure 38) so she could see what sort of things she had been doing at nursery.

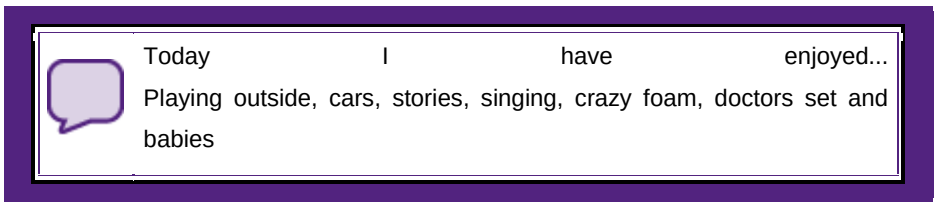


Figure 38 - Part of Claire's daily report from her daughter's nursery

The nursery had told her that her daughter's physical development was above her age band, and as a result she had put her name on a waiting list for a gymnastics club in the town. Anna received detailed sheets from her daughter's pre-school 'Learning Journey' that outlined what she had achieved and what she was working on, as well as providing ideas for how this could be supported at home. She gave the example of when her daughter was learning the names of shapes at pre-school they had walked around the house and pointed out objects that had a particular shape. She also remarked that her daughter was learning phonics and how to write her name in readiness for starting school later in the year. As a result she was giving her opportunities to practice at home. For example, tracing her name and repeating the initial letter sound of different objects such as "ball, b, b, b is for ball". In terms of her daughter's behaviour (which was the reason for her attending the *Solihull* group), the CNN who had done the initial assessment had suggested that she was simply bored and 'ready for school' which Anna agreed was probably the case as she described her daughter as "very forward for her age… she's always hit the milestones. She smashed her two year check." Anna felt that she could have gone to school a year early because she was "so ready".

Similarly, Jenny was influenced by her sons' pre-school 'Learning Journeys'. She mentioned that she sometimes brought them home at weekends so she could look at them in detail and discuss them with her children. In addition, she sometimes received a sheet telling her how she could move her children's learning on. For example, if they could count to six, she could help them to count to eight. She also made notes for the 'Learning Journey' of things they had done with her such as recognising a particular letter in street signs. Jenny

had home-educated her two oldest children until they turned seven. Unlike other parents whom she described as "anti the local education authority", she had welcomed them because she wanted to check that she was doing it right. Although she continued to invest a lot of time and effort into supporting all her children's development, she felt that when she sent her children to school "they flourished…far better than I could offer at home." It seemed that her desire to help her children in the best possible way was influenced by the voices of people that she saw as the experts. This could explain why she approached the pre-school for help with her son's challenging behaviour and consequently attending the *Solihull* course.

In terms of her sons starting school (which they were due to do later in the year) Jenny had been told by their teacher that all children would start bringing books home that had no words in, even if they were already starting to read. Although she felt this was not fair, the teacher had explained that they had to put everyone on a level playing field. For this reason she was not concerned that her youngest sons would not be able to read when they started school, even though she had made sure her older children could. Similar to Kate, Jenny insisted that "the things that worry me more about the boys starting school are cutting up their dinner, dressing themselves and wiping their bottoms. Maybe that's right, maybe that's wrong, but I think everything else they'll pick up as they go along. The social skills like eating nicely are the things that matter." She saw it as her role to ensure her children were proficient in these skills before starting school.

Suzy, on the other hand, described the shock she felt when her four year old son had recently started school and had found that other children knew their alphabet and were learning to read, and that her son was "behind". For this reason, she was starting to do things earlier with her nine month old son such as reading books, and she was thinking about providing opportunities for him at home to make marks and be creative. She and Tessa had not received any ideas from their children's nurseries or pre-schools for supporting their

learning at home and nor did they expect to. Suzy compared the two pre-schools that her older son had attended and decided that one was better because the 'Learning Journey' included the child's voice, lots of photographs and emphasised learning through play, whereas the one from the other pre-school did not have much in it and, as far as she could tell, did not provide such a good range of activities. Tessa was unconcerned about her children's development because she had been told by professionals at the private nursery her children attended that they were "on track". She did not see the need to question or know exactly what they were able to do or how she could help. It seemed some mothers were happy and relieved to be able to leave their child's development up to the professionals. As Claire remarked, "now she's in nursery, there's no need for me to do so much. I can pass the buck onto someone else." She gave the example of how she used to do messy play activities with her daughter at home, but now she let nursery do the "messy stuff".

5.2.3 Parental responsibility

Where the Children's Centres were situated made a difference to how the professionals viewed the mothers they supported. Mrs Green explained that out of the eight Children's Centres they covered, the two in this town were in their most vulnerable areas. On the east side of the town she described a concentration of social housing which meant a high proportion of families with young children needing support. In the town there were a greater number of families but around the same number needing support. Therefore services were targeted towards the two Children's Centres in Embervale. Mrs Green informed me that there was also a high level of maternal mental health issues in this area and therefore bonding and attachment were a big focus of their programme which she felt were vital for encouraging good communication between mother and baby and which in turn supported children's literacy development. It was interesting to note, therefore, that one of the outreach workers had a different understanding and thought that the two Centres did not do anything to support literacy development.

The Home-Start employee also commented on the families living on the east side of the town where a lot of their support was focused. She described them as preferring to sit at home watching TV all day and only going out to do the same at friends' or family's houses on the same estate, with babies being babysat by the television with their bottles propped up and dummies in. For these reasons she thought there was very little interaction between parents and their young children. She believed that many of the families did not have a single book in the house as they had the TV on constantly and children were given hand-held devices from a young age. Furthermore, some children rarely played outside, especially if they lived in one of the three-storey flats with no garden. When children eventually entered a school setting they had no understanding of the behaviour needed to learn such as sitting still and listening to instructions. The school setting was completely alien to them. Failing to prepare their children for school was exacerbated by parents' lack of interest in sending them to pre-school even though they were eligible for free funding, or in taking them to groups or even out of the house. It is worth noting that the CNNs that ran the *Let's Get Talking* group saw this town as a hotspot for speech and language difficulties. As a result, they said they were having to run courses back-to-back due to the volume of children being referred for intervention.

The Home-Start employee saw the biggest problem as parents not realising that what they were doing was harmful to their child's development. As far as they were concerned everybody around them treated their children the same way. Many children were on the Child Protection Register from the two estates but often families did not understand why they were on it; "they think their way of life is completely normal because they don't know any different". For this reason the leader of the *Baby Giggles* session was not hopeful of anybody turning up. Although the group was targeted towards parents they saw as needing support, they had started to open it up to anyone that wanted to join in order to keep the group running.

The leader of the group explained the lack of interest as due to parents being worried about being referred to Social Services and wanting to stay "under the radar". One mother that attended the group said that she had asked a friend to come with her but she had replied "I don't need anyone to tell me how to look after my baby!" Of the mothers that did attend, the leader told me that she did not see them as needing much support but she had noticed they all lacked confidence. One of the mothers, who had been involved with Sure Start for a number of years (some of her children were now grown up) and was attending the *PICL* group, told me that "instead of looking at our circumstances like they used to, the groups now make mums feel responsible. It is all about what we have to do." By adopting a policy where certain mothers are targeted because they are seen to lack necessary parenting skills, it is not surprising that they feel scrutinised, stigmatised or low in confidence. This is likely to deter many from attending or returning to groups.

Mrs Green understood that there were parents who needed help but did not want to attend groups. She felt for some it was because they did not think there was a problem, while for others the idea of attending a group of any sort was off-putting. She explained,

> the thing with the Children's Centre is that it is a voluntary service, so people don't have to engage with us. And if they choose not to do so, unless there's a safeguarding concern, then we haven't really got any say...But if they choose not to, and some parents don't think there's anything wrong with their child's development, people will say "well his brother or sister was exactly the same and they caught up eventually", and that's why really engaging them early on is the most beneficial […] We have a fair number of referrals that say "needs to be supported to come to a group", and so that means either meeting them at the door or actually going to fetch them, things like that. And some people don't like groups at all – some people won't come to a group – if we can do that piece of work in the home, we'll try, but often the reason it is a group, is because you need that interaction, you need parents to be talking to one another,

> understanding that you are not the only one that's got a problem, and listening to the way that other people deal with things as well.

It was felt that groups were the best option as parents with similar-aged children would be able to build their own friendships and support networks. This had been the case for Claire who had attended a *pathway* group from the beginning and commented that she "met most of the girls there that we sort of interact with now." Kate had also formed a close group of friends through groups she had taken her daughter to but realised that not everybody was comfortable going to groups where they did not know anyone. She had only initially gone to the *Stay and Play* group because she knew one of the volunteers. She then tried other groups, made friends with other mothers and went on to try different groups with them. She said "I've probably made more friends in the last two years, than I've made in the last fifteen years."

It was clear from the poor attendance at many of the groups I visited, that there was an issue with getting parents to engage with the Centres in the first place and then to keep them attending. Mrs Pink (from the private music and movement class) had previously run some open-to-all sessions for the Children's Centre in the town centre but said they were poorly attended and subsequently folded. She felt that there was now a lot of stigma around using the Children's Centres as many initiatives had been targeted at 'troubled' families. Even when services were available to all and free, families did not want to be associated with them. Watson, Cameron and Aghtaie (2014) suggest that the focus on targeting services has meant families who need help are at risk of being missed unless they are referred by a professional such as a midwife, and the focus on 'troubled' families has meant that people are fearful of using the services in case they are stigmatised. It has been suggested that labelling interventions as 'universal' even if they are still targeted at particular parents are more successful at encouraging parents to take part (Clarke & Younis, 2017).

Another consequence of targeting services is that some families are excluded. Eve had accessed lots of groups at the Children Centres with her children before they made them referral-only. She commented,

> they targeted it more at single parents, fathers, Polish, foreigners, people with twins and that type of thing. So I felt that we weren't allowed to go anymore, and they played a really important part in their lives […] I got what I needed to out of Sure Start, but I felt that if I had another baby now, there'd be absolutely nothing on offer for someone like myself…who works…We haven't got any needs – I'm not a single parent or anything like that but I think us sort of people, we do get forgotten about, and I don't think that's fair…It's a shame. As I say, I know what my two got out of it before – because I did a thing called the *PICL* group. I was one of the first ones to do that. And again, I felt I learnt an awful lot from that […] Obviously I wouldn't need to do it again, but now I guess I wouldn't be able to do it because things have changed over at Sure Start. Which again, is disappointing because all of us do need – just because you work and things like that, it doesn't mean you don't need that extra support… And I think it is disappointing that just because you don't fit into a box that all of a sudden it just stops. And I think that some people are scared to ask as well for help, whereas I would've asked if I needed it, but I think some people might be afraid to ask.

By excluding some families from the groups, there appears to be a danger that those who would like help are now afraid to ask for it in case it means being judged and labelled. Eve knew that groups were poorly attended and felt that lots of children and families were missing out because they were not seen as being 'in need' of support.

A childminder I met in the library expressed the same frustration at no longer being able to access groups at the Children's Centres. She said she now struggled for places to take the children and felt that the *Stay and Play* groups were not held at particularly convenient times as they were often too close to the school run. She thought it was wrong that they did not allow everyone to use all the services as all children needed the same things – it should not be based on the

parents' circumstances. She also felt that children who had been identified as needing more support would actually benefit from mixing with all sorts of children. She told me about an Indian child she looked after whose English language was very poor. She had approached the Children's Centres to see if they could help but was told that his mother would need to approach them or be referred. When she told the child's mother she had said that she did not like to mix with new people and therefore was not interested in pursuing it. The childminder felt this was not fair on the child. It seems that the focus is on identifying mothers who need help to support their child's development rather than on helping children directly. Thus the discourse around parental responsibility is reinforced.

5.2.4 Place and time

For parents that did want to access different groups, place and time were significant. Marie, who had accessed some Children's Centre groups when her daughter was new-born, could not understand why she no longer received any information about the groups they were now running for her age group (her daughter was almost two years old). Natasha, who had also accessed some of the groups with two of her children (now five and three years old), commented that there seemed to be a lot for younger children but as they got older there was less available. She felt it was because, by the age of three, children were in pre-school which meant there was no time to fit in groups as well. Suzy was also finding there was less to do even though her son was only nine months old. As a result, she had recently started paying to go to the private baby signing class and was looking at starting the music and movement one. She said,

> I just think [the Children's Centres] are very good at support when they are very young, and they are good at supporting mummies as well […] so they are good on that side, but once they are a bit older… I mean, I feel that my time with Sure Start is pretty much over now. I don't know if I'll continue the Monday [*Pathway*] group. I've finished the Wednesday [*Baby Giggles*] group. So I'm looking for other things to do now really.

Beth, who was Polish and new to the area when her first child was born (now five years old) had not known about any groups until a Polish friend told her about a *Polish Stay and Play* group that was running at one of the Children's Centres. It was then that she became more aware of the other groups that were running. She felt that midwives should inform mothers about groups before their babies are born so they can find a group straightaway and not be isolated as she had been.

Other issues that mothers talked about in relation to accessing the Children's Centres were parking and a lack of groups in school holidays. Suzy complained about parking at the Children's Centre on the east side of town,

> the parking is a nightmare. It really drives me up the wall…I find parking such a major issue with all these places. It puts me off going if I can't park, and it's the same with [the Children's Centre in the] town. Then, you know, you're having to carry a heavy baby…I need something where I can just park and carry him in, which I do at Sure Start but it's not easy, especially when I have to park a mile up the road because there's no spaces anywhere on the road. So parking annoys me quite a lot actually. They want people to use the services but they don't want to provide any parking.

This was also mentioned by the mothers at the private baby signing class who felt that, as well as parking being difficult at both the Children's Centres, they were not comfortable leaving their cars so near to the social housing estate on the east side of the town. They were also fed up that they always had to pay for parking if they wanted to do anything in the town centre.

For Kate, school holidays proved the biggest challenge when groups stopped running.

> I think the summer holidays are a big challenge. If you have your baby in the summer holidays, it's going to be a long time before you realise there's anything going on […] I don't understand why the Sure Start groups can't keep open through the summer holidays because they're open for the parent-craft classes. So the buildings – they

> open to let these people in, so they might as well run something or they could do special ones.

In this way, many of the mothers felt that the Children's Centres did not provide the service they wanted or needed for themselves and their children.

In summary, government policy and data have constructed a deficit discourse that is reflected in the ways the Children's Centre staff and other professionals target particular families and focus their work on developing skills that parents and children are seen to be lacking. For example, speech and language delay was seen to be a significant problem for many children so interventions were based on teaching parents (mothers) how to support this area of learning. The interventions were delivered in ways discussed in Chapter 2. Professionals decided what skills the mothers and children lacked, and then focused on teaching them to the mothers so they could take more responsibility for their children's development. Mothers were therefore framed as having prime responsibility for their children's learning. Like in the library, those who attended groups were predominantly female as were the staff. Fathers were often seen as disruptive and stopped attending after a couple of weeks. The attendance of mothers at the different groups was generally poor too. It seemed that by framing mothers and families in ways which focused on their deficiencies, many did not want to engage for fear of being judged and others lacked confidence. At the same time, by targeting certain families, some mothers were excluded from accessing groups. Others were unaware of the groups they could access, were discouraged by the lack of groups running in school holidays or were put off by the location of the Centres.

However the emphasis on mothers stopped when the children reached the age of two as they were then encouraged to use the funding they were entitled to (due to being 'disadvantaged') and put

their child into a form of childcare. Pre-school was heavily promoted as the best way to get children 'ready' for school. While some mothers were concerned about how best to get their children 'ready', many looked to the people they saw as experts to take on this responsibility. Others took on some responsibility by engaging their children in literacy practices that they believed would reinforce the type of literacy they would encounter at school. In many of the sessions, mothers were given handouts to reinforce what they were supposed to learn and to offer examples of particular literacy practices deemed appropriate for each stage of their child's development. This promoted the idea that literacy is a set of skills to be learnt incrementally.

The next portrait moves on to considering how the two pre-schools I visited constructed literacy spaces. It also builds on the concepts of 'school readiness', parental responsibility, place and time.

5.3 Pre-schools portrait

In the town I found five pre-schools catering for children from the age of two to four years. Four of these were run from church buildings, and one was part of the large primary school situated next to the Children's Centre on the east side of the town. There were also three privately-owned nurseries that looked after children from birth to four years old.

Having tried, unsuccessfully, to gain access to one of the large nurseries and the primary school pre-school, I focused on a pre-school on the east side of the town (ES), and one in the town centre (TC). Both were run from church buildings.

5.3.1 Constructing a literacy space

5.3.1.1 Pre-school ES

The pre-school was situated in the middle of a council estate and occupied the church hall (Figure 39).



Figure 39 - Church hall set out for pre-school ES

It ran for three hours on four mornings a week during term times, and there was the choice of staying for an extra three quarters of an hour at the end of session if parents provided their child with a packed lunch. Around thirty two children were enrolled of which six were Polish. All of the three and four year olds, and most of the two

year olds, received free funding, while the Polish families paid for their children's places. The cost was significantly cheaper than other pre-schools in the town. Mrs White, explained that they could not charge more as people living on the estate would not pay it. As well as Mrs White, there were three members of staff and three volunteers (one was Polish). Nearly all the staff members were young with most of them having gained a childcare qualification within the last five years. Mrs White commented that they could only afford to pay the minimum wage.

As the room used for the pre-school was also used for church services, the resources had to be set up and put away each day. There was also a small outside play area alongside the church building that the children were taken to for part of each session. This was set up with ride-on toys, a mud-kitchen, some large vehicles and small-world toys, building bricks and balls. For a large part of the sessions, children were split between the inside and outside play areas, with the youngest children in one group and the children who would be attending school the following year in another group. Inside activities included a book corner, soft toys, dolls and prams, small world toys, jigsaws, a home role-play area, vehicles, a slide, see-saws, writing materials and some shoes for dressing up (Figures 40, 41 and 42). The books were displayed messily in a corner and the children showed no interest in them, preferring to play with the toys.



Figure 40 - 'Home' role-play area with dolls and prams at Pre-school ES



Figure 41 - Train set with some themed books and magazine at Pre-school ES



Figure 42 - Books, magazines and soft toys at Pre-school ES

There were some moveable display boards that were decorated with photographs of staff and children, the local area and special events. Words were written in English and Polish to accompany the pictures, such as food that was offered at snack time. These boards also served the purpose of enclosing children in a smaller space within the large hall. At the end of each session, staff members collected some children and then used the boards to create a closed space so they could engage them in some more focused activities. At the same time, the other adults tidied away and set up for lunchtime. It was only during this time that I observed staff making a concerted effort to interact with the children beyond tasks such as changing nappies, taking children to the toilet and sorting out drinks and snacks. Sessions mainly consisted of children playing alongside the volunteers and each other. When it came to this group time not all the children wanted to join in and some chose to continue playing. Staff did not insist they joined in. However this meant that the children who did comply were often distracted by the noise of others

moving about and playing and, as a result, would also wander off from the group.

Activities in these group times varied between reading a book to the children, singing some nursery rhymes, doing some jigsaws, playing with stickle bricks, threading beads and sorting objects using tweezers. Staff tried to get the children to sit still, listen, answer questions and develop their fine motor control. However, some of the youngest children in the group sabotaged the activities by crying, clinging to the adult and running off to see what other groups were doing. Furthermore, some of the older children struggled to cooperate with others and share the resources, while others simply lay down or collected toys from elsewhere in the room. A conversation with Mrs White revealed that a big focus for the staff was speech development. This was why they tried to sing and read stories but they did not do any specific intervention work with the children, or formally plan any activities. They just put out what they thought the children would like to play with.

Mrs White thought that staff commented on the children's play, although I did not observe this. In most cases children played happily on their own with little intervention or supervision from the adults. Lots of the children had dummies in and therefore did not talk to the other children. I commented to Mrs White that I thought the children were very independent as most of them were happy to play by themselves. She thought this was due to them receiving little attention at home and commented that they easily separated from their adults when they were dropped off in the morning.

Many of the children had delayed speech; the oldest child who was already four years old simply made noises and pointed at things saying "what's dat?" Mrs White explained that the Speech and Language Service and Early Years SEND team were supporting some of the children, but parents were of the opinion that once they had got a referral it was like waving a magic wand and the problem would be solved. She felt that the parents did not understand that they had

a role to play, even though she tried to speak to them about the importance of talking to their children and reading them stories. She believed that the children were only spoken to when being told what to do or being reprimanded, and spent all their time in front of the TV or on tablets or phones, which meant the only meaningful interaction they had was with adults at pre-school.

The children's 'Learning Journeys' were displayed near the entrance/exit making them clearly visible as parents dropped off and collected their children. They contained observation sheets that had been completed by members of staff, and described things the child had done. Apart from an initial 'getting to know you' sheet when a child started at the pre-school that described some of their likes and dislikes, there were no comments from the parents. Ideas for further learning were not shared either. During the time I visited, I saw one mother looking at her son's 'Learning Journey'. She told me that she was concerned about his speech as he was only able to say the initial sounds of words and therefore she had just started attending the *Let's Get Talking* group at one of the Children's Centres. She was sending him to the pre-school to help his social skills and to give her a break. Mrs White explained that most parents just used the pre-school because it was free and they could go back home and watch TV in peace. She found that most were not interested in the 'Learning Journeys' but did sometimes use the pre-school's social media page to make positive comments about the pre-school. Mrs White had written up some of their comments and pinned them to one of the display boards. She found communication with parents most effective when done through social media or via text message; in her opinion they did not read printed material such as letters and reports. A booklet entitled *What to expect, when? Guidance to your children's learning and development in the early years foundation stage* (4Children, 2015) hung near the entrance/exit but I did not observe anyone looking at it. Although parents were offered two meetings a year to discuss their child's progress, many did not attend so the staff had to try to talk to them at the door instead. Another way that some

staff tried to communicate with parents was by sticking a label on a child saying something they had done well such as "I shared nicely" or "I said the word 'yellow'" to wear home. On speaking to parents as they were waiting to collect their children, I found that most of them had chosen this pre-school because it was the nearest one to where they lived and they knew other people who sent their children there. Mrs White confirmed that some of the children were cousins. None of the parents mentioned that they thought the pre-school benefitted their child's development.

Natasha had three children, aged eight, five and three. She lived on the estate, her youngest daughter attended this pre-school and she was employed there as a member of staff. In terms of her younger daughter's literacy development she told me that she liked looking at books and watching 'Ben and Holly's Magic Kingdom' on the television. She was impressed that her daughter knew the episodes off-by-heart and saw it as a sign that she had a very good memory. She also explained that she had talked to all of her children from when they were babies as she knew this helped their speech. However, she also told me that the Health Visitor had been concerned about her son's speech at his two year development check. She thought that he had not been quite ready at two as he was quiet and laid-back, whereas her two daughters were more vocal and strong-willed at the same age. She saw her daughters as being advanced, and described her youngest one as being able to speak in clear sentences from the age of two. When her son's speech was reassessed at two and a half years old there were no more concerns. In terms of the pre-school, she had sent her daughter there to help with her social skills "and obviously pre-school is a different environment from home. They can teach them so much – they can do things that you can't always do at home - there's only so much you can do. It's just that extra step of bringing them on more." She was not able to give an example of what the pre-school did that she could not do at home.

5.3.1.2 Pre-school TC

The pre-school was situated in a quiet side street on the edge of the town centre. It also occupied a church building, but had the use of two large rooms, a small intervention/meeting room, as well as an outside area. Like Pre-school ES, resources had to be set out and put away after every session. As well as Mrs Ebony and Mrs Scarlet, there were several members of staff spread across the two rooms. All the staff had considerable experience and training within the childcare sector as well as being parents to their own children (who were now grown up). Sessions ran for three hours on four mornings a week, with the option to stay for a further hour on three of these days for a (packed) lunch. The older children were in receipt of free funding for their places, as well as some of the two years olds. If a child was not funded, the cost was comparable to most other pre-schools in the area but nearly double what Pre-school ES charged.

The two large rooms were used to split the children by age group (up to twenty in each room) so the youngest children ('Cygnets') and the children who would be starting school the following year ('Swans') each had their own room and certain members of staff were assigned to each room. There was a time during each session where children could move into either room. When the 'Swans' arrived they had to find a chair which had their name on and put their coat on it before being able to play with the toys and activities that had been placed around their room. These included colouring books, letter tracing, construction, role play areas (home, hospital), book corner, small world and jigsaws. When the role play area was set up as a hospital, there were writing materials set out on a desk along with a computer keyboard and phone (Figures 43, 44 and 45).



Figure 43 - 'Home' role play area at Pre-school TC



Figure 44 - Book corner at Pre-school TC



Figure 45 - Mark-making materials for children to access independently at Pre-school TC

While the children were playing, one of the staff members selected a group of four children ('Swans') to take into the small room. She explained that, as the SENCO (Special Needs Coordinator), she ran a communication and language group for around half an hour twice a week to help children who were struggling with their speech, as well as to encourage skills such as turn-taking. There were two Polish boys in the group who were included to help bring on their English language. The SENCO used pictures to illustrate what activities they would be doing and placed them in order, then removed each picture as the corresponding activity was completed. She sang a 'Hello' song to each child and encouraged them to answer with "Hello" and her name. After that, she said each child's name emphasising and repeating the initial sound, as well as using sign language for the initial letter. Another friendship song was sung while the children held hands and the SENCO used the sign for 'friend'. Following on from this, she sang a song about rolling a ball to a friend whilst rolling a ball to different children. They were then encouraged to say the name

of a friend they wanted to roll the ball to. The children played a 'Bob the Builder' game where there were a selection of plastic tools that they had to balance inside Bob's wheelbarrow. The SENCO encouraged them to repeat and sound out the initial letter of the tool they selected, e.g. "s s s spade". The session ended with a 'Goodbye' song where everybody was expected to join in and wave at each other as each person's name was sung.

Another member of staff had set up a 'Picture Hunt' involving pictures and words related to the theme of 'Space'. She selected a group of four children ('Swans') and gave them clipboards, pens and a sheet showing five pictures and words, e.g. Earth, moon etc. They then went outside and walked around the building looking for matching pictures and words. When they found one, they looked for it on their sheet and made a mark next to it. The member of staff repeated this with different groups of children so by the end of the morning they had all had a turn. After snack time, the two rooms were opened up so children could move between the two rooms. In the 'Cygnets' room were messy activities such as paints, playdoh and gluing. There were also books, small world toys and construction (Figure 46 and 47)



Figure 46 - Painting table at Preschool TC



Figure 47 - Books available in 'Cygnets' room at Pre-school TC

Shortly after this, all the children were taken outside where there were ride-on toys, sand, bats and balls, water and paintbrushes, small vehicles, a tray containing leaves, conkers and plastic mini-beasts, prams and dolls, drawing and activity books. Whilst the children played outside, some members of staff put away the toys inside.

After playing outside, the children were separated and returned to their original rooms where a member of staff read a story while the children sat and listened. Then they were asked to choose a song they wanted to sing. Suggestions included 'Spiderman', 'Baa Baa Black Sheep' and 'Twinkle Twinkle'. The 'Cygnets' then came to join the 'Swans' while staff set up their room for the children who were staying for lunch and some children were collected to go home. The children and staff stood in a large circle in the middle of the room and they sang some action songs – 'I've got a body', 'Zoom, I'm going to the moon' (tied in with the 'Space' theme) and 'Tommy Thumb'. Then a CD (from the same company that ran the private music and movement class) was put on and everyone enjoyed some more songs that involved moving in different ways. One song

encouraged the children to use their index finger to draw different shapes in the air.

On one of my visits a walk had been organised to a nearby park to link in with the week's theme of 'Safety'. Some mothers had volunteered to accompany the children. Mrs Scarlet spoke to them about the importance of talking to the children about what they could see on the walk even if it seemed boring and obvious. However it soon became clear that the mothers wanted to talk to each other rather than the children, so Mrs Scarlet stopped several times to point things out to the children and ask them questions. Some of the mothers then tried to do the same, but seemed embarrassed, laughing at themselves and each other before quickly giving up. Halfway through the walk, one of the members of staff collected everyone in a circle to sing some songs and play parachute games. Songs included 'Ring a Ring of Roses', 'Wheels on the Bus' and 'Grand Old Duke of York'. During the outing photographs were taken which Mrs Scarlet explained they would use next week to talk to the children about their trip. On their return to the pre-school, the mothers were asked to write a comment about something they had noticed their child doing that could be put in their 'Learning Journey'.

The staff tried hard to engage the children in conversation. For example, they joined in with role play, construction and playing board games. They also sat with them at snack time and lunch time, asking them questions about things they had been doing at home as well as encouraging good manners. If a child brought them a book, they read it to them, often attracting other children to come and listen. Mrs Ebony commented that the staff knew not to bombard the children with questions but to correctly model using language, such as "train on track, choo! choo!" She felt it was important for them to hear lots of basic, simple language. This was encouraged through reading books and singing rhymes every day, as well as any opportunities to reinforce letter sounds, such as "line up if your name begins with a cuh (c)". For Mrs Scarlet, modelling language correctly was particularly important for children with a speech and language delay

and children for whom English was a second language. Having found out from the parents of the Polish children that their main reason for sending their children to pre-school was so they could learn to speak and understand English, Mrs Scarlet said

> I just really work on very simple instructions, so whereas normally you would just issue an instruction to English-speaking children and they'd get it, I'm having to rethink how I do it. And lots of visual clues as well. It's surprising though how quickly it's coming. And even including them in a game, putting them at the end of the four so they are having to take turns to watch other people, and then by the time it gets to their turn they've sussed what's expected.

In terms of writing skills, Mrs Ebony explained that they tried to give the children lots of different materials for mark making such as pencils, paints, brushes with water, chunky chalks, and big mops and sweeping brushes to paint with, which they enjoyed.

Parents were kept informed about what was going on via a noticeboard outside the entrance/exit to each room. This showed what activities were provided each day, which members of staff were present, the story that would be read, along with a copy of the prospectus, latest newsletter and medium term plans. Parents were invited to a meeting when their child started at the pre-school and when they moved from 'Cygnets' to ''Swans'. The initial meeting explained the *Early Years Framework* (DfE, 2017c), how the pre-school was run and who the individual staff members were. It was also used to gain parents' consent for referring a child for further help if staff felt they needed it in the future. Parents were told that if staff had concerns about speech and language or any other aspects of a child's development, then they would be told and other agencies would become involved. They told parents this so they would be prepared if this needed to happen. Mrs Ebony explained,

> I always say to them "Look, for goodness sake, please don't worry if we suggest that your child needs speech therapy because loads of children have to go, and the earlier we get that in there, the better." And sometimes we are finding that some of them, with the two year

> [development] check that they are having with the Health Visitor, it's getting picked up already, and they come to us having gone through the *Let's Get Talking* programme […] 'We like to have an open relationship where you can talk to us, we can talk to you, so if we have got any delicate conversations we've got to have with you, we know you and you know us, and you kind of trust us and it's easier for us to have those conversations'.

Mrs Scarlet stressed that most communication was done via the noticeboard, verbally and through the half-termly newsletter. Unlike Pre-school ES, they did not use text messaging or social media. Mrs Scarlet stated that "we very much promote the fact that we've got an open-door policy so if they want to talk to us about anything, any aspect, anything to do with coming through that door, then we're there." But she did admit this was rare, with most parents just wanting to drop off and collect with little involvement. 'Learning Journeys' were displayed near the entrance/exit but I did not see parents looking at them. Staff said that some parents liked to look at the photographs but others did not bother. They contained lots of detailed observation sheets and photographs that were annotated by the staff linking them to statements from the *Early Years Framework* (DfE, 2017c), but apart from an initial parent questionnaire that had been completed when the child started, there was little written by the parents or ideas for how they could support learning at home. A board had been created with sticky notes where parents could write their own comments about things they had noticed their child doing or any news they wanted to share (Figure 48). But Mrs Scarlet commented that they were not used and they struggled to get parents' feedback and comments. She sometimes wrote ideas for things they could do at home on the noticeboard but was not sure that they took much notice.



Figure 48 - Display board for parents to share news and comments at Pre-school TC

Beth, who was Polish and whose three year old son attended this pre-school, was very interested in supporting her children's language skills, especially as her children were learning two languages at the same time. She had made time to talk and read with both her children (she also had a five year old daughter) as much as possible from when they were born. She explained that they had a lot of Polish books at home but they also went to the library every week and borrowed English books. She translated the English stories into Polish as she read them out loud to her children, but kept the characters' names the same e.g. 'Gruffalo'. Since her daughter had started school, she had learnt to read in English and now preferred the English books she brought home from school. Despite this, Beth still gave her Polish books to read and in the evening they only read in Polish. Beth expressed her surprise and delight that her daughter was reading at a higher level in English that was expected for her age, as she felt she had not been exposed to this language as much. Although Beth did take credit for introducing her children to reading from an early age which had resulted in them both loving it. She said "my children love reading. They were really interested. It's not like I was

trying to read and they were running away. And I find it is really nice in the evening to have a cuddle and to read to them. So it's not only about reading, it's about connection."

In terms of the pre-school, Beth said that she had been told to "keep doing what you are doing, lots of books to read and talk to your children in your own language, and we will do our part. We will talk in our language, in English." She was aware that they played games with her son to encourage his language such as a memory game where they had six objects, covered one up and then asked which one was missing. She also thought that they talked a lot to him, encouraging him to ask for things as well as explaining what they were doing. She was pleased that the pre-school immersed him in a completely English-speaking environment and that Mrs Scarlet had told her that her son was now attempting to form sentences in English. Before pre-school, she described how her children had ignored anyone that spoke to them in English even though they would hear her using it, but had both started speaking Polish from fourteen months old. However she also recognised that fifteen hours a week in pre-school was not enough to level the two languages and that this could only happen once they were enrolled in full time school. Her daughter was now really interested in comparing the two languages in terms of the different sounds that letters make.

Lydia (whom I met at the music and movement class) was French and had two sons (two years old and six months old) who were learning French and English at the same time. She felt it was "really important to encourage the French books and the French literacy as well, because you see a lot of bilingual children totally able to speak and listen to the foreign language, or second language, but not so much read and write." At his two year development check, Lydia had expressed her concern that her older son was not speaking much and had been asked by the Health Visitor if he could say fifty words in English. She had kept a list for a few weeks and discovered that he could say at least seventy five English words and fifty French words, so had no longer been concerned. However friends had wondered if

the two languages were confusing him (Lydia always spoke to her children in French unless they were with English-speaking friends, and her husband usually spoke English). However, she did not think this was the case as he understood instructions in both languages, and she thought it would be more confusing if she suddenly started speaking to him in a language he had not heard before when he got older.

Both Lydia's children were soon to be going to a nursery full time as she returned to work after maternity leave. Her older son had been going on a part-time basis while she was at home with his younger brother. In terms of literacy, the nursery shared targets for them to work on at home. She gave the example of the target – 'to repeat words from a book'. So when she read 'We're Going on a Bear Hunt' (by Michael Rosen) her son said the lines that began with "we can't go" using phrases such as "over it" and "under it" and "through it". Lydia often asked the nursery what her son was learning to do and then tried to provide the same sorts of activities at home.

5.3.2 Getting 'ready for school'

Other mothers who sent their children to pre-school talked about how it prepared them for school. Eve, who had two sons aged four and three, described how the pre-school her oldest son had gone to was in the grounds of the school he now went to – "I like it because they know what the school requirements are for when they move up…so even though he did go to nursery, I felt that the pre-school brought him on a lot more." She was therefore thrilled that her younger son had got a place there and she was pulling him out of his nursery so he could attend. Eve said that, unlike the nursery that had not discussed her sons' development or suggested ways she could support it, the pre-school involved her by sending home tasks such as a scrapbook to fill with photographs and other things collected on a day trip. On another occasion her son had brought home a soft toy dolphin which had accompanied them on outings over a school holiday, and they had enjoyed taking photographs of where they had

been to create a diary. She also liked that they wore a uniform which helped her son to understand that pre-school was similar to going to school. She felt this helped him get 'ready for school'. Eve was very much guided by the pre-school staff whom she referred to as the "experts". She felt reassured that, by doing the things they asked of her, she was supporting her children in the best way and that she was doing "enough". For example, they had told her that one of the signs her son was 'ready for school' was whether he could write his name. Eve knew they were helping him to do that and she was doing the same at home.

5.3.3 Parental responsibility

Mrs Scarlet felt that the age of the staff at pre-school TC made a difference to parents who saw them as experienced and knowledgeable with clear boundaries and expectations for children's behaviour. But as well as supporting the children, Mrs Ebony felt their role was also to support their parents,

> And we do support families if we feel they are struggling with a child's behaviour or anything, I'll get somebody in to cover to release Mrs Scarlet who's very good at behaviour management – she's our behaviour management lady […] so they can go in to that little room and have one-to-one, face-to-face with the parent to support them and to give them strategies […] We'll do it for anything. You know, a parent might come in in floods of tears. "Do you want to talk?" In they'll go and they're having problems in certain aspects of their life […] that's a big part of it, because the children are with their families at home all that time. We're just a little few hours, a little window and we've got to help and support them and make their lives as happy at home and any support we can give.

In this way, it seemed that Mrs Ebony saw parents playing a bigger role in their child's development than the pre-school, but that the pre-school could support them in this. She went on to explain that most of the mothers did not work because they chose not to. She believed this was "a good thing to promote anyway – if parents want to stay at home with their children, let's promote it!"

Another way of supporting parents and promoting the pre-school was through the weekly playgroup that Mrs Ebony and Mrs Scarlet ran along with a group of volunteers for two hours on the morning pre-school was closed. It charged a minimal fee, provided limitless drinks and biscuits and was very well attended with around forty adults and fifty children. Most of these were mothers, grandmothers or female childminders. I spotted one father who was there with his female partner and child. The children ranged from new born to three years old. A range of activities were provided in the two rooms and outside (Figures 49 and 50) and for the last half an hour Mrs Ebony led some singing while playing the guitar. The children and adults joined in singing and actions, with some children moving about in the centre of the room. Songs included 'Twinkle Twinkle', 'Wind the Bobbin Up', 'Wheels on the Bus', 'Row, Row Your Boat', 'Hickory, Dickory Dock', 'Sleeping Bunnies', 'Five Cheeky Monkeys' and 'Our God is a Great Big God'. This was one of the groups that Kate regularly brought her daughter too because she liked the singing, water, painting, and gluing, and she felt it was very good value for money unlike the private classes. Despite not being keen on the idea of pre-school, she had put her daughter's name on the waiting list as she felt it was one of the better ones.



Figure 49 – One room set up for playgroup



Figure 50 - Sticking activity in another room used for playgroup

Quite a few of the mothers that attended the playgroup with their children put their names down on the waiting list for the pre-school. It was a way for them to meet Mrs Ebony and Mrs Scarlet informally and help their child to get used to the setting. Mrs Scarlet relayed what one mother had told her,

> "I just love the feel of the place. I've been coming [to playgroup], I know you, I know what the place is like. This little one is very special – it's my last. I don't want it to go anywhere else." And she actually has worked in a nursery and she said "You know, I've worked in a nursery. I wouldn't send my child to a nursery. I have a friend who works in a care home and she says 'I wouldn't put my parents in a care home.'"

I spoke to some other mothers that attended the playgroup. Some explained that they had been coming for years. They had started with their older children and were now bringing their younger siblings. Some had children who also attended the pre-school and others

planned to send their children to the pre-school when they were old enough having already put their name down on the waiting list.

But playgroups were not for everyone. Marie preferred more structured groups. She described playgroups as places where everybody does their own thing, which she did not like as she described herself as "socially awkward". Kate alluded to this when she talked about first going to this playgroup – "You'd got all these blonde little mummies who didn't want to talk to anyone else. They were there to talk to their own friends and that was it. And it was getting to the stage of why am I bothering doing this? And it was like, well you're not doing it for you, you're doing it for her." She persevered and made a good friend who she then started to meet up with at other times and at other groups. As a result she now had a much-valued friendship group made up of mothers with similar aged children.

5.3.4 Place and time

Pre-school ES was situated in the centre of a council estate and only families that lived on the estate used it. Mrs White commented that the estate had a number of well-known, large extended families that had grown up and remained on the estate. Children at the pre-school were often related and most lived in council-owned houses. She said families did not cross the main road that separated this estate from the other social housing estate where the Children's Centre and primary school pre-school were situated. She referred to this as the "north/south divide". She felt that lots of children were missing out on the resources that the Children's Centre provided and that, as a result, it was underused. Mrs White went on to say that the money that continued to be spent on the Centre would be better directed to the pre-school so staff could be paid more money and more places could be offered. A new pre-school that had recently opened on the other estate had targeted all the eligible families there but only three children took up a place so it closed soon after.

While I was visiting, a young mother and father who lived on the estate turned up with their two year old daughter interested in securing a place for her. They had found the pre-school after asking on social media if anyone could recommend a pre-school in the area and this one was suggested. After a short visit they said they wanted a place and explained that they were eligible for the two year old funding. They were given details about who to contact about this but nothing about the pre-school itself. Mrs White told me she did not bother giving out a prospectus as she did not think parents would read it, especially as they did not bother looking at the Ofsted report before selecting a pre-school. Natasha's reasons for picking this pre-school after having a look round were, liking "the welcoming staff, how it's open plan so they can just play and stuff like that, and I'd heard lots of good stuff about it from other people who said how it was a good place. And I knew a couple of people in the area who sent their child there." Fiona had similar feelings. She would soon be sending her eleven month son to one of the private nurseries when she returned to work after maternity leave. She explained that she had chosen the nursery because her nephew had gone there and was really happy. At the age of ten he still liked to visit.

Word-of-mouth was important to Pre-school TC too. The pre-school had been set up in 1990 and had been running ever since. During this time, it had been able to build up a good reputation in the town. Mrs Ebony felt that people valued them for their Christian ethos,

> They respect it. Very few of them, as far as I know, actually go to church but they are happy for the children to have that ethos around them […] We treat everyone with the same respect regardless of where they're from or what background they're from, don't we? And I think that helps, I think parents realise that about us – that we do treat them with respect and we do, you know even those ones in the most difficult circumstances, treat them well. And I think they respect us for that.

In summary, while both pre-schools provided a range of resources for the children to play with, the ways that these were used varied

considerably. Children in pre-school ES experienced limited interaction with staff despite there being a deficit discourse around large numbers of children with speech and language problems and parents who were uninterested in their learning and development. It seemed that many parents preferred to hand over responsibility to people they saw as the experts.

In contrast, the children in pre-school TC experienced more focused, structured interaction with staff. This included small intervention groups and opportunities to engage in a range of literacy practices, such as singing and listening to stories. Staff saw parents as having the prime responsibility for their children's learning and made attempts to involve them. However, it seemed as if most of the parents here were also happy to leave it up to people they saw as the experts.

On the other hand, bilingual mothers saw a shared responsibility with their children's childcare providers. They engaged their children in literacy practices that they thought would support their language development in both languages. Some mothers also valued pre-schools for helping to get their children 'ready' for school.

The final portrait moves on to consider how private classes constructed literacy spaces. It also builds on the concepts of 'school readiness', parental responsibility, place and time.

5.4 Private classes portrait

Private classes for under-fives and their carers tend to be groups run by individuals, either as employees or franchisees of a larger company. This means that classes often establish a local or national reputation for providing a service that focuses on a particular aspect of young children's development, such as movement, language, or artistic skills. In Embervale I found two classes that incorporated activities designed to promote language and communication and were known by some of the mothers I interviewed.

The first class, based on music and movement, was founded in 2004. It now employs seventeen teachers delivering classes around the Leicestershire area. The class I visited ran once a week for forty five minutes (during school term times) from a church hall on the east side of the town. Each session cost £5.50 which was payable on a weekly or half-termly basis. It catered for children from birth to five, although the children I observed were mainly aged two and younger. Around eight mothers, one female childminder, one grandmother, and their children attended on a regular basis.



Figure 51 - Church hall used for Music and movement class

The second class, based around teaching babies and parents how to use sign language, was founded in 2002 by a teacher of the deaf. It has nearly one hundred and thirty teachers operating classes throughout the UK on a franchise basis. Mrs Hazel, who led the class I visited, was one of these teachers. The class ran for an hour once a week (during school term times) from a church hall in the town centre (Figure 51). Each session cost £6, payable a term (approximately 12 weeks) in advance. The class was aimed at babies from birth to around eighteen months. Once a child was walking, parents were encouraged to move on to a 'toddler' signing class where they would be encouraged to say, as well as sign, words. However there wasn't a 'toddler' class operating in this town. Three babies (under a year old) and their mothers attended regularly.

5.4.1 Constructing a literacy space

5.4.1.1 Music and movement class



Figure 52 - Mats where participants sit in a circle during music and movement class

The music and movement class followed a similar pattern each week. Everyone sat on mats facing into a circle (Figure 52) and the leader put on a CD with different songs. She took control of the session by singing along, doing actions and encouraging the adults and children to join in. Some of the songs were familiar nursery rhymes but most were original songs (CDs were available for adults to purchase before or after the class). Props, such as teddies, balls, musical instruments, sheer scarves and a parachute, were also incorporated at different times. These were very popular with the children and helped to keep their attention; they often rushed up to the leader to collect them for themselves, a younger sibling and their adult. Towards the end of the session the children were encouraged to sit still with a snack and a drink, and to listen to a story being read. At the end, the leader would blow bubbles and the children would enjoy moving about trying to catch and pop them while the adults tidied up and got ready to leave.

The songs, and often the stories, were characterised by the repetition of simple phrases and sounds. Alliteration and rhyme were common features. For example, one song had the words "moving with mummy on Monday", "tiptoeing on Tuesday" and "wobbling on Wednesday", and one story used lots of the repetition when describing what a character was doing e.g. "dig, dig, digging". Mrs Pink explained that they used "short, simple, repeated phrases – so that helps with language and communication […] the idea behind that is to extend vocabulary, perhaps that children wouldn't normally be exposed to." This approach reflects a type of literacy based on phonics and developing vocabulary which is similar to the 'school' literacy constructed and promoted by government policy.

Songs were also repeated in subsequent classes to enable the adults and children to become familiar with them and join in more as the weeks went by. This meant that children's listening skills were also being developed; in order to join in with the words and actions they had to pay attention to the leader and others in the room. This was apparent when children were listening to a story as the leader would often stop and ask them a question to focus their attention and keep

them engaged. However in one session, two older children (aged three) chatted and argued during the story-time, and their mothers (who already knew each other) also chatted to each other. On this occasion, the other children became disengaged as they struggled to hear the story and the leader was forced to cut the story short. This was unusual. In the other sessions I observed (when they were not present), the adults who regularly attended kept quiet so their children could listen to the story and answer questions appropriately.

The mothers I interviewed who attended this class, all commented on how much their children enjoyed it, how their children had grown in confidence and were excited to take part. Marie commented about her (almost) two year old daughter,

> Now, she's just absolutely obsessed. She likes singing, she likes nursery rhymes. She really likes that there's actions you can do with the songs. And you can see her doing them, and almost daily she does *Funky Chicken* at me. She makes me turn on one of the CDs for it. We sing pretty much all day.

For Lydia, it was important that her sons (two years old and six months old) had fun with literacy which was her prime reason for taking them to the music and movement class. She remarked, "it's just something fun for them to do, something they enjoy."

Anna, who was in full-time higher education and had a three year old daughter, had not been able to take her to the music and movement class but had experienced it when she worked in a nursery. She said she felt sad that her daughter had not been able to experience it as "you could see the children really coming out of their shells – they were really enjoying it and getting excited when it was time for [the class]. I loved it. Even when it wasn't [the class], the kids would be singing the songs and I really enjoyed it." Like Anna, Marie recognised that it was important for the adult to enjoy it too - "I thought 'Oh my gosh! I actually enjoy this too' because I think that's important – to go to groups that you enjoy or else you just kind of feel 'Uh, a chore!' But we really, really like [the class]."

As well as attending the class, the mothers I interviewed invested a lot of time supporting their children's literacy development in fun ways. Lydia explained this is relation to her older son,

> I definitely encourage books. For example, we give them as rewards. He's a really bad eater so we do a reward chart and that's one of the rewards he gets. Because I want him to see books as something fun and something he will enjoy, not something he has to do because school makes him. And I just want him to enjoy reading as he grows up because I think it's really important...We read every day.

Marie also wanted to make learning fun for her daughter so she would be more likely to enjoy school,

> I think it's good to get it all started when they don't realise you are teaching them, because I know some children…I don't know how she'll be…I enjoyed school but she might not. So it's always good to start when they don't really realise that they're learning stuff or that you're teaching them stuff. We just make it fun.

Marie felt that books, reading, drawing and television programmes helped her daughter's literacy development but she was guided by what her daughter liked and was interested in,

> I don't expect her to read, but we read a lot of books. She is really obsessed with books and she likes colouring so far. We are trying to get her to make, like, people shapes. You know, not letters, but shapes of different objects and stuff […] We don't always watch TV but we do have some programmes. And I've picked some that actually seem to teach her some stuff and that she's interested in […] I'm always reading books. I think that's why she likes them too. I try to encourage her.

Marie was keen to point out that she and her husband were avid readers and they owned a lot of books that could be found all over the house. Like Lydia, she valued the involvement of her daughter's father whom she described as actively playing with her every evening, and grandparents who looked after her one day a week and gave her different experiences. Although she had not yet visited the library with her daughter, she wanted to go and see what books they

had for herself and her daughter. She was also interested to find out about the groups that were running there. It seemed that, as well as recognising the importance of starting young, enjoyment was a common motivator for mothers to engage in particular activities with their children. If they and their child enjoyed it, they were more likely to encourage it.

5.4.1.2 Baby signing class

The signing class followed a similar pattern each week. Everybody sat on foam mats on the floor facing into a circle and the leader, Mrs Hazel, took control of the class. Sessions began with a 'hello' song and ended with a 'goodbye' song. Both songs were very simple and repetitive, and included each child's name. After the 'hello' song, Mrs Hazel used a mixture of props to introduce different signs. For example, the theme of one session was 'Birthdays'. She taught the signs for 'spoon', 'apple', 'highchair', 'biscuit', 'cake', 'banana' and used a mixture of real and toy objects, as well as pictures, to illustrate each one. Mothers were encouraged to say and sign each word several times while babies were given the objects to play with. Songs were sung that fitted with the theme and when words in the songs matched signs they were learning (or already knew) mothers were encouraged to use the correct sign alongside each word. The songs tended to be ones that mothers were already familiar with such as common nursery rhymes. In one session, linked to the theme of 'Halloween', mothers learnt the signs for 'mouse' and 'spider' before singing 'Hickory, Dickory Dock' and 'Incy, Wincy Spider'. They also used the signs for 'sun' and 'rain' which they had previously learnt. In addition, Mrs Hazel read a book with a Halloween theme and used a range of signs alongside the words she was reading.

Sessions were very much about using,

> signing as a precursor to speech. So it's not an 'instead of', it's an 'as well as'. So there's a visual cue to the word that mummy or daddy is saying or the picture that they're looking at. But also they are open to language from a very early age and interactions of language […]

> it's giving them early exposure to spoken language, signed language, written language, and just having them around it. (Mrs Hazel)

In the same way as the music and movement class, this class seemed to be focused on building children's spoken vocabulary by exposing them to a variety of language. Being able to communicate using sign language, even before speech is developed, was also seen as a way of developing confidence,

> because it alleviates the frustration of not being able to be understood, that helps as well with their communication. Because even if they don't want to talk, they can sign, which gives them confidence, and if they are confident and got good self-esteem they are more likely to communicate. (Mrs Hazel).

Growth in their children's confidence and willingness to take part was also something that mothers who attended the music and movement class commented on.

The second half of each session was referred to as 'social and support time'. Babies would often go to sleep, play with some toys that were put out or feed. Mrs Hazel offered mothers drinks and biscuits and they would mostly chat about their experiences of motherhood; two were first time mothers and often sought advice and reassurance from the other mothers (including Mrs Hazel). On one occasion a mother was struggling to establish a bedtime routine as her daughter was often not ready to sleep after a bath. The other mothers suggested reading a bedtime story. She thought her daughter was too young for this (around four months old) but the others insisted she was not. One mother said she had always done this with her baby who was the same age and she could tell that he already enjoyed 'The Gruffalo' (by Julia Donaldson). Mrs Hazel also talked about her own son who had recently started school and who had always enjoyed choosing bedtime stories to read. In this way, the mothers and professional shaped each other's ideas about what was good for their children's development.

5.4.2 Getting 'ready for school'

The props that were used throughout the music and movement class supported vocabulary-building as well as moving in different ways. For example, shakers were moved up and down the body, tapped on tummies and shoulders, and rolled over and under arms. Mrs Pink explained to me how the activities would help the children when they were expected to write at school,

> Just talking about letter formation on a page, then linking back again to music and movement, there are lots of songs which involve up and down, left and right, side to side, round, over, under. If children can experience these motions, and the vocabulary, through their body, then when they transpose it onto pen and paper, then it makes sense…because they've learnt it through their body, with different parts of their body as well.

The use of positional and directional language was also apparent when the children were encouraged to move the parachute – up, down, side to side, in, out etc. A favourite use of the parachute was when the children had to try to stop balls and other objects from falling off it by moving it around, and crouching down underneath it to hide and then springing up. So as well as building vocabulary, movement was used to develop gross and fine motor control. For example, songs might include twirling, jumping, spinning, rocking, throwing, kicking legs and waving arms.

> It's really important that we work on the core strength – we've got a song that's all about having a bath. And children sit on their bottoms, but when they do the splishy splashy bit then they'll kick their arms and legs in the air, and that's all about core strength. Because if you think about what a child needs, what skills do they need in place to be able to sit and write a story, for example…he needs core strength – he's got to be able to sit in that chair and hold himself upright, lean himself over the desk with enough strength not to be slumping down to hold that pencil. (Mrs Pink)

In terms of fine motor control, children were seen using their 'magic finger' to make imaginary marks on the floor, and musical

instruments (such as guiros) to make different sounds. In one session, adults and children walked around in a circle with tambourines, tapping them fast, slow, loud and soft. Mrs Pink felt that being able to apply the right amount of pressure and at different speeds would help with pencil-grip and applying the correct pressure when writing.

> We can demonstrate that, we can support that, through drumming. Do I need to play loudly? Do I need to play softly? And they are learning about pressure all the time. So that translates to the classroom, with holding that pencil…So what could I do in my early years to build up those muscles, that strength in those fingers to hold that pencil? Well, I could hold a parachute, but there's not a lot of tension there, but maybe if we use Lycra. There's a lot of tension in Lycra – we are bouncing objects on the Lycra…But at the same time I'm also working my fingers and boy do I know when I've been working with the Lycra, even as an adult! (Mrs Pink)

Eye-tracking was seen as an important skill to build in the early years. Bouncing objects on the parachute, and the use of bubbles at the end of each session gave children the opportunity to follow them with their eyes, and then, if they wanted to catch them, to develop their hand-eye coordination.

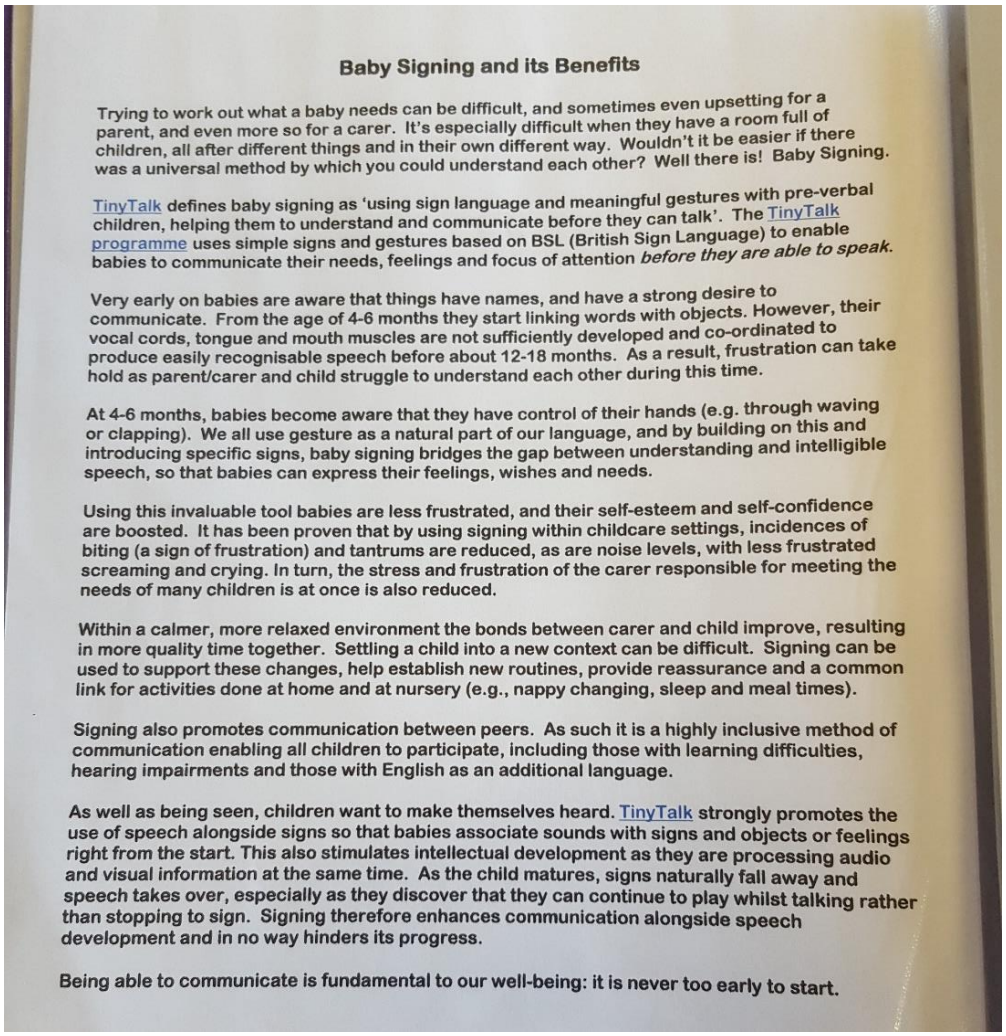
> Their eyes have to work so hard when they start school because they are looking at the whiteboard far away so they are using their far vision for that, and then they are coming down on to their work space. They are writing in front of them and it's close up…eyes are continually having to focus, and they are also having to focus to try to keep on the line. (Mrs Pink)

Despite explaining to me the benefits of the activities for children's literacy development and getting them 'ready for school', these were implicit in the sessions. Mrs Pink and Mrs Hazel appeared reluctant to point them out to parents, preferring them to discover the benefits for themselves.

> When parents enquire about the classes we try not to bombard them with everything because, from experience, if you're sent like a great

> big three-page booklet of what we do and why we do it, it can put them off. Predominantly they are looking for something fun to go and do with their baby. So, for those parents that ask, I do highlight that it links to the EYFS and explain briefly what that is. I have information out in the classes so if they do want to know more about what areas it meets, they can look at that. (Mrs Hazel)

Mrs Hazel had a folder and small display board out in each class which detailed the benefits of baby signing and how the classes linked to the EYFS Framework, although I did not see anyone looking at them when I visited (Figure 53).



Baby Signing and its Benefits

Trying to work out what a baby needs can be difficult, and sometimes even upsetting for a parent, and even more so for a carer. It's especially difficult when they have a room full of children, all after different things and in their own different way. Wouldn't it be easier if there was a universal method by which you could understand each other? Well there is! Baby Signing.

TinyTalk defines baby signing as 'using sign language and meaningful gestures with pre-verbal children, helping them to understand and communicate before they can talk'. The TinyTalk programme uses simple signs and gestures based on BSL (British Sign Language) to enable babies to communicate their needs, feelings and focus of attention *before they are able to speak.*

Very early on babies are aware that things have names, and have a strong desire to communicate. From the age of 4-6 months they start linking words with objects. However, their vocal cords, tongue and mouth muscles are not sufficiently developed and co-ordinated to produce easily recognisable speech before about 12-18 months. As a result, frustration can take hold as parent/carer and child struggle to understand each other during this time.

At 4-6 months, babies become aware that they have control of their hands (e.g. through waving or clapping). We all use gesture as a natural part of our language, and by building on this and introducing specific signs, baby signing bridges the gap between understanding and intelligible speech, so that babies can express their feelings, wishes and needs.

Using this invaluable tool babies are less frustrated, and their self-esteem and self-confidence are boosted. It has been proven that by using signing within childcare settings, incidences of biting (a sign of frustration) and tantrums are reduced, as are noise levels, with less frustrated screaming and crying. In turn, the stress and frustration of the carer responsible for meeting the needs of many children is at once is also reduced.

Within a calmer, more relaxed environment the bonds between carer and child improve, resulting in more quality time together. Settling a child into a new context can be difficult. Signing can be used to support these changes, help establish new routines, provide reassurance and a common link for activities done at home and at nursery (e.g., nappy changing, sleep and meal times).

Signing also promotes communication between peers. As such it is a highly inclusive method of communication enabling all children to participate, including those with learning difficulties, hearing impairments and those with English as an additional language.

As well as being seen, children want to make themselves heard. TinyTalk strongly promotes the use of speech alongside signs so that babies associate sounds with signs and objects or feelings right from the start. This also stimulates intellectual development as they are processing audio and visual information at the same time. As the child matures, signs naturally fall away and speech takes over, especially as they discover that they can continue to play whilst talking rather than stopping to sign. Signing therefore enhances communication alongside speech development and in no way hinders its progress.

Being able to communicate is fundamental to our well-being: it is never too early to start.

Figure 53 - Example from the information put out in each baby signing class

However, Mrs Hazel did talk to mothers about how baby signing had helped her own son who had recently started school. She said, "my little boy is learning to read now, and he's grasped it so quickly, and

I can only say that's from his early exposure to communication and language." In this way, she was keen to emphasise the benefits of being around language and encouraging communication from an early age so that children would have the foundations for reading when they started school.

Conversely, Mrs Pink thought that many of the adults that brought children to the classes already recognised the value of what was offered or would soon realise it for themselves,

> I will say that 40% of our customers are teachers or ex-teachers… so they know the value of music and movement. I don't have to explain that to them. If I can get people through the door, they will tend to stay, because they'll see the joy of their child, and they'll pick up some of the learning that we're trying to do with them, and they'll continue to come.

Lydia, a secondary-school teacher who took both her children to the music and movement class, recognised the importance of encouraging writing and phonics skills at home with her two year old son in order to give him a head start before he started school. She felt that her support was even more important as he would be one of the youngest in the class.

> So I think it's important that he can recognise letters and write his name, and little bits […] It's little things like for example, he's got a big whiteboard and he writes on it – little fish and sharks are a favourite – but I also write his name sometimes and sound out each letter, that kind of thing. I think it's just using opportunities around you to do things. For example, we've got magnets on the fridge as well, and we make words…We've got baby flash cards that we've been given and you are supposed to make words with them later. Obviously we are not using them for that, but I am making sure he knows what the letter sound is. And maybe one day he'll associate that with writing […] we've got a Peppa Pig thing that tells you the letters, and we've got a mini-bus. At the moment, I don't think again he's really associating it, but that's something that will help him because if he presses the letter it will give him the sound, and there's

> phonics games…We have a V-tech bus that sings nursery rhymes, and it sings things like 'e as in elephant', so it will help him later.

In addition, she valued the involvement of a grandmother and father who also regularly read with her sons.

5.4.3 Parental responsibility

For Mrs Pink the involvement of parents was key to supporting children's development. She explained that,

> Sometimes we get phone calls where people make an enquiry about the class – "Do I have to stay?" Well yes, you do have to stay, you are actually half of the part of the learning process. We are facilitators, and hopefully you will take those activities home. And many, many people come back to me and say "Oh we did this at home, we did that at home." And that's the most wonderful thing I can hear, or maybe a child has not participated in the class, they've been an observer, and parents are a little anxious - "Shall I come back, they've not joined in?" And then maybe after two or three weeks, they'll say to me "Oh I was in the kitchen, and I popped into the lounge and little one was doing blah, blah, blah that they'd learnt in the class". And that's so rewarding for us to learn.

However, Suzy, who had a nine month old, wondered whether to continue going to the signing class as she was not sure if it was making any difference to her son's development. She mentioned that "he did sign 'milk' and then he stopped very quickly and he's not done it again since. And he's not really picked up anything else." Likewise, Rose, who had attended the baby signing class for a short time when her (now two year old) daughter was younger, had not gone to the class for long as she felt her daughter was not enjoying it. In the end she said she only went along to learn the signs so she could try to teach them to her daughter at home. In this way Rose understood that any gains for her child's communication skills depended on her being committed to learning the signs first and then reinforcing them at home. As the children were so young in this class, activities were very much directed at the mothers and it was difficult to tell whether a child was picking anything up. It seemed to be the mothers'

responsibility to learn the signs and then invest time during the week to reinforce them whenever possible. This was highlighted by Mrs Hazel giving out a weekly sheet recapping the signs that had been taught as well as other top tips for developing a baby's language (Figure 54) and reminding mothers that they could purchase CDs and DVDs.

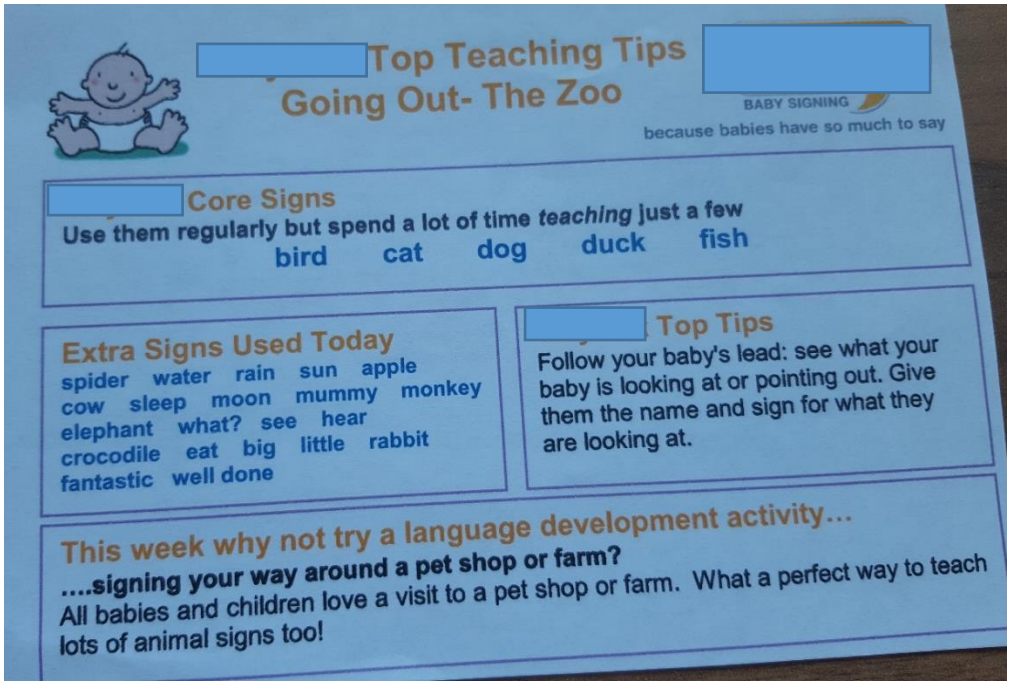


Figure 54 - Summary sheet given to parents at the end of a baby signing session

The emphasis on mothers taking responsibility for their child's progress was also clear during the social time when Mrs Hazel asked if anyone had any "signing stories". This was a chance for mothers to share examples of signing that their baby had done at home. One mother said her baby was now doing the sign for 'all gone'. In addition, mothers were encouraged to keep a record of which signs their child was using so they could claim certificates to celebrate how many signs their child had learnt.

Mrs Hazel was unsure why this class struggled to engage people. Even though it was aimed at young babies (whose mothers were either on maternity leave or working part-time), she surmised that the uptake of childcare places in the area was the reason for the low numbers attending this class. Similarly, the leader of the music and

movement class felt that the free funding of childcare places for two year olds was having an impact as it meant that mothers were going back to work sooner. Not only was this a worry in terms of keeping the classes going (the baby signing class closed at the end of the term I visited) but for Mrs Pink, it was also worrying in terms of parents' involvement in their children's learning,

> It does worry me, with all these free childcare places, because how can community groups compete with that? And then the parent isn't involved in their learning. I won't say they are not informed, that's unfair to say, because every child has a learning journey. So a parent does have information about what happens in school or in pre-school, but it's not the same as being there and being part of it. And also understanding what your child enjoys – and how you can build on that, because they do need leading to extend a particular activity or an area of strength. And you want to build on that, and if you are not really aware of it, other than just one comment in a learning journey, then how can you be a part of it really?

But Mrs Pink also felt that the class in this town was not as successful as classes in other places because mothers here lacked confidence.

> It is an area that we struggle to engage parents with. I've thought about giving up many, many times because I don't think we've ever made a profit there. It's always been a loss or a break-even at best. But…it's not just about money, it's also about the value that you add to the community […] You don't even know if the title 'Music and Movement' puts people off - do I need to sing? You know, if you've not got a lot of confidence then…I do think it's a confidence thing with a lot of the parents…it is about building parent confidence in a group, and letting them know that they are a good mother, they are a good parent, you know […] I mean there's a lot of social and emotional sides of things. It's a really big step to come to a class for a lot of people, and for many, many different reasons. It could be someone who's perhaps…has never worked, who is suddenly at home with a baby, and where do I find the confidence and the money to come along to join in with something? Will people judge me? …So there's that confidence thing, of getting through the door…it's not

> just about the children. It's half and half. It's as much about the caregiver as it is about the child.

In summary, the two classes constructed literacy spaces where a leader took control of the class and encouraged particular practices such as singing, listening to stories and moving in various ways. Although the development of literacy skills was more implicit in the music and movement class, the mothers that I met there engaged their children in literacy practices outside of the class. They reinforced ones they experienced in the class as well as those promoted through policy discourses, such as reading printed texts and mark-making. The professionals and mothers also recognised the importance of the early years for helping children develop and become 'school ready'. Mothers took on this responsibility by seeking out and encouraging activities their children enjoyed. They hoped that by making learning fun their child would have a head-start when they started school and recognise the types of learning on offer there. Furthermore, what mothers themselves valued and enjoyed, along with the resources they had access to, influenced what they did with their children. However, low attendance numbers suggested that not all mothers were able, or wanted, to access the same resources.

Building on Chapter 2, this chapter has revealed how government policy discourses influence the way different resources are offered to mothers in different settings. In particular, how discourses around 'deficit', 'school readiness and 'parental responsibility' are used to explain the literacy practices promoted by professionals and the ones that mothers choose to engage in.

Linking back to Chapters 2 and 3, the next chapter examines how policy and place/space shaped the ways mothers used and experienced the various resources provided by the town to support their young children's literacy development. The analysis reveals that

mothers had different experiences depending on where they lived, where they went, what capitals they had, and how they were framed.

Chapter 6 – Analysis

Chapter 1 introduced the research question and Chapter 4 outlined my approach for answering it. This chapter now answers the question

How are the resources provided by a small town used by mothers to support their young children's literacy development?

6.1 Pedagogical power

The review of policy and research discussed in Chapter 2 explored the ways in which mothers have been positioned as primarily responsible for their young child's development and learning, and how this impacts on mothers in different ways. Policy that has framed families as 'troubled' or 'disadvantaged' has led to some mothers being targeted with interventions designed to improve their parenting skills. The aim being to increase their children's 'school readiness' and educational attainment so they can achieve social mobility and reduce the burden on the state. The following analysis of the different ways mothers experienced the resources that were provided in Embervale gives insights into *how* different mothers learned/were taught to support their children's literacy development. This varied depending on how they were framed, where they lived and where they spent time in the town.

Analysis of the different pedagogies that were employed in different places is central to understanding the ways mothers learned to support their young children's literacy development. Bernstein's (1975) concepts of visible and invisible pedagogies are helpful here. This distinction attempts to explain differences

> in the manner in which criteria are transmitted and in the degree of specificity of the criteria. The more implicit the manner of transmission and the more diffuse the criteria, the more invisible the pedagogy: the more specific the criteria, the more explicit the manner of their transmission, the more visible the pedagogy. (p.6).

Where pedagogy is *visible*, Bernstein (1990) argues, there is an obvious hierarchical relationship between the teacher and pupils, and rules around what is to be taught (criteria) and how it is to be taught (sequencing and pace) are made explicit to the students. The teacher exercises authority over what is taught and how, and establishes herself as a transmitter of knowledge. Where pedagogy is *invisible*, although the teacher still exercises some control over what and how she teaches, she takes on the role of facilitator and rules and relationships are implicit.

By analysing how the mothers experienced different pedagogies, it is possible to see how they were subject to different assumptions and forms of control because "pedagogic practices are cultural relays of the distribution of power. Although visible and invisible pedagogies are apparently opposing types both carry social class assumptions." (Bernstein, 1990, p73-74). Utilising the concepts of visible and invisible pedagogies sheds light on how power was distributed via mothers' differing experiences of places and resources within Embervale. Although the mothers in this study cannot be said to necessarily represent **all** mothers of young children who lived in Embervale or in similar situations, some generalisations will be made in order to recognise similarities and differences between them.

6.1.1 Being educated

The findings show that only certain mothers were seen as needing to be taught how to support their child's learning. How they were taught related to how they were framed, where they lived and where they went**.**

In addition to the economic deprivation reported by local newspapers, social media, the local MP and historian (Chapter 3), professionals recognised cultural deprivation within the town and employed a similar discourse to that seen in government policies. They characterised many of the families they worked with as suffering from multiple problems. These included: low educational attainment; poor maternal mental health; limited socialisation including a

refusal/reluctance to go to groups; an over-reliance on screens to keep children quiet and entertained; a lack of positive interaction between parents and children; and ignorance around how children develop. Professionals used these characteristics to define, understand and explain the widespread speech and language problems and lack of 'school readiness' within the town's youngest population, with certain parts of the town seen to have a larger concentration of 'problem' families residing in them. The two social housing estates situated on the east side were highlighted by several professionals as having a higher proportion of disadvantaged families who were unable to break an ongoing cycle of poor parenting and multiple deprivation.

6.1.1.1 Visible pedagogies

Mothers who visited the Sure Start Children's Centres experienced a visible pedagogy characterised by explicit criteria, pace and sequencing controlled by professionals, as well as a hierarchical relationship with the professionals. They were often mothers who lived in social housing, either on one of the two east side estates or in the town centre, who had been identified by a professional such as a midwife, health visitor or social worker as 'vulnerable' and 'needing support'. Being labelled in this way and being referred to Sure Start and/or Home-Start positioned them as deficient and lacking in knowledge and skills. At the same time, this positioned the professionals as experts who knew best what support the mothers needed. In keeping with government policy, this was being taught the knowledge and skills they lacked (which became the criteria). Professionals chose the programmes they thought would address the 'problem', and set the pace and sequencing for how knowledge would be transmitted through a two year pathway. In this way, visible pedagogies were deemed to be the most suitable approach for meeting the (perceived) needs of these 'deficient' mothers.

In terms of literacy development, the criteria were specific. Mothers were seen as lacking the knowledge required to ensure their children would develop well in the first two years of life. Therefore they

needed to be taught how to communicate and interact with their young children, and about the developmental milestones as set out in the *EYFS framework*. In terms of pace and sequencing, mothers could be referred to Sure Start from as early as pregnancy when they would initially be taught about bonding and attachment. This was intended to help them learn how to communicate and interact well with their child from day one, and lead to increased well-being for both mother and child. Following on from this, Home-Start targeted mothers soon after birth through their *Baby Giggles* group, where the mothers were taught about the different milestones their baby should reach and how to support them to do so successfully. Later groups, such as *PICL*, *Let's Get Talking* and *Solihull*, moved on to teaching mothers about particular aspects of their child's development such as how brains develop, how children learn, how to encourage speech and develop language, styles of parenting and how to deal with challenging behaviour. Like *Baby Giggles*, *Solihull* also looked at developmental milestones and how children should be supported at home to reach them.

The prevailing notion that mothers should support their young children to reach particular developmental milestones was especially relevant for mothers attending *Let's Get Talking*. They had been referred to this course due to their child being identified by a health visitor as not reaching the two year old milestone for speech and language. This course was designed to teach mothers correct strategies for encouraging their child to talk and increase their vocabulary. This approach portrayed the parents as deficient in the knowledge they needed to support their child's speech development, and held them responsible for supporting their child to reach this milestone even if the child was thought to have a specific learning difficulty. The increasing numbers of mothers and children being referred to this course supported the wider discourse that many parents (mothers) in this town did not know how to support their child's learning in the right ways.

For mothers referred to Sure Start and Home-Start, this meant pressure to enrol their child in a pre-school as soon as funding was available (usually two years of age). This was reinforced by a sequence of learning (a pathway) which stopped teaching the mothers how to support their child's learning when the child turned two as the pre-school could then step in and take on this role. In this way, another aspect of the criteria being taught was that the children of some mothers would learn better with pre-school professionals who possessed the knowledge required to support their development and get them 'ready for school'. This contributed to the discourse that being in an educational institution from an early age helps to close the gap between 'disadvantaged' children and their 'better-off' peers.

Moreover, the mothers were taught not to question the judgement of the professionals. It was unusual for mothers to have the opportunity to ask questions, but if they did, professionals ensured that their, as well as other professionals', dominant positions were maintained. For example, in response to a rare question from a mother in the *PICL* group about how best to help a child with mispronunciation, the mother was told to wait until her child had the two year development check with the health visitor. The health visitor could then refer the mother to the *Let's Get Talking* course if she felt it was needed, and pre-school would help if there were further concerns. In another example, a mother in the *Let's Get Talking* group asked if the professionals thought her daughter would be 'ready for school'. Their response was to ask the pre-school professionals who were better placed to make this judgment. By dealing with the mothers' concerns in this way, the professionals strengthened the hierarchical relationship. They distanced themselves from the mothers whilst also reinforcing the idea that they should defer to the superior knowledge of particular professionals in relation to children's development. At the same time, the professionals' emphasis on the pre-school promoted an institutional approach to education over the more informal learning that could be supported in the home, cementing the

idea that the mothers' role was only important up to the point the child could be handed over to the 'experts'.

Another characteristic of a visible pedagogy is an emphasis on performance i.e. the extent to which the student is meeting the criteria (Bernstein, 1990). Because the performance of the mothers (in terms of what they actually did with their child at home) could only be assessed by their responses to questions asked in the sessions, professionals taught them how their child's learning and development related to the different areas of learning in the *EYFS Framework*, so the mothers themselves could monitor their children's development. To assist them with this, mothers who attended *Baby Giggles*, *Pathway* groups or *PICL* were given a 'learning journey' to complete with photographs of their child engaging in activities related to the EYFS areas of learning, or as evidence that they had reached a particular milestone. For mothers in a *Pathway* group, their baby's development was also formally tracked and kept on record, so if they were failing to meet a particular milestone extra support could be put in place. This pedagogical practice enabled the professionals to indirectly monitor how well mothers were learning the lessons they were being taught. The assessment practices highlighted where the mother was falling short because her child was failing to reach particular milestones. In this way, the professional exercised power over how the mother was judged and what support she could and should be offered.

6.1.1.1.1 Space and resources

Relating back to Lefebvre's (1991) concepts of 'conceived' and 'perceived space' discussed in Chapter 3, visible pedagogies were further reinforced through the way the buildings were organised. The two Children's Centres were permanent buildings set up for the specific purpose of providing a range of services for families. In this way the 'conceived space' constructed by policy shaped the 'perceived space' in the way buildings and rooms were organised. Rooms were defined either as adult spaces or spaces for children which meant that mothers and children often occupied different

spaces. Instruction for the mothers usually took place in the adult spaces away from the children, who were looked after in a crèche (child space). If both adults and children occupied a child space but the children were old enough to move around independently (for example, *Let's Get Talking*), chairs were used to mark out a separate space for the adults, and children were encouraged to play in a different part of the room. In the *PICL*, *Solihull* and *Let's Get Talking* groups, chairs were set out in a semi-circle so the mothers faced the teachers who positioned themselves in front of the semi-circle (Figures 55 and 56).

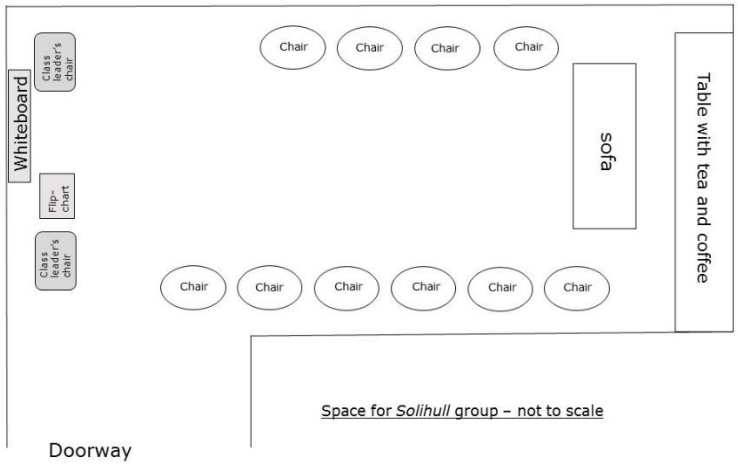


Figure 55 – Solihull's adult space

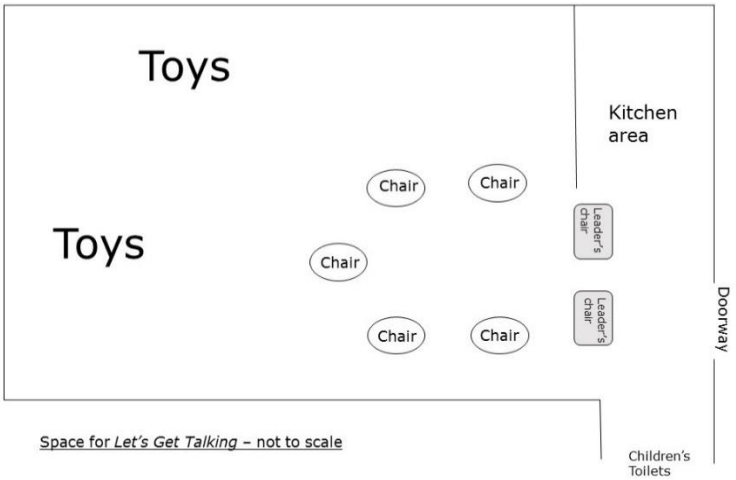


Figure 56 – Let's Get Talking's separate adult and child spaces

In the case of the *Pathway* group, mothers sat around the edge of some baby rugs so they could place their baby in front of them and still see the 'teacher'.

These arrangements and uses of space can therefore be seen to be linked to the concept of 'conceived space' which is the space of dominant ideologies and discourses that influence the design of the physical space and how the space is expected to be used. The 'conceived space' recognised the knowledge of the professionals as superior to that of the mothers which contributed to the visible pedagogy they encountered. The use of space established the professionals' more dominant position, as it was the mothers, rather than the children, who were made the focus of teaching.

The way resources were used also reinforced the hierarchical relationship between the professionals and mothers. Particular literacy practices and resources, such as scrapbooks (used for 'learning journeys'), photographs (to stick in scrapbooks), DVDs, handouts and flipcharts were used. As well as making the criteria explicit by setting out the subject matter in the order in which it would be taught, handouts contained questions and tasks for the mothers to complete both within a session and as homework. Flipcharts were used as a way for professionals to record mothers' responses and summarise learning. In this way, the resources supported a pedagogy where the power rested with the professionals who decided which tasks to set, which questions to ask and which responses to record.

These pedagogical practices allowed the professionals to set and control the agenda, placing their analysis of the mothers' needs above what the mothers might have experienced or wanted to know. As a result, the professionals defined and secured a dominant position. Professionals were transmitters of knowledge, who relied on explanation and description of the interactions and behaviours they expected from the mother. Where children were present, some

interactions were modelled, such as the singing of nursery rhymes at the end of a *Baby Giggles* session or at the start of a *Pathway* session, but the leader maintained the hierarchy by choosing some, if not all, of the rhymes to be sung and only allowing a short amount of time for this (and sometimes omitting this part altogether). Where resources were provided for the children, as in the case of the *Stay and Play*, *Let's Get Talking* and the *Pathway* groups, these were chosen and arranged beforehand by the leaders of the sessions according to what they thought was appropriate and would encourage the mothers to interact with and play with their children. In this way, the mothers experienced distinctive pedagogical practices that relied on them having little control over what and how they were taught. As well as teaching them specific ways to support their children's literacy development, they were also taught to be docile recipients of knowledge. This rendered them powerless to influence how or what they could learn or experience, and taught them not to question the judgement of professionals.

Consequences of these pedagogical practices could be seen in the way they were (not) received by the parents who were targeted. Many of the groups suffered from low attendance figures, and those who turned up often fell away before the course was finished. Professionals expressed concern that they were not always able to engage the mothers whom they felt would benefit most from what was on offer, but thought that their troubled lives meant they wanted to 'stay under the radar'. In other words, they assumed that some mothers were reluctant to accept help as it would mean making their lives open to the judgment and criticism of professionals. In this way, the visible pedagogical approach employed in the Children Centres may have deterred mothers who felt insulted by or antipathetic to the idea that they needed to be taught in this way. Evidence to support this view is anecdotal but illuminating. A friend of a mother who attended *Baby Giggles* had told her that she did not want to come along because she did not need anyone telling her how to bring up her baby. Some mothers looked uncomfortable when they were

asked what they had learnt during some of the *pathway* groups. One mother commented that one professional was too 'school-mistressy' and that the sessions were like being at school. A visible pedagogy therefore risked alienating mothers who did not see themselves as deficient or needing to be 'educated'.

6.1.1.2 Invisible pedagogies

Mothers who chose to take their children to the library and/or private classes experienced a more invisible pedagogy based on modelling and suggestion. In contrast to the pedagogical practices experienced in the Children's Centres, mothers were not the focus. They were not separated from their children but were encouraged to interact and experience what was on offer together. In this way, they were not obviously positioned as 'deficient' and 'lacking in knowledge', which meant an overt hierarchy was more difficult to establish. Pedagogical practices, such as singing, moving and using different props were designed to engage the children and enhance *their* learning. So if questions were asked by the professionals, they were directed at the children not the mothers, and referred to what they were doing in that moment.

Unlike the mothers who experienced a visible pedagogy, other mothers were not given specific tasks to do or asked questions to check their understanding or to find out what they did at home with their child. This meant that monitoring their or their child's performance was of little concern to the professionals. They were more concerned that everybody found the sessions fun and supportive. Mothers and their children could collect certificates to acknowledge the number of signs used (baby signing class) or the number of books borrowed/visits made to the library, but these were designed to encourage particular behaviours rather than as a way to monitor and track what the mothers were doing at home with their child. In this respect, some mothers experienced far less control from professionals.

However this does not imply an absence of criteria. Both the private classes were planned in advance according to a scheme of work that other 'teachers' running the same classes in different areas also used. Therefore the professionals still had a considerable amount of control over what happened in their sessions. Planned activities were linked to the *EYFS framework* where possible, and in both classes, there was a specific focus on developing children's vocabulary. The music and movement class also incorporated songs, actions and a story to help develop children's knowledge of letter sounds, listening skills, fine and gross motor skills and eye-tracking. However, in contrast to the groups at the Children's Centres, the criteria were invisible, explicitly known only by the leaders of the classes. The content, sequencing and pace of the sessions, as well as the benefits of particular activities were rarely shared with the mothers, unless they asked. Instead the professionals worked on the assumption that mothers signed up for the classes because they already recognised some of the benefits for their children's learning. In addition they hoped that through taking part and having the activities modelled to them by the leader, they would pick up ideas about how to help their child's development at home. The leaders saw themselves as facilitators, rather than transmitters. Benefits of learning to sign were made slightly more explicit by the leader of the baby signing class, who sometimes talked about how it had helped her own son. This may have been done because the babies were very young and so it was difficult for the mothers to see immediate benefits. It was also a way for the class teacher to position herself alongside the other mothers rather than distance herself like the Sure Start professionals.

In a manner similar to the Sure Start and Home-Start professionals, the librarians employed the deficit discourse that had become well-established within the town, asserting that many children were often left to their own devices and entertained by screens rather than interacting with others, and that their parents lacked the skills and education to know how to support their children's literacy. However, instead of trying to explicitly teach these parents how to support their

children's literacy in the way the Sure Start and Home-Start professionals did, the librarians employed an invisible pedagogy to *suggest* to parents how to interact with their children, and to *encourage* them to borrow suitable books to share at home. Therefore, the librarians that led the *Wriggly Readers* sessions were keen to model the type of behaviours they wanted mothers to display with their children, such as joining in with action songs and nursery rhymes, listening to and interacting with stories. The librarians did not follow a pre-set plan each week. Instead, they chose songs and stories that they hoped would engage the children and their adults, sometimes asking children for song suggestions. Thus they exercised some control over what was presented to participants in these sessions, but little control over what the mothers and children actually did.

Sessions were very informal with participants able to move in, out and around the area freely. In some cases, mothers and children had minimal interaction, with mothers preferring to socialise and chat with other each. This was also the case at other times, when mothers were seen to use the children's area in the library as a place to socialise with their friends or use their phone rather than interact with their children or to borrow books. The librarians were reluctant to establish a hierarchy where they took an authoritative role and insisted on mothers and children engaging in their preferred literacy practices as they felt this might alienate them and stop them coming to the library altogether. Similarly, the staff at pre-school TC recognised that they could only suggest to parents how they could support learning, such as when they modelled how to talk with children about what they could see on a nature walk even though some of the mothers clearly felt uncomfortable doing this and were reticent to do so, preferring to chat with each other instead. Another way the pre-school tried to use suggestion was through the use of a noticeboard that was positioned where parents dropped off and collected their children. The staff felt it was important that they were able to see what was provided each day as some might want to

follow-up some of the activities and learning at home. However, the staff had little way of knowing whether or not this was the case, especially as few parents were involved in the pre-school or regularly looked at or contributed to their child's 'learning journey'. Thus they exercised very little power over whether parents received and acted on this information.

6.1.1.2.1 Space and resources

Like the Children's Centres, the library was a purpose-built building with pre-defined areas including a specific space for young children. The way this space had been organised and the way resources were used ('perceived space') supported an invisible pedagogy based on suggestion and modelling. Some forms of literacy, such as picture books, were made more visible and accessible, suggesting these as the best forms for young children ('conceived space'). This was reinforced by a display that showed well-known, popular picture books and encouraged parents to share these books with their child (Smith, 2018). In terms of organising the space for *Wriggly Readers*, a few soft toys and cushions were scattered on the floor to encourage the children to sit. The leader of the session was positioned on a chair above the mothers and children, who sat on the floor facing the chair in no particular shape (Figure 57). A lack of physical space and the large number of people meant it would have been difficult to be seen if the leader had also been seated on the floor. As the librarians very much believed it was their role to model the types of behaviours they wanted parents to engage in with their children, it was vital they were visible even if this meant occupying a more dominant position.

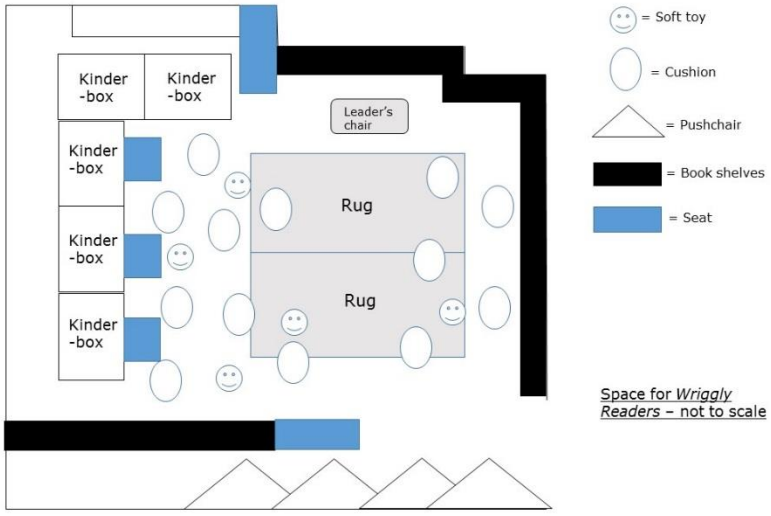


Figure 57 – Wriggly Readers' shared adult and child space

Activities and resources were carefully chosen by the leaders of the private classes to accompany their planning but, in contrast to the Children's Centre groups, were not aimed at the adults. Instead, they were used to engage the children and develop different competencies, and they varied from week to week. In the case of the private classes, these resources had to be imported into the space from outside as they did not have the use of purpose-built premises like the Children's Centres and library. Resources therefore helped to transform empty church halls into welcoming, family-friendly spaces. Children and adults, including the leader, sat on colourful, soft mats facing inwards to make a circle (Figure 58).

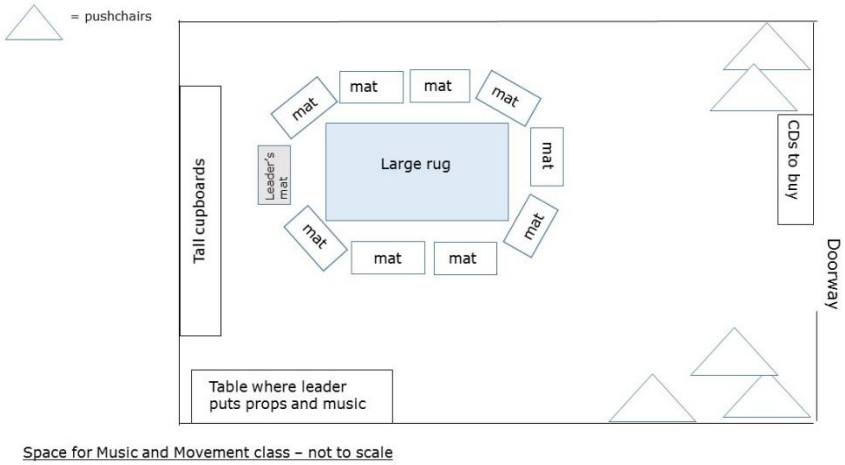


Figure 58 – Music and movement class's shared adult and child space

In contrast to the distancing of professionals that could be seen in the Children's Centres and library, this layout positioned the leaders of the private classes on a more equal footing with their participants as nobody was elevated or separated, and enabled a more sociable and informal relationship with the mothers. Therefore, unlike the mothers (and fathers) who were often seen to be disengaged from what was on offer in the other places, mothers willingly took part in the activities, literally and figuratively 'buying into' what the private classes offered them and their children.

6.2 Power of capitals

By analysing the different ways mothers talked about how they supported their children's literacy development, it is possible to see patterns of variation depending on which capitals they possessed and which they were able to acquire through the places they went.

Capital can be both materially represented e.g. in artwork, books, buildings etc., but also embodied e.g. in people's dispositions, tastes, use of language and lifestyle choices (Moore, 2012). For mothers of young children, the concept of capital relates to the resources they have access to, as well as the ways in which they use them to support their child's literacy development.

Which capitals people possess, which they can accumulate and which are valued determine their success in particular fields. Bourdieu (1986) asserts that "the best hidden and socially most determinant educational investment [is] the domestic transmission of cultural capital" (p.243). But it is only the cultural capital of the middle classes that is accepted – they are seen as having the 'right' knowledges and dispositions and therefore their cultural capital is seen as normal (Lawler, 2014). Yet the education field is set up so that those who succeed within it are seen to do so due to innate ability or talent, rather than the result of an investment of time and particular forms of cultural capital within the family. Children who reside in families that possess the right sorts of cultural capital, which they transmit to their offspring from birth, are the most advantaged and therefore the most likely to achieve within the education system and get the best jobs (Savage, 2015).

Crossley (2012) uses the example of middle class students who, having been raised in privileged home environments, possess the right sort of cultural capital to succeed in school. He argues that they are able to 'speak the same language' as teachers because they arrive at school articulate and familiar with the types of learning on offer. In other words, the cultural capital they have acquired through engagement in particular activities at home is valued and rewarded by the educational system. This type of capital can then be used to acquire qualifications (symbolic capital) which can be exchanged in the job market for economic capital. Therefore, whilst appearing to treat everyone equally by being open-to-all, the education field validates the culture and cultural practices of the middle class whilst blaming the parents of children who do not succeed at school for not equipping them with the 'right' cultural capital (Jenkins, 2002; Schubert, 2012).

In this way capital should be seen as something that children begin to acquire from birth and that can give them an educational advantage. This idea is particularly important in relation to the field of early education. As the review of policy and early literacy research

in Chapter 2 has shown, the literacy practices that children are engaged in before they start formal schooling can determine whether or not they have a good chance of succeeding when they get there. Young children whose parents have already engaged them in the literacy practices that resemble ones that are valued in school have a considerable advantage.

> The different forms of capital, the possession of which defines class membership and the distribution of which determines position in the power relations constituting the field of power and also determines the strategies available for use in these struggles…are simultaneously instruments of power and stakes in the struggle for power. (Bourdieu, 1984, p.315)

To what extent mothers possess the power to provide their children with the cultural capital recognised by formal schooling therefore depends on their own pre-existing capitals and how easily they can acquire more. Children whose mothers already possess a significant amount of capital and find it easier to accumulate more, occupy a more advantageous position in the education field than those who do not. The field is unequal from the outset. While some mothers' capital gives them the power to afford their children an educational advantage (thus enabling them to also occupy a more powerful position within the education field as it is set up in the town in this study), others' lack of certain capitals renders them and their children relatively powerless and places them in a disadvantaged position.

6.2.1 Habitus

Mothers' position in the field (as determined by their capital) shapes, and is shaped by, their habitus. Bourdieu defined the habitus as a system of dispositions generated by the position one occupies but which also generates perceptions, appreciations and practices. It is manifested in the way we, consciously and unconsciously, stand, move, take up space, speak and dress as well as in our tastes and attitudes (1990). In other words, a person's habitus depends on both structure and agency. "It is 'structured' by one's past and present circumstances, such as family upbringing and educational

experiences. It is 'structuring' in that one's habitus helps to shape one's present and future practices." (Maton, 2012, p.50). By studying people's practices, it is possible to reveal aspects of their underlying habitus that informs and influences what they do. In the case of this study, what the mothers did, and what they said, revealed aspects of their habitus that influenced the way they viewed their and others' role in their children's literacy development. Additionally, the way literacy was presented to different mothers by different professionals reflected aspects of their own habitus. Their attitudes towards the mothers they came into contact with informed the ways they worked with them.

For Bourdieu, habitus therefore determines what practices people engage in. Our position within a field (as determined by our capitals) generates different possibilities and choices, which in turn shape our sense of what is suitable and best for us (Maton, 2012). This means that people engage in practices that 'fit' with their ideas about how to act depending on the context they are in, and helps them to make sense of their lives. "Individuals develop a sense of where they belong in society and what is, and is not 'for the likes of us'" (Crossley, 2012, p.95). They are unlikely to seek out places or fields that do not match their habitus. A mother's habitus will therefore influence whether or not she feels comfortable in particular places and engaging in particular practices, which may limit or enhance her ability to pass capital on to her young child.

6.2.2 Educating her young child

The findings show that the resources mothers had access to outside the home influenced how resources were provided and used within the home learning environment.

Mothers who used the library, private classes or referred themselves to Sure Start (i.e. were not targeted but went to universal groups such as *Stay and Play*, or asked to join a group such as *Solihull*) tended to possess enough economic capital to be able to introduce their young children to a wide range of literacy resources, including

digital literacies such as e-readers, phonics toys, educational apps on a tablet computer, selected programmes on television, and music CDs. In addition, they were able to provide a range of books that they may have borrowed from the library, purchased or were given as gifts; craft materials and resources for activities such as colouring and drawing; whiteboards and pens; flashcards; and letter magnets.

The way these resources were used demonstrated the mothers' existing cultural capital; they valued and engaged in a broad range of literacy practices with their children, such as singing nursery rhymes and alphabet songs, sharing books, going on outings, making up stories, talking around play, sounding out letters, making and writing words such as the child's name, doing crafts and drawing shapes. Furthermore, many of them recognised that, by involving themselves in these practices with their child, they were supporting their early literacy development and helping them be 'ready for school'. In this way mothers used their own cultural capital, in the form of knowledge around how young children learn and what resources helped to support this, to develop their children's cultural capital in ways that resembled the types of learning they thought they would later experience at school.

As well as recognising the important role they could play in their young children's literacy development, the mothers valued the involvement of other relatives such as grandparents who provided similar activities and resources, and fathers who often shared in bedtime reading. These children therefore not only benefitted from their mothers' cultural capital but also her social capital, as they were able to enhance their cultural capital through contact with other relatives. Once a child was enrolled in pre-school, the mothers stayed involved in their learning, getting ideas for activities they could do at home, working towards targets and reinforcing learning. For a bilingual mother, working with the pre-school helped her children to become more accustomed to hearing and communicating in the English language. Mothers who occupied a more privileged position

had the power to exploit others' cultural capital in order to increase theirs and their children's.

They used their economic capital to own transport which meant they could get to, as well as pay for, extra activities outside the home such as private classes and playgroups. These were in addition to their use of free resources and activities, such as those provided by the library and pre-school. Their existing cultural capital meant they recognised the benefits for their child's learning that these places provided. Reasons for supporting their children's literacy development in these different ways were focused around getting their child 'ready for school', in terms of both their academic and social skills. They wanted to make sure their children were developing their vocabulary, were able to communicate with others, and saw learning as something that was fun. For example, mothers who went to the music and movement class and/or *Wriggly Readers* emphasised their child's enjoyment, increased confidence, as well as the chance to mix with others and be exposed to books from a young age. For a bilingual mother, opportunities to increase her children's contact with native English speakers by taking them to the music and movement class was felt to be important for helping them to understand and speak English. The mothers' existing economic and cultural capitals enabled them to increase their children's cultural capital by accessing places within the town that they felt were beneficial for their child's learning and readiness for school.

Furthermore, their privileged position gave them a habitus which meant they were comfortable occupying spaces where other mothers and professionals who shared a similar position and habitus could be found. These were mothers who willingly joined in with singing and actions, and were happy to sit and read books to their child in the library. The nature of these groups, where relationships were typically informal and mothers were able to socialise, often led to recommendations for other groups and arrangements to meet up at other times. In this way, the mothers and children were able to

increase both their social and cultural capital, which in turn reinforced their sense of where they belonged (habitus).

At the music and movement class, a range of music CD were used to accompany the songs, most of which were original. Some of the mothers who took their child to this class had the economic capital to be able to purchase one or more of the music CDs so they could also join in with and learn the songs at home. The baby signing class sold CDs and DVDs so mothers could continue learning and practising the signs at home. This demonstrates how having one sort of capital (in this case, economic) makes it easier to accumulate more capital (such as the cultural capital associated with engaging in the 'right' sorts of literacy practices). However they were also able to access free resources such as the prompt sheet provided at the end of each baby signing session to help them practise the signs at home, and books from the library. Economic and cultural capital afforded the mothers the power to accumulate further cultural capital from the private classes and library. By providing resources that the mothers could take away, borrow or buy, they could replicate particular literacy practices at home to build their children's cultural capital.

In contrast, the mothers that were referred users of the Children's Centres or lived in the more deprived parts of the town, such as those that sent their child to Pre-school ES, appeared to have less economic capital. They were less likely to own their own transport which would have given them access to different services and their children had access to a more limited range of literacy-related resources. They had some books, DVDs, television programmes and child-friendly apps on a tablet computer or phone. A lack of economic capital makes it harder for mothers and their children to accumulate further capital (such as cultural capital in the form of resources or the ability to access different services to support literacy development).

In terms of the literacy practices that these more limited resources supported, mothers described children playing with apps or watching television programmes and films on their own, and an older child

reading to a younger child. One mother who possessed a few simple board books about a popular TV character, mentioned looking at them with her daughter and pointing out words when reading, while another talked about reading bedtime stories with her younger son but had only recognised the importance of this once her older son had started school and experienced problems. This suggests that some mothers lacked the cultural capital possessed and valued by other mothers, including recognising the importance of being involved in their children's literacy development in order to help get them 'ready for school'. Consequently, their children were less likely to be given the cultural capital recognised and valued by formal education.

Other adult family members, such as fathers and grandparents, were hardly mentioned in terms of supporting a child's development, indicating that their children were not able to gain these forms of cultural capital elsewhere either and that some mothers had less social capital. For the mothers that did attend the Children's Centres, there was some opportunity to build social capital, particularly if they went to a *pathway* group where they could meet mothers with the same age children. However, low numbers associated with a lack of engagement and mothers needing to work, made this more difficult. Additionally, Mrs Pink from the music and movement class felt that since the Children's Centres had changed from offering their services universally to targeting particular families, a stigma had grown up around them and fewer and fewer mothers were wanting to engage with their services. For the few mothers that did go, it meant that friendships were limited to mothers who had similar amounts of economic, cultural and social capital, and who were likely to share a similar habitus. Therefore, the (limited) social capital they may have been able to acquire at the Children's Centres was unlikely to lead to the increase in cultural capital that mothers with higher levels of capital were seen to gain by accessing different services.

This was confirmed by the professionals who described mothers from the two social housing estates as staying very close to home, only

mixing with close family and friends that they had grown up with. Hanley (2008) describes this as "the wall in the head" that can result from growing up and living on an estate. She argues that the way estates are built means that the people living there are isolated by a lack of facilities and separated from different classes of people which means the only world they know is the one within the estate. This shows how social capital creates a sense of belonging and fixes boundaries, but also affects one's ability to generate other forms of capital. It is the combination of capitals "that is often what makes the middle class family so effective in the educational domain" (Ball, 2003, p.82).

Moreover, by being positioned as 'deficient' and 'in need of the support of professionals, their habitus was shaped by the field. This made it difficult for them to question what was on offer or consider other possibilities. For example, one mother who had only ever attended groups at the Children's Centres, looked puzzled when asked if she ever took her children to the library (as she did not see it as having anything to offer). If she had felt able to access different resources she would have had more opportunity to mix with mothers with different habitus' and engage in different practices. However it seemed that her habitus prevented her from considering the possibility of visiting other places or doing different things. Another mother described the feeling of not fitting in when she went along to a playgroup for the first time, having only gone to *Stay and Play* at the Children's Centre beforehand. However, her strong belief that there were benefits there for her daughter's development helped her to overcome this aspect of her habitus and to persevere. Consequently she was able to increase her social and cultural capital when she formed new friendships, alter her position and her habitus. This was revealed when she later tried to introduce singing to the *Stay and Play* group (that she had first gone to) but was met with reluctance from the others there who could not see the point.

A particular habitus can therefore be seen to be created and reinforced by being targeted and framed as 'deficient' and 'in need'

of education. This may explain why some mothers excluded themselves from particular places and people. Women are often keenly aware of the judgements of real and imaginary others (Skeggs, 1997). Mrs Pink from the music and movement class recognised this when explaining why she struggled to fill the class in this town. She felt that many mothers who lived in the town lacked confidence and therefore did not want to participate in a class where they had to sing or where they might feel judged by the others there.

However concerns around being judged were shared by other mothers too and may also be indicative of a different aspect of their habitus associated with becoming a mother. One mother described how she did not take her son out much when he was very young as she felt embarrassed breast-feeding in public and struggled to get into a routine. Another mother was worried that her daughter would destroy the library books; a mother of twins felt uncomfortable trying to control their behaviour in an organised group; and another mother mentioned feeling shy around others. Feelings of self-consciousness and inadequacy associated with being a mother to a young child was therefore something shared by mothers from different social groups. This type of habitus affects mothers' ability to join different groups and meet new people, and therefore to accumulate social and cultural capital for themselves and their children.

Having formed a habitus which means that you lack self-confidence and self-efficacy might also explain why some mothers seemed happy to hand over responsibility for their child's learning to people they saw as the experts. Once their child was enrolled in some form of childcare, they did not think they needed to follow up learning at home. They appeared to know little, or be interested in knowing, about their child's 'learning journey' which meant that they were not able to accumulate cultural capital from professionals and use it to increase their child's cultural capital in the same way as other mothers. This idea was supported by Mrs White at pre-school ES who explained that parents were not particularly interested in reading information that the pre-school provided or attending parents'

evenings. Communication with parents relied on quick chats at the door or messages through social media. Although she had tried explaining to parents the benefits of reading to and talking with their children at home, she felt it was ignored. If they had been told by a professional such as a pre-school practitioner or health visitor that their child was on-track, they tended to see this as a good enough reason not to do anything else with their child at home. If their child was referred for specialist support (children from Pre-school ES were often referred to the Speech and Language Service or the Early Years' SEND team) parents accepted the help but did not see that they could also provide extra support for their child. It therefore seems that a particular habitus associated with low self-confidence and fewer opportunities to acquire economic, cultural and social capital, means some mothers are more likely to put their trust in the professionals to decide and provide what they believe their children need in terms of education.

This matches the findings of Lareau (2011) who discovered that whilst working class and poor mothers could be assertive when dealing with people such as landlords, they were seen to separate themselves from educational institutions which they saw as a separate realm where they did not belong and where communication was one-way and dominated by what the professionals believed to be important. This contrasted with middle class mothers who were seen to be confident in questioning and challenging educators, whom they saw as equals, in order to get better educational provision for their children (Lareau, 2011).

Additionally, for the children attending pre-school ES, opportunities to accumulate the cultural capital that other children were being given appeared to be limited. Due to its location within one of the east-side social housing estates, many of the families chose this pre-school due to its proximity to where they lived, their lack of transport, desire to stay on the estate and because it was recommended by family and friends. Most of the pre-school's funding came from the free places it provided for children from low-income families. Where

it did charge, the fees were significantly lower than other pre-schools in the town. Therefore the resources it was able to provide were well-used (many were donated or second-hand), sometimes dirty and in poor condition. Although books were provided for the children in this setting, they were kept messily in the corner of a large open room and were not accessed by the children independently. Pre-school staff, who were young and inexperienced as they were cheaper to employ, sometimes attempted to engage the children in listening to a book or joining in with a familiar rhyme or song, but these activities were not planned for or given priority and children were able to disrupt them or opt out. Children were provided with toys they seemed to like playing with but these hardly varied from day to day and were the same for all the children. Despite many of the children having been assessed as having speech and language problems, spoken interaction between the staff and children was minimal and tended to relate to their care, such as when needing the toilet or sorting out snacks. In this way the pre-school appeared to lack the economic capital and cultural capital (in the form of learning materials and qualified, experienced staff) to be able to provide the children with the cultural capital they were unable to gain at home. Furthermore, they were not encouraged to acquire the sorts of cultural capital that would be recognised and valued when they got to school.

In contrast, because of its location in the town centre, Pre-school TC was able to charge a higher rate for places that were not funded, and employed experienced, well-qualified staff. It had a good range of toys and resources that were kept in a good condition and it provided different, planned activities. These included differentiated activities for two age-groups of children, adult-led activities inside and outside, as well as intervention groups for children needing more support with speech and language. Staff tried hard to interact with the children, whilst they played and ate lunch, by commenting on what they were doing, joining in with their play and asking questions. Part of the daily routine included reading a book to the children, singing nursery rhymes and joining in with action songs on a CD (purchased from the

music and movement private class). In this way, the children who attended this pre-school were more likely to gain some of the cultural capital they may not have had access to outside, and that would be recognised and valued when they got to school.

6.2.3 Educating herself

The findings show that mothers who were able to access particular resources were motivated to educate themselves on how best to support their child's learning.

Mothers who used the library, private classes, pre-school TC or referred themselves to Sure Start occupied a position where they could accumulate cultural capital by learning from others. Their habitus and social capital meant they were more likely to feel comfortable approaching and questioning professionals to find out what they wanted to know. This could be seen in the case of the two mothers who attended the *Solihull* group after recognising that they were struggling with their child's behaviour and were concerned over the impact of this on their 'school readiness'. One had asked for help through the Community Nursery Nurse and the other through her sons' pre-school. Prior to this they had had no experience of Sure Start as they did not occupy a position or appear to have the sort of habitus that might lead to professionals identifying them as 'vulnerable' and 'in need of support'; one was in higher education, and the other was a stay-at-home mother who had spent some time home-educating her older children when they were younger. Although they were not the typical users of Sure Start, they were able to make use of it to educate themselves in how to deal with challenging behaviour thus enhancing their cultural capital. By taking on board the knowledge they were given and staying the course (unlike others who had been referred by professionals but stopped attending), they were able to use this acquired capital for their own, and their child's, benefit.

Similarly, a mother who took her children to the library on a regular basis was keen to learn as much as she could to support her children's

learning and had attended groups, such as *PICL*, at one of the Children's Centres before they had become a referral-only service. However, she could no longer access these groups with her second child. She believed her circumstances meant she was not seen by the professionals as needing support, which she felt was unfair. Her view was that all mothers might need help at any point and therefore by targeting particular mothers, others were excluded who could also benefit. The consequences of restricting access to the Children's Centres to 'disadvantaged' families was also highlighted by a childminder who felt that children benefitted from mixing with children from different backgrounds. In this way, mothers' capitals can be seen to shape their habitus, which in turn shapes which services they are offered and choose, and the capitals they and their children are able to acquire. Mothers with the least amount of capital seem to have the least power to accumulate more.

In contrast, the mother who could no longer access the Children's Centres possessed a habitus which gave her the confidence to question the staff at her son's pre-school about ways she could support learning and 'school readiness' at home, and she was enthusiastic about the activities they sent home for her to complete with her son. In the case of Pre-school TC, the staff were viewed as experienced and trusted as many mothers had got to know them informally through the weekly playgroup they ran. This gave them the social capital to be able to approach the staff if they were having difficulties with a particular issue such as behaviour. Mothers were able to ask them for their advice and help which they were happy to give and made time for. In contrast, the Sure Start mothers were positioned in a hierarchical relationship with the professionals who taught them not to question their judgement and who inadvertently promoted the idea that once their child was in pre-school, responsibility for their child's learning could be shifted to the professionals there. Undermining the mothers' role in this way could be seen to reinforce and shape a habitus where mothers became less

involved in their children's learning and limited their ability to acquire cultural and social capital for themselves and their children.

Mothers who took their baby to the baby signing class did so with the understanding that they had to learn the signs first so they could teach them to their child. In this way, they valued the knowledge (cultural capital) that they could acquire from the leader of the class to enhance their child's development. Information was available in folders and on display that detailed how the classes linked to the *EYFS framework*, which meant that mothers could also educate themselves about the benefits of signing and how it related to the different areas of learning. The presentation of certificates to acknowledge how many signs they had taught their baby to use and time in each session for mothers to share their 'signing stories' (experiences of learning and teaching the signs to their baby at home) acknowledged the cultural capital they and their children were acquiring. Although the group was small, the nature of the group that allowed time for socialising meant they were also able to increase their social capital. During this time they often discussed other aspects of their baby's development, sharing experiences and worries which enabled them to share their cultural capital and reinforce each other's habitus' as it was clear they had much in common. This was highlighted when one mother mentioned that she felt she did not 'fit in' at the Children's Centres after trying some groups there. She had not found much in common with the other mothers there apart from the age of her baby. The others sympathised and suggested other places that they thought would be more suitable. Thus they confirmed each other's habitus in terms of 'knowing one's place' by marking themselves out as different from the mothers that could be found in the Children's Centres.

In summary, this chapter has shown how different mothers learned/were taught to support their children's literacy development.

This differed depending on how they were framed, their capitals, their habitus', where they lived and where they spent time in the town.

By analysing how mothers experienced different pedagogies and spaces within Embervale, it has been possible to see how power was distributed. Mothers who went to the Children's Centres were framed as 'deficient', 'vulnerable' and 'in need' of support. They experienced visible pedagogies where they exercised very little control and where professionals occupied a dominant position. This was reinforced in both the way spaces were organised and through the separation of mothers and children. Mothers were the focus of interventions. In contrast, mothers who chose to go to places such as the library and private classes experienced more invisible pedagogies. They were not separated from their children and had a more equal relationship with the professionals. Although particular behaviours were suggested through modelling and the way spaces were organised, professionals exercised less control over how mothers and children used the spaces. It was hoped that mothers would see the benefits for their child's development and be encouraged to engage in particular activities, but children, rather than mothers, were the focus.

Just as an analysis of pedagogies revealed how power was distributed, so did an analysis of capitals and habitus. The different ways that mothers talked about supporting their children's literacy development and how they viewed their own and others' role were influenced by the capitals they possessed, the capitals they were able to acquire from the places they visited, and their habitus'. Some mothers possessed enough economic capital to be able to provide a range of literacy resources within the home and to access ones from outside. They also possessed a particular form of cultural capital that meant they valued and engaged in a range of literacy practices with their children and recognised the importance of these for their 'school readiness'. At the same time, they were able to use their social capital in the form of contact with relatives and pre-school professionals to acquire further cultural capital for themselves and their children. The possession of these capitals shaped a habitus that gave them

confidence to occupy different spaces, question professionals and make contact with other mothers thus increasing their social capital further.

In contrast, mothers who were targeted by the Children's Centres appeared to have less economic capital. This meant they found it difficult to access resources from different parts of the town and to provide their children with a range of literacy resources in the home. They were also less likely to possess the cultural capital that valued particular literacy practices and the importance of getting their child 'ready' for school. Limited social capital and places to go, meant it was more difficult to build either cultural or social capital. Furthermore, contact with a small network of family and friends within one part of the town not only compounded their lack of power to increase their capital but also shaped a particular habitus. Mothers were less confident to go to different places and meet other people, and preferred to hand over their children to people they saw as the experts.

In answering the question,

How do the resources provided by a small town support mothers to support their children's literacy development?

it has become clear that many inequalities exist in the town of Embervale. The construction of particular pedagogies and practices in different places reinforce, rather than reduce, these inequalities. The next chapter reiterates the importance of space and place as a way to understand the world. It does this by offering a new reading of the town before offering suggestions for how Embervale, and other places, could be re-constructed more equitably.

Chapter 7 - Re-constructing the literacy map

7.1 Re-reading the map

In Chapter 3, Cresswell (2014), Lefebvre (1991), Soja (1996) and Massey (2005, 2013) showed how places/spaces offer a way of understanding the world. Places/spaces are socially-constructed in a multitude of ways due to the different meanings that are attributed to them. Having analysed the different ways that mothers experienced literacy spaces within the town of Embervale, this chapter attempts to re-read and then re-draw the map so that young children and their parents might be supported in more equitable ways.

7.1.1 Boundaries

In Chapter 3, a street map of Embervale (Figure 3) showed how it was geographically split into two parts by a major relief road taking traffic around the town centre and out towards two motorways (one to the east and one to the west). The road also divided the east and west sides of the town. Having now located where different types of early years' literacy resources could be found and who used them, it is possible to read the map differently (Figure 59).

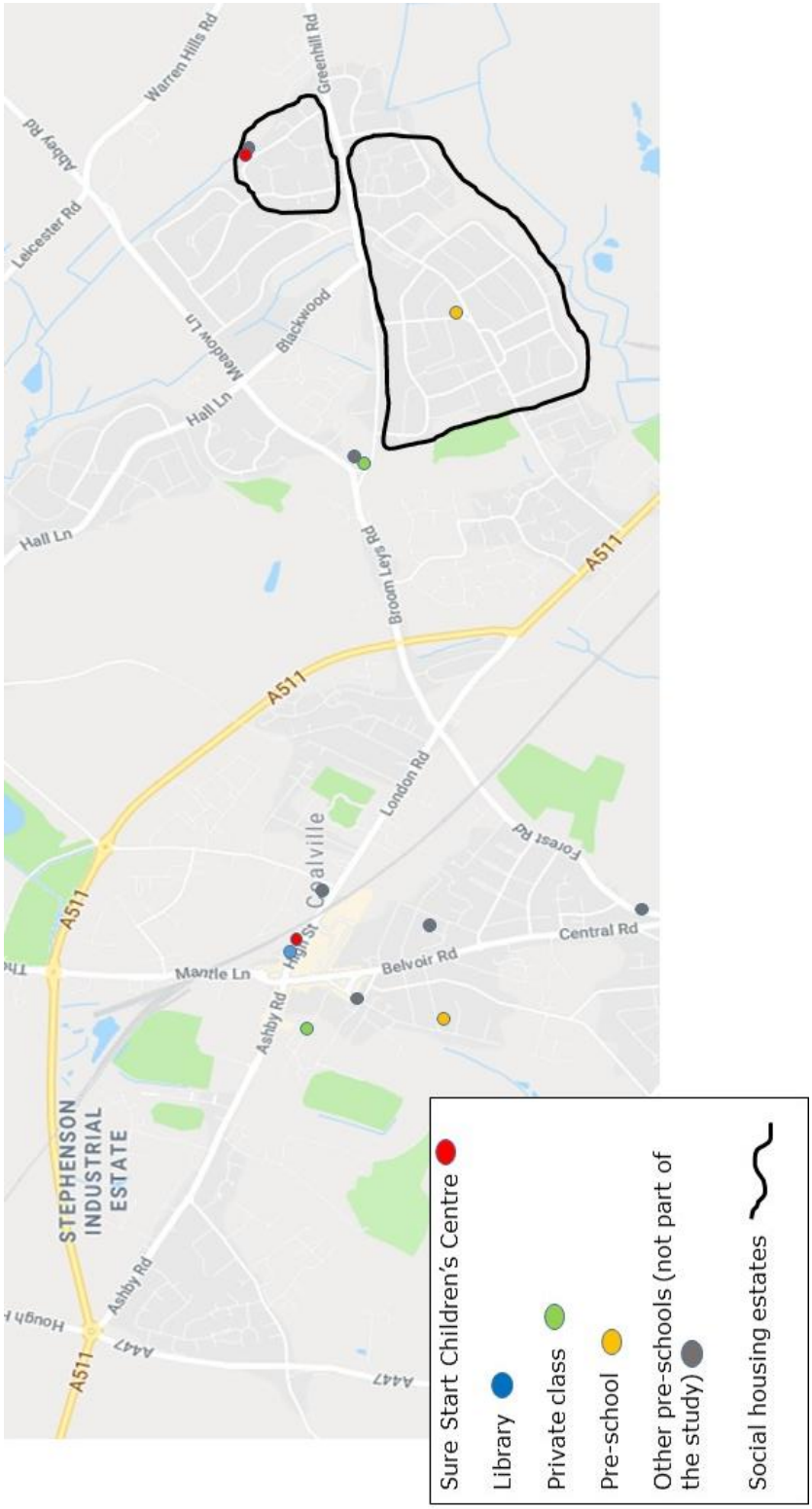


Figure 59 - 'New' Embervale map

This 'map within a map' offers a new lens to reveal an uneven distribution of resources by both type and amount, as well as boundaries around who typically used them and how they were

experienced. These boundaries were not only geographical. They were also cultural and social. For example, for those living on either of the social housing estates on the east side of Embervale, there was another main road that divided them. Whilst we might see this as simply a geographical boundary, it was also a cultural and social boundary as it contributed to a discourse shared by different professionals around the idea of a 'north/south divide' on this side of the town, with residents from the council estate (south side) preferring to stay close to home rather than cross the road to use the resources available on the housing-association estate (north side) and vice versa.

There was also a sense that people living on the two estates created further boundaries around themselves by mixing only with friends and family who lived in and went to the same places. For example, families that lived on the council estate tended to use Pre-school ES because they knew other people (family and friends) that used it and it was convenient. Whilst this may have given them a sense of belonging and security, it also served to reinforce a 'wall in the head' (Hanley, 2008) and 'knowing your place' (habitus) which separated them from people who lived in and went to different places. O'Donoghue (2013) has shown how significant place is for working class mothers who have a sense of how they are positioned by others within a social space, as well as by the amount of capital available to them. They occupy the spaces in which they feel most comfortable and exclude themselves from where they feel 'out of place'. This results in them feeling on the edge or outside of things, and leads them to occupying the only positions available to them within the field of education.

Dorling (2011) recognises that towns in Britain have become more geographically divided, with the most affluent choosing to live in particular neighbourhoods and the poorest people having little choice over where they live, which has led to increasing social polarisation. The way that Embervale had been physically constructed during its periods of growth and decline meant that two social housing estates

were placed on the east side of the town away from the town centre. Government policy around the type of resources needed in particular places and who they are meant for, constructs a discourse around need which frames particular groups of people as being deficient. In the case of this study, these different constructions restricted the mothers' capitals and shaped a 'habitus' that meant they limited where they went. In this way, mothers experienced geographical, cultural and social boundaries.

The way early years' literacy resources were organised around Embervale created further divisions and boundaries as they were unequally distributed (Figure 59). On the west side of the town there was the baby signing class, Pre-school TC (as well as two other pre-schools and three private day nurseries) and the public library which was located next to a Children's Centre. On the east side of the town was the music and movement class, another Children's Centre and three pre-schools. However, these were more spread out. The Children's Centre and one of the pre-schools was situated on the social housing estate to the north while the other pre-school was situated on the social housing estate to the south. Meanwhile the music and movement class and other pre-school were situated outside both the estates. Therefore resources were limited for mothers who wanted to stay close to home.

Where early years' literacy resources were located across Embervale had a bearing on the types of resources families were able to access. The unfair allocation of resources to different parts of the town reinforced divisions between classes. As Skeggs observes, working class women experience class as exclusion because they "do not have access to economic resources and cultural ways to be anything other than working class" (Skeggs, 1997, p.74). In this way, class is mapped on to place, people are fixed in particular places, excluded from other spaces and learn to 'know their place' (Crossley, 2017; Lawler, 2014).

Free funding for pre-school for 'disadvantaged' two year old children, combined with the targeted approach of the Children's Centres, meant that families living to the east were offered resources and services in a similar way to receiving a state 'benefit' designed to ameliorate aspects of their cultural and economic deprivation. For a low-income family without privately-owned transport who lived on the housing-association estate, the Children's Centre and pre-school, both publicly-funded, were the only services on offer. For a similar family living on the council estate, the only service available was pre-school ES (mainly funded through free places). However, for low-income families living on the west side of Embervale, services such as the Children's Centre and free pre-school places could still be seen as a 'benefit' but there was a greater choice of childcare available as well as the public library. Families with higher levels of economic and cultural capital had an even wider choice of resources as they were more likely to pay for private classes and own a car. They could access services at a greater distance from where they lived, including outside Embervale, which several did. In addition, they were unlikely to be targeted by the Children's Centres, as they were not seen as 'vulnerable' and 'in need' of support, so the services they accessed were not ones that were offered like a 'benefit'; they were more likely to be bought and chosen. The unequal distribution of literacy resources across Embervale not only made it geographically more difficult for some families to access them but also constructed boundaries around the types of support offered. This limited opportunities for some families to increase their social and cultural capital.

Additionally, how spaces were organised had implications for how parents and children engaged with literacy resources (Nichols & Rainbird, 2013). Some settings constructed boundaries in the way they organised their indoor spaces. For example, the council-run library and Children's Centres were purpose-built, institutionally-organised spaces that had separate areas for children. The Children's Centres had rooms that were designed for children through the

inclusion of toys, books and child-sized furniture, and rooms for adults that were set up as meeting rooms/classrooms with circles of chairs and flipcharts. The ways these rooms had been organised and defined differently created a separation of mother and child, with children often being looked after in one of the child-friendly rooms while their mothers were being taught in one of the classrooms. As a result, literacy in the adult-focused spaces looked very different to the literacy found in the children's spaces. Dominant literacy practices included leaders of the sessions scribing mothers' responses onto flipcharts, giving mothers handouts as a record of what they needed to learn and for completing tasks, and mothers filling in a 'learning journey' for their child. The title of 'Children's Centre' therefore belied the nature of the provision, with mothers being the focus rather than the children.

Although the library had the most clearly-defined space for children's literacy, which it presented as being different and needing a separate space from other forms of literacy, it did not encourage the separation of mother and child. An enclosed, safe space within the library building was marked out as a 'Children's Area'. Colourful, low furniture, book-boxes, displays, rugs and toys constructed a different space and bookshelves divided it from other spaces within the library but made it a welcoming place for mothers and children to spend time in (Smith, 2018). In contrast, settings that were run by private individuals, such as the pre-schools and private classes, were located in multi-purpose church-owned buildings so a suitable space had to be re-created on a daily basis through the introduction of child-orientated resources. On the one hand, like the library, resources in the private classes were organised to encourage and facilitate shared activities and interaction between mother and child. On the other hand, the pre-schools separated mother and child but predominantly focused on resources for children. In this way, the organisation of spaces and the resources within them sometimes created boundaries between children and their parents, and between different literacy practices.

Mothers who used the Children's Centres were not only separated from their children, but were also distanced from professionals who positioned themselves as the experts and mothers as deficient who needed to be taught how to be better. This approach created a hierarchical relationship between the professionals and mothers who were taught to put their trust in the 'experts' rather than question them. It also reinforced a discourse around the importance of early intervention, particularly for 'troubled' families. 'Vulnerable' mothers were identified by professionals from as early as pregnancy in the hope that they would be able to 'get it right' from as soon as the baby was born. Additionally, they were encouraged to enrol their child in pre-school from as early as two years old as this was seen as a way of compensating for any failings on the part of the mother and important for 'school readiness'. This type of pedagogy, which emphasised the knowledge and expertise of the professionals (rather than the mothers), meant that mothers were also taught to be compliant and accept being separated from their child. By emphasising the knowledge of the professionals as superior to the mothers', it seemed that instead of building their confidence and cultural capital there was a risk of mothers feeling inadequate and ill-equipped to support their children's learning. This finding is supported by Lareau's (2011) research into families from different social classes which showed how working class and poor parents often feared they would 'do the wrong thing' and therefore deferred to the educational professionals.

Resistance towards the 'experts', if it occurred, was passive and simply involved mothers absenting themselves from a particular group or not engaging with the Children's Centres at all. Interestingly, the professionals found it puzzling that there was a lack of engagement and low attendance numbers. The only explanations they could offer were that some families wanted to 'stay under the radar' or that mothers were out at work. But as Savage (2015) argues, the mothers "know they are looked down on and ridiculed, which is why they would rather stay among 'their own'" (p.357).

There was no evidence that the professionals considered the possibility that by employing particular pedagogies and targeting practices, they were stigmatising and alienating the families they wanted to help.

Mothers who used and experienced the literacy resources provided in Embervale to support their young children's literacy development received mixed messages. On the one hand, mothers who did go to the Children's Centres were taught about the importance of interacting and engaging with their children (i.e. to be more like the 'middle class' mothers who went to the private classes and library). On the other hand, a pedagogy of separation meant they were not allowed to do this. Paradoxically they were more likely to find themselves divided from their children who were handed over to professionals to look after in crèches or pre-schools. Support within the Children's Centres was adult-orientated with little or no modelling of how to support children's literacy development and therefore of no direct benefit to their child. By contrast, mothers who could choose to go to private classes and the library experienced a different, child-centred pedagogy where the focus of support was on the child and could directly benefit them. This approach seemed to motivate many of them to incorporate similar activities at home, as they were able to recognise benefits for their child's learning and development.

7.1.2 Domains

Ellis & Smith (2017) identify three literacy domains (Figure 60) to aid professionals in thinking about the different ways literacy is experienced and understood. For them, the child is at the centre of this.

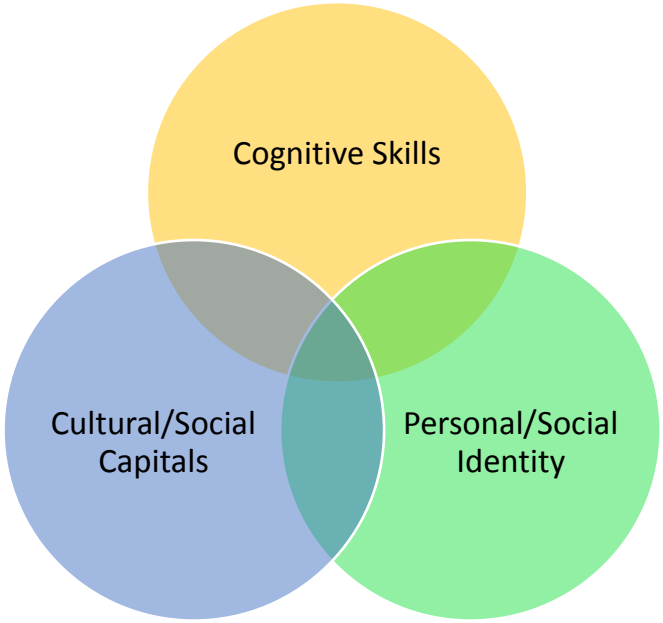


Figure 60 - The three literacy domains

Cognitive skills include literacy skills such as phonological awareness, letter recognition, concepts about print and comprehension skills. These tend to be the literacy skills that are seen as needing to be learnt by the child in order to be literate and successful in school, and are therefore the main focus of the *EYFS Framework* and the *Primary National Curriculum.*

Cultural and social capitals includes home literacy practices, values & beliefs; funds of knowledge; and the texts/resources that are available. In other words, these are the different ways that people engage in literacy practices, and the resources they value and use. For young children, this is likely to be influenced by the resources they are provided with at home and in the wider community, and the literacy practices that are valued and shared by the adults around them.

Personal and social identity includes how a person sees themselves in terms of literacy (including what they feel they are

entitled to and what they aspire to) as well as how they are positioned by others. This idea relates to Bourdieu's concept of habitus. For young children, their literacy identity will be shaped by the literacy practices that are encouraged and supported by the people and resources around them.

This model will now be used to shed light on how the boundaries described in the previous section result in young children's literacy being supported differently and unequally.

Children whose mothers took part in and encouraged shared literacy practices, such as those who went to the library and/or private classes and provided a range of literacy activities at home, were likely to have more opportunities to develop in all three literacy domains, as the type of pedagogical approaches and resources they encountered supported these. Activities such as shared reading, singing rhymes and songs, recognising letters and talking around play, have all been seen to help develop young children's cognitive literacy skills such as phonological awareness, concepts of print and comprehension. These are exemplified in the curriculum documents for teaching literacy, such as the *EYFS framework* which was used by the professionals in the private classes to guide what they did. Engaging in these types of activities before a child gets to school can also increase a child's social and cultural capitals as they build up their knowledge and experience of different texts and songs, and come to value their early literacy experiences. As a result, they are more likely to acquire a positive personal literacy identity that can give them confidence and be built on when they get to school.

One of the motivators for some mothers in this study for supporting their child's literacy development in particular ways was the responsibility they felt for getting their child 'ready for school'. The increasing 'schoolification 'of the early years has been commented on extensively in recent years (Brogaard Clausen, 2015; Grieshaber, 2000; Roberts-Holmes, 2015; Urban, 2015). Pressure on individual schools to reach government-imposed targets for children's

attainment in literacy and maths has resulted in a culture of testing and measuring. This has meant a sharp focus on the cognitive skills associated with literacy. Some mothers acknowledged the importance of acquiring these skills in order for their child to be successful at school, and believed they could play a role in developing these skills at home so they could be 'ready for school'. As has already been described, they were more likely to possess a considerable amount of cultural and social capital, and were prepared to accumulate more in order to benefit their child. As a result, they looked for places, such as private classes, the library and carefully-chosen pre-schools, where they felt their child could begin to develop the cognitive literacy skills they would need to do well at school.

Children of parents who can travel to and afford a range of 'enrichment' activities are able to develop "physical, social and intellectual skills which…leave them in a state of learning readiness" (Vincent & Ball, 2006, p.158). By engaging in these types of literacy practices and providing their child with particular literacy resources, mothers were also able to develop their child's social and cultural capitals, and literacy identity. However mothers who saw it as the role of the professionals to develop their child's cognitive skills were less likely to use and experience the same types of support, or engage their children in the same types of literacy practices. Not only did this make it harder for mothers to build their own social and cultural capitals and literacy identity, but their children were less likely to be able to acquire the cognitive literacy skills, social and cultural capitals and literacy identity that other children could acquire before they started school.

The importance of these different starts in life has been widely evidenced (e.g. in the work of Heath (1983) and Thomson (2002) who found that children who lived and grew up in different communities had very different literacy experiences before they arrived at school which subsequently affected their ability to engage with the 'schooled' literacy that was presented to them there). Some children are more likely to be positioned as being of a lower ability

and experiencing disadvantage. To attempt to address these differences the UK government has promoted various interventions. Early years' pupil premium (EYPP) funding, for three and four year old children from low-income households who are in some form of state-funded childcare, was introduced in England in 2015 (DfE, 2014). This has resulted in extra money for early-years providers, allocated in the belief that it will enable them to provide much-needed resources to accelerate the learning of disadvantaged children, and last year the Social Mobility Commission (2017b) called for this to be doubled. There has also been the creation of more free childcare places: the funding for fifteen hours of childcare for two year olds from disadvantaged families from 2014, and the increase from fifteen to thirty hours of childcare for three and four year olds from working families since 2017 (DfE, 2015). Additionally, health professionals have been tasked with carrying out a development check on all two year olds so delays in speech and language can be identified early and intervention put in place (DCSF, 2009).

The focus of these initiatives has been two-fold. On the one hand, there has been the focus on helping 'disadvantaged' children acquire cognitive literacy skills as early as possible so they can be made 'ready for school'. On the other hand, mothers have been encouraged to enter paid employment while their children are young so they can increase their economic capital. Meanwhile, the other two literacy domains - social and cultural capitals, and personal/social identity – have been largely ignored.

Despite the focus on economic advancement, the income level of most disadvantaged families has steadily fallen since 2010 (O'Brien & Kyprianou, 2017). Dorling comments that "for the average UK family with two children, the amount needed to survive with any decency is rising by 5% a year as the costs of providing for children rise more quickly than the growth in average living costs…the average family in Britain has been becoming poorer" (2014, pp.7-8). Furthermore, many families where one or both parents are in paid employment are now experiencing in-work poverty. In 2016, the

Joseph Rowntree Foundation reported that in the UK 55% of people in poverty were working families, which represented an increase of two million from the decade before (New Policy Institute, 2016).

In Embervale the construction of retail and industrial parks on the outskirts of the town has created an employment market that is predominantly populated with unskilled work, such as that found in the service and caring industries, warehouses and logistics. Typically these jobs are insecure, offering temporary and part-time work, low wages and zero-hour contracts (Savage, 2015). As a result, many families (including those with higher levels of cultural capital) struggle to afford the cost of extra resources/services to support their children's learning. Furthermore, they are time-poor and fatigued as they struggle to meet the demands of running a home, as well as being a parent and employee. Paradoxically, by trying to strengthen economic capital, it becomes more difficult for mothers (and fathers) to provide the supportive, engaging home literacy environment likely to increase their child's social and cultural capitals, and personal and social identity. In these circumstances, it is perhaps understandable that some parents feel a loss of agency and hand over responsibility for their children's learning to people they see as experts. Growing concerns around children arriving at school without the skills they need have contributed to the discourse around the benefits of early education, particularly for poorer children. Media headlines suggest that *Boys trail girls in literacy and numeracy when starting school* (Weale, 2015) and *A third of children [are] not 'school-ready for Reception* (Parkes, 2016). It therefore seems likely that more and more families will be placing their young children in childcare for longer hours and from an even earlier age, in order to give them what they are told is the 'best start'.

7.2 Re-drawing the map

7.2.1 Pushing the boundaries

A re-reading of the literacy map has shown where different boundaries and divisions have been created in Embervale. These

boundaries influence the way mothers and their young children use and experience literacy resources. It is now important to consider how the boundaries might be 'pushed' and the map re-drawn in order to offer some recommendations for how young children and their parents can be supported in more equitable ways.

7.2.1.1 Accessibility

Where resources are located affects how easily they are accessed and who they are used by, which subsequently influences the value attached to them by mothers (Nichols, Nixon, Rainbird, & Rowsell, 2007). This has been well illustrated in Neuman and Celano's (2012) study of two public libraries located just six miles apart in Philadelphia, USA (one in an affluent area and one in a deprived area), which offered children living in these two areas very different literacy experiences. Poorer children had the poorest experiences and less chance to succeed educationally, whilst rich children had extensive experiences (i.e. were rich in cultural capital) and were seen to do better in school. The researchers concluded that geographic and spatial neighbourhood boundaries exacerbate inequalities by shaping people's expectations about learning and what is achievable. At the moment, as my data demonstrate, families who live in certain areas or possess lower levels of economic capital find it harder to access the same services as other families because there are few services within walking distance and that are cost-free. Furthermore, the ones that are easier to access appear to offer more limited literacy experiences for their children and are offered as a 'benefit'. Conversely, children of better-off parents are able to get to different places within and outside Embervale, and mothers can choose from a wider range of literacy experiences. As a result, mothers experience different pedagogies and are given different, often mixed, messages about how to support their children's literacy development.

At the same time, as childcare and pre-schools become the main source of support for families with young children other services are diverted away from families. This could be seen in the Children' Centres targeting their services and focusing only on children up to

the age of two; Mrs Pink from the music and movement class noticing fewer children above this age in her classes and mothers commenting on the lack of groups available for children over this age. Mothers also reported that once they returned to work and/or their child was enrolled in pre-school there was little time left to go to other places or engage in other activities. In addition, they lamented the lack of groups that ran during school holidays. This was also commented on by the mothers in Hackett's (2017) study of their experiences in a museum setting with their young children. Not only do opportunities for children to engage in different literacy practices become more limited, but there is also a danger that, instead of children developing and learning through having a range of experiences in different places and with different people, pre-schools' become seen as primarily responsible for supporting child's development.

Heavy cuts to local authority budgets over the last ten years have meant that many public libraries have been closed or taken over by volunteers, with the remaining ones still under threat. During my fieldwork the opening times of Embervale's library were reduced from six days to five days, with shorter opening hours. As Sirinides, Fink and DuBois (2017) show, working families often struggle to access library services if they are not available in the evenings. Staff reported that there had been several redundancies and that they now relied heavily on volunteers. Yet libraries have been shown to be valuable spaces for promoting parental engagement and enhancing children's early literacy skills through facilitating singing, playing, talking and reading (Celano & Neuman, 2015). Librarians can model different literacy practices to engage parents and children, and reassure parents that there are many ways to help their children learn – not just reading books. Libraries can therefore still promote more formal, 'schooled' literacies whilst incorporating the informal, multi-modal literacies (Nichols, 2011) that may attract families with a range of social and cultural capitals and identities.

At the same time, Children's Centres have been closing. Since 2010, more than three hundred and fifty Sure Start Children's Centres in

England have been closed while only eight new ones have opened, and government spending on Sure Start has reduced considerably (Walker, 2017). It was reported in January 2018 that the local authority that oversees the Children's Centres in Embervale was considering closing more than half of the Centres in the county (twenty five out of forty) including the one on the east side (Martin, 2018). This would leave just one Children's Centre in the town centre which undoubtedly would have to target its services even more narrowly. UK government austerity policies since 2010 have hit poorest areas the hardest and resulted in support that has become even more individualised, with particular families being made the focus of interventions designed to compensate for their deficiencies. This has increased stigmatisation and division (Crossley, 2017; Jupp, 2017). By shifting the focus to working with families in their homes, as the *Troubled Families* programme has done, it could be argued that Children's Centres and other public services are no longer required. However, reducing public services designed to support families with young children means that those who already experience disadvantage are likely to feel it even more. Families already find themselves socially segregated and cut off from the few early years' services that remain. With even fewer resources available, their children are likely to have even fewer chances to develop their cognitive literacy skills, social and cultural capitals and literacy identities (Ellis & Smith, 2017).

If the aim of public policy is to close the educational attainment gap between poorer children and their 'better-off' peers by encouraging parents to support their children's learning, then families need to have the same choices when it comes to accessing early years' services. They need equal opportunities to build their cultural capital and develop high expectations for their children's learning and development. This means parents and their young children experiencing similar types of pedagogies and literacy practices, and receiving the same messages. In order to do this, services need to be made more accessible. They should be within a reasonable

walking-distance; groups such as those offered through private classes need to be made available at no, or very low, cost; they need to be available for families with children up to the age they start full-time school; and they need to be available at times to suit working families.

7.2.1.2 Distinctiveness

The private classes and most of the pre-schools in Embervale were located in multi-purpose church buildings, so spaces for young children had to be constructed through the introduction of different resources that were stored away between uses. This meant that only the public library and Children's Centres were easily recognisable as spaces for young children and their carers.

Policy and research has argued that the early years are a crucial time for a child's development and need be supported by parents and professionals in particular ways. If this is the case then it follows that the spaces that young children and their parents and carers inhabit should reflect this distinctiveness. Permanent, well-resourced spaces have a better chance of being noticed, valued and used, than temporary and largely invisible ones. Their distinctiveness could not only highlight the importance of the early years for children's learning and development, but parents would be more likely to know where to get help if they felt they needed it and attendance could be improved.

7.2.1.3 Inclusion

Although at a certain juncture Children's Centre services were judged to be being over-used by middle class parents (Jupp, 2013) and therefore became more closely focused on supporting disadvantaged families, Sylva (2016) found that the presence of middle class mothers did not stop the poorest mothers from benefitting. However government policy which has attempted to label some families as 'vulnerable' and 'troubled' has resulted in Children's Centres having to target their services to particular families (mothers). This seems to have created a stigma around their use which has alienated not

just the families they have sought to help (who do not necessarily see themselves as 'in need' of the help offered) but also families who would like to make use of services but feel 'out of place'. This fits with Daly and Bray's (2015) findings from their research into parenting support, which found that cutbacks in services and increased targeting have led to an increase in stigmatisation and have undermined parenting support. Unlike middle class mothers who generally possess confidence and a sense of entitlement due to being in a more privileged position, working class mothers with a history of deprivation and school failure often have unconfident and fragile learner identities (Reay, 2017). Being offered support in a way that makes them feel judged and responsible for any problems they may be experiencing makes them more likely to stay away.

The idea of needing to separate particular mothers from their children in order to educate them in how to be the 'right' sort of parent, exposed the mothers to the scrutiny of professionals, gave them mixed messages and encouraged them to defer to the 'experts', thus reducing their agency. They were only offered types of support that the professionals felt they needed and that fitted with the way government policy had constructed the problem of poor parenting and low educational attainment, rather than from an analysis of local and individual needs. This created a hierarchy where the professionals positioned themselves as the experts and distanced themselves from the mothers and children. In Hackett's (2017) study of mothers interacting with their young children in a museum setting, one of the mothers commented that she felt that she had to listen to Children's Centre professionals as they appeared to know her child better than herself. However, by spending time with her child in the museum she had come to realise that that was not true, that she did know her child well and that gave her confidence. In a case study of a Children's Centre that was seen as being particularly successful at developing young children's language and communication, it is notable that practitioners interacted directly with children in sessions, explaining to carers what they were doing and why, and used lots of

highly-engaging resources to support the children's learning (Ofsted, 2013a). Unlike the mothers that visited the Children's Centres in Embervale, mothers who took their children to private classes and/or the library were able to interact with their child. This helped them to recognise benefits in terms of 'school readiness' and were motivated to continue similar practices at home. They valued the support of other adults, such as family members, who also engaged their child in similar literacy activities.

In order to create home learning environments that give children equal opportunities when they start school, the stigma associated with using particular resources needs to be removed. This means a change in the way these services are offered that does not discriminate between, and make assumptions about, users and that focuses on children's learning and development rather than their mothers'. This means providing more groups for families to enjoy together, so children's development can be supported directly and mothers can recognise the benefits for themselves rather than needing to be 'taught'. By mixing with a range of other adults and families, mothers are more likely to build social and cultural capitals, re-shape their habitus, and overcome some of the social and cultural boundaries that exist. Parents could be offered support, not as a 'benefit' but as a strongly endorsed choice. If they felt they needed extra help, like the mothers who asked for help and referred themselves to a group at one of the Children's Centres, they could ask for it without the fear of being judged.

7.2.1.4 Communication

Research suggests that services meet the needs of the community best when users participate at the planning stage (Bagley & Ackerley, 2006). Yet Daly and Bray (2015) reported that parents' and children's voices have been largely silent in shaping support as they are often seen as beneficiaries rather than partners. Nichols, Nixon, Pudney & Jurvansuu (2009) argue that,

> inquiring into parents' priorities and discovering their existing resourcing practices may well assist early childhood and family service practitioners to support parents' role in children's learning and development. Seeing parents as active agents in resourcing their children, and even as resource producers, may well contribute to more equal partnerships. (p.159)

It seems likely that if early years' services offered the types of resources that parents wanted and needed for their children, then they would be more likely to engage with what is on offer.

However, a growing emphasis on pre-school has encouraged not only greater separation of parents and children, but also separation of professionals and parents. In the pre-schools in Embervale there appeared to be few positive connections made with the home learning environment. Whilst the professionals at pre-school TC referred to themselves as being open to listening to parents and helping them if they needed advice (e.g. with behaviour management), two-way, regular communication did not seem to exist between the professionals and parents in relation to their child's literacy development. Therefore little was known by the pre-school professionals about children's home literacy practices and parents' social and cultural capitals and identities, and connections could not be made for children between the literacy practices they engaged in at home and in the childcare setting.

If pre-school professionals have a better understanding of families, then they are more likely to provide the types of rich literacy resources and experiences that will ensure all three literacy domains are taken into account and children's literacy supported more effectively (Ellis & Smith, 2017). As Pahl and Kelly (2005) argue, home cultural literacy experiences need to be valued in order to develop a literacy curriculum that is meaningful to children. Professionals need to take into account parents' and children's existing 'funds of knowledge' and see beyond stereotypes (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). While it is apparent from this study that poorer families had fewer and more limited early literacy resources in the

home, it cannot be assumed that these are of any less value. "When educators overlook the funds of knowledge or the habitus and capital shared by families and embodied by children, social disadvantage in literacy learning is often reinforced" (Ashton & Beecher, 2014, p.33). Therefore opportunities for an authentic exchange of knowledge need to be created beyond the tokenistic 'getting to know you' sheet when a child first joins the pre-school or the one-way system of informing the parent what their child has done at pre-school via a noticeboard or app.

If children are to be placed in childcare settings in order to promote their development, get them 'ready for school' and enable parents to go to work, then professionals must listen to the views and experiences of parents so they can ensure they provide support for children in all of the literacy domains. This means changing the discourse from one of deficit and blame to one where there is a greater understanding and acceptance of parents' views and circumstances. If parents and professionals can find ways to combine their roles effectively children are more likely to be able to develop not just their cognitive literacy skills, but also their social and cultural capitals and personal and social identity. As Chandler puts it,

> If [practitioners]…lose contact with our local communities then we will create a mess. If we are in tune with parents, children and staff, then there is a synergy and creative energy from which we all benefit. (2006, p.148).

This study has shown that ethnographic research is well-suited to developing a nuanced understanding of how young children's literacy development is supported in different ways in different places. Mothers were seen to use and experience literacy resources differently depending on where they went and where they lived, which perpetuated existing inequalities.

As Ball (2017) reports, social and economic inequalities are growing; the richest are moving further ahead whilst the poorest are falling further behind. Education is affected by these inequalities. In 2017 only 70.7% of children were reported to have reached a good level of development (at age five), which represented a slight increase on the 69.3% reported in 2016. Meanwhile the gap between the highest and lowest attaining children had risen from 31.4% to 31.7% (DfE, 2017b). According to The Sutton Trust, the poorest children in the UK are eleven months behind when starting school (Stewart & Waldfogel, 2017). Furthermore, these children fall further behind as they go through their primary and secondary school and the gap is closing so slowly that, according to the Education Policy Institute (Andrews, Robinson & Hutchinson, 2017), it will take another fifty years to close (if it continues at the same rate).

If the aim of professionals and policy-makers is to close the attainment gap and give all children a fair chance to succeed in the education field, then all three literacy domains need to be addressed. If not, then children are likely to continue to arrive at school without the 'school readiness' that is expected and will fail to reach the attainment measures and age-related expectations laid out in the curriculum. At the same time parents (particularly mothers) will continue to be blamed for not doing the 'right' things with their children at home and deficit discourses will be perpetuated.

School is no longer enough. Policy demands that children must start to gain cognitive literacy skills from as early as possible. If mothers are not up to the job, early-years professionals must take over. It seems that by maintaining their commitment to the idea that children need to be supported financially and educationally to acquire the cognitive literacy skills needed for their own educational and economic advancement, successive governments have failed to understand the complex and increasing pressures some families are subject to, and have failed to address the social and cultural capitals that different families possess, or their personal and social identities. In this way, many families continue to be misrepresented (Crossley,

2017; McKenzie, 2015) and community resources fail to meet their needs. Policy-makers and professionals must now work to provide resources that families want and need by respecting and trying to understand the complexities of family lives. If they fail to do this, services will continue to be cut, educational inequalities and hierarchies will continue to exist, and the attainment gap will remain wide open.

Final thoughts

At the start of the study, I aimed to hear mothers' views in order to understand their experiences and how they saw their role in supporting their children's literacy development. However, as the study evolved it became clear that educational policy, and the way it is interpreted and acted upon at a local level, was an important aspect of how mothers used and experienced resources.

Therefore, in terms of the contribution of this study, I hope that it is three-fold. First, that it shows how educational policy is enacted at local level and how dominant discourses influence what support looks like for different groups. Second, that it offers a way of thinking about the nature of intervention and how to empower parents to support their children in ways that help them to be successful. Third, that it brings new, up-to-date case studies of early literacy practices to the existing literature on family and community literacies.

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Appendix 1 – Interview themes

- **Role of mother** in education and development (other people involved/how?) in relation to literacy
- **Places** visited/plan to visit with child
- Activities in the **home**
- **Resources** available/used in home and community – benefits/barriers
- **Places** and/or **people** for advice/**support**
- **Pressure** to support child's development/learning – if so, from where?
- Views on **pre-school**

Appendix 2 – Sample interview transcript

Helen - Do you take them to anywhere in particular, any favourite places you go to?

Jenny - We like going to the library. They don't go to any type of group because I won't do that now.

Helen - Have you done it in the past then?

Jenny - I did it with N and A, and I've done it with H. But with twins, H was 2 when they were born and I took them to a twins group once or twice, but to be honest it was so stressful, I just didn't go again. So no, I'm afraid I don't. But S goes to preschool on a Monday. Tuesday I see my mum. Sometimes we take them swimming. Sometimes we'll take them to the park. Sometimes we take them to the farm. Sometimes we just stay at home and she'll take them out for an hour so I can do some jobs. Wednesday, they both go (*to preschool*). Thursday, I goes, and then Friday they both go. So there isn't really a great deal of time.

To be honest when you've got so many children, it's all about crowd control, and I feel really bad when I think about N and A and all the things I did with them. And all the hours I spent, and these pair I just think 'Oh you poor things!'

We look at books, we do colouring and we look at numbers and we look at road signs, but they can't read and they can't write.

Helen - You mentioned the library, what do you do when you go there?

Jenny - We just go in and they put their bags down and they choose some books, and they like to play on the big rug. They have the rug with all the shapes on it. And we'll pick some books for the week, and sometimes they draw, sometimes I'll read them a story. I very often find that if I'm reading a story, children that I don't even know will come and join me. But I don't go to any of the groups there.

Helen - So, are there any resources or services that you wish you had in Embervale?

I think because they're not my first, I don't really feel like I need to reach out. I know when N was little, I'd go every week and have him weighed and I'd speak to the Health Visitor. But generally speaking, I'm quite lucky, if I need to know anything I ask my mum.

Themes:	
Places	Other people
Literacy practices	Barriers
Mother's identity/feelings	