REAL Creative Evaluation 2019
Written by Dr Rory McDowall Clark for Culture Shift

A partnership between Culture Shift, FSN and ESCC Early Years Improvement Team.

Contents

Abbreviations

APPG   All-Party Parliamentary Group

ASD   Autism Spectrum Disorder

DWP   De la Warr Pavilion

EAL   English as an Additional Language

EIF   Early Intervention Foundation

EPPE   The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project

ESCC   East Sussex County Council

EY   Early Years (although 'early years' is officially recognised as denoting birth to 8 years, in this context EY refers to preschool children, staff and provision)

FSN   Fellowship of St Nicholas

HLE   Home learning environment

HMAG Hastings museum and art gallery

ISEND Inclusive special educational needs and disability services, run by ESCC

NCB   National Children's Bureau

ORIM Family literacy framework comprising Opportunities, Recognition, Interaction and Models of literacy

PVI   Private, voluntary and independent sector

RCT   Randomised controlled trial

REAL   Raising Early Achievement in Literacy

SALT   Speech and language therapy

Introduction

This report outlines the process and findings of the REAL Creative project undertaken between January and July 2019 by Culture Shift working in collaboration with FSN and East Sussex Early Years Improvement Team to support early literacy. Children who have problems with communication, language and literacy skills will also experience difficulties with other aspects of the curriculum as literacy underpins all areas of learning. Resulting low levels of self-esteem and reduced motivation to learn limits future potential and is the reason for Hastings Opportunity Area's identification of literacy as a priority area.

In its sixth State of the Nation report (2019), the Social Mobility Commission draws attention to the extent to which inequality remains deeply entrenched in Britain. They point out the 'stark fact' that social mobility has stagnated over the last four years at virtually all stages of life from early childhood onwards[1]. Developmental gaps begin to open up between disadvantaged children and their more affluent peers before birth and these persist throughout life with adverse effects on educational achievement, subsequent employment opportunities and overall life chances. One of the major ambitions of the Social Mobility Action Plan is to narrow the gap in educational attainment to enable children and young people to reach their full potential.

Reduced social mobility and adverse life chances are not simply social in origin and there is considerable disparity in the chance of successful outcomes for children growing up in different geographical areas[2]. The Social Mobility Commission identified a number of 'cold spots' across the country where barriers to social mobility are particularly challenging; these include Hastings, ranked at 299th (out of 324) in the Social Mobility Index.

The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Social Mobility have recognised that getting early years education right is one of the keys to narrowing the attainment gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children and in turn, narrowing the regional attainment gap[3]. The early years are crucial in preparing children to progress successfully through school and into adult life - young children maintain the gains made in early years education throughout their lives, supporting their self-perception as learners and thus their

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1   State of the Nation Report 2018-2019.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/798404/SMC_State_of_the_Nation_Report_2018-19.pdf
2   Social mobility index: 2017 data. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-mobility-index-2017-data
3   Closing the regional attainment gap. https://www.suttontrust.com/research-paper/appg-social-mobility-closing-the-regional-attainment-gap/

overall achievement. Gaps in achievement appear early on however, with children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds starting school around 11 months on average behind their peers[4].

Literacy is particularly important in determining a child's life chances. A good standard of literacy underpins all future learning and children with poor vocabulary at age five are more than twice as likely to be unemployed aged 34[5]. This makes early literacy intervention programmes, such as the REAL Creative Project in Hastings, of particular interest as they hold out the possibility of narrowing the gap for disadvantaged children before they embark on their school journey. The REAL (Raising Early Achievement in Literacy) Programme is already recognised as a valuable intervention that supports children at risk of poor educational outcomes[6]; REAL Creative builds on this proven success whilst providing additional benefits of community engagement.

The APPG suggest that place is the biggest piece of the attainment puzzle[7], emphasising that a sense of community is fundamental to achieving local buy-in and ensuring the success of a new initiative. They recognise distinct differences between each Opportunity Area delivery plan as each locality interprets and shapes national policy in a way that works for them. Hastings is a vibrant community with strong artistic traditions. Drawing on this rich environment through the involvement of creative practitioners and cultural spaces gives REAL Creative a distinct local flavour that at the same time reflects internationally recognised good practice in early years.

> *Place is the biggest piece of the regional attainment puzzle*

The REAL Creative Project was evaluated by Dr Rory McDowall Clark between February and September 2019. Evaluation focussed on assessing the success of the project in supporting and extending young children's language and literacy; in enabling early years settings to work with parents to increase confidence in supporting children's learning and the added benefits that creative practitioners and cultural spaces can bring to early literacy. The methodology for this evaluation included:

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4   Waldfogel, J. and Washbrook, E. (2010) *Low income and early cognitive development in the UK*. Sutton Trust.
5   Closing the regional attainment gap. https://www.suttontrust.com/research-paper/appg-social-mobility-closing-the-regional-attainment-gap/
6   Nutbrown, C, Hannon, P and Morgan, A (2005) *Early Literacy Work with Families.* Sage.
7   Closing the regional attainment gap. https://www.suttontrust.com/research-paper/appg-social-mobility-closing-the-regional-attainment-gap/

- Summative data from language checkers completed by early years staff and parents before and after the project.

- Quantitative measures of the home learning environment.

- Questionnaires competed by early years staff at set points throughout the project.

- Qualitative consultation including interviews and focus groups with early years staff and with artists who delivered the project.

- Observation of a number of the creative events to include informal discussions with parents.

See appendix for methodological rationale.

Background

1.1 Making it REAL

The fundamental role of language and communication for children's development, learning and subsequent academic success is central to public policy that aims to narrow the achievement gap. The family literacy project, Making it REAL, is a nationally recognised programme that grew out of three decades of work by Professor Cathy Nutbrown. It has been developed across England by the Early Childhood Unit at the National Children's Bureau (NCB) in partnership with the University of Sheffield. REAL (Raising Early Achievement in Literacy) is targeted at young children who have been identified as needing additional support in early literacy. It aims to support development by working with children and parents to improve the home learning environment. Early years practitioners receive two days initial training delivered by NCB. This supports their knowledge and understanding of how to deliver the project to families over the course of three events and two home visits.

REAL is based on the ORIM framework (Opportunities, Recognition, Interaction and Models of literacy) which supports parents to: create opportunities for learning; recognise and value small steps; interact in positive ways and model explicit behaviours. In 2013 REAL's framework for early literacy development with parents was awarded the ESRC prize for outstanding impact on society. This impact is recognised by the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) as statically significant, achieving positive outcomes both for improved literacy and improved letter recognition[8]. The evidence base for REAL is currently rated at 3 by the EIF; further independent evaluation, structured as a large-scale randomised controlled trial (RCT), is underway to compare progress of children who receive the REAL Programme with a control group. This RCT will cover 120 nursery settings and is to be published in Autumn 2021[9].

1.2 REAL Creative

Building on the successful model of REAL as a foundation for developing early literacy, the REAL Creative programme was undertaken by Culture Shift working in collaboration with FSN and East Sussex Early Years Improvement Team. The project has extended the REAL concept through partnerships with artists and cultural organisations, embedding creativity and cultural engagement in literacy development through a multi-agency approach. Following a pilot study in Hastings and Bexhill during 2018, indicating that the

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8   Early Intervention Foundation Guidebook (2017)
9   https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/the-real-programme/

creative element brought additional value to the programme, the REAL Creative project involved eight early years settings across Hastings between January and July 2019. Of these, one was a school-based nursery and lead setting for the Early Years hub but the majority were in the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector. As many more children attend PVI provision, working with this sector is crucial to narrowing the achievement gap. Each setting was paired with a creative practitioner, experienced in working with young children. These were poet and illustrator, Ed Boxall; movement artist, Anne Colvin; theatre practitioner, Rebecca Fifield and storyteller, Kevin Graal. Cultural venues - De La Warr Pavilion, Hastings Museum, Jerwood Gallery and Hastings Libraries - were likewise an essential part of the programme.

The aims of the project were to:

- Improve children's literacy and language development
- Improve the home learning environment through increasing parent's confidence to engage children in books and creative play.
- Open up cultural resources (libraries, museums, galleries) to families that wouldn't have engaged previously, broadening horizons from an early stage
- Increase skills and knowledge of EY practitioners in supporting literacy, creativity and cultural learning.
- Increase skills and knowledge in the cultural sector to support early literacy and language development
- Narrow the gap in terms of opportunity and resource in early years education

1.3 The process

Initial training was provided for early years staff, creative practitioners and representatives from cultural venues by NCB trainers in collaboration with Anne Colvin and Culture Shift. This included a full day getting to grips with REAL and a further two days exploring creative approaches to literacy with artists leading aspects of the training. Joint training supported developing relationships between all parties, enabling participants to share experience and value each other's expertise. The pilot study had established that this relationship-building is fundamental to success. Three separate training days provided participants with background knowledge and understanding of the ORIM framework and how to use it to engage parents in supporting their children's developing literacy. It included opportunities for practitioners to explore their own creativity and develop confidence and skills in supporting creative engagement. As part of the training sessions, a visit to Jerwood gallery enabled educators and creative practitioners to work together on potential ideas for their own projected cultural experiences.

Settings were responsible for recruiting families where children had been identified as having relatively lower age-related development in early literacy for a variety of reasons and where it was felt families may need additional support. Children's initial starting points were measured through pre-observation forms and ESCC language checkers (for more details on data gathering and methodology see Appendix). Two network meetings during the course of the programme enabled EY practitioners and artists to share experiences and learning in a wider forum and to explore ways to tackle difficulties such as overcoming barriers to parental engagement.

The project included the following activities over the course of four months: two home visits for EY practitioners to engage parents and children in literacy activities within a familiar environment; a joint family visit to the library; three creative events at cultural venues and other community resources such as the beach, Alexandra Park and the local supermarket, developed in partnership with the creative practitioners; a final celebration event for all families at Hastings Museum and Art Gallery.

Rationale

2.1 Developing family literacy

Literacy is more than a technical skill, it is a social and cultural practice and for young children it develops through exposure rather than direct instruction. Becoming literate is a matter of learning to use a cultural tool and this begins in the home as children are exposed to their family's literacy practices. The 'home learning environment' (HLE) is crucial for nurturing children's emerging language skills, both explicitly and implicitly, through everyday interactions. The importance of the HLE was identified in the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Report as having greater impact on children's outcomes than parental occupation, level of education or any other socio-economic features[10]. Since then, longitudinal studies have shown that the effects of the HLE continue into secondary school impacting on GCSE and A level results[11]. EPPE demonstrated that 'what parents do with their child is just as important as who they are'. Many children benefit from a favourable HLE where parents engage them in meaningful conversations, share books and stories, model literate behaviours through reading and writing, but those who lack such encouragement begin school with a severe disadvantage. The HLE is thus a strong predictor of a child's future success so bringing about improvements through behavioural change is a priority in narrowing the achievement gap [12].

Making it REAL and REAL Creative are programmes designed to develop the HLE by creating opportunities for parents to interact with their children and recognise the importance of their role in supporting the first steps in literacy. REAL is structured around the ORIM framework that reflects key aspects of socio-cultural learning:

Opportunity: identifying when possibilities for learning present themselves

Recognition: recognising and valuing children's early achievements

Interaction: interacting with children to scaffold their learning

Modelling: demonstrating literate behaviours, such as reading for information, that children will

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10   Sylva, K *et al*. (2004) *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Final Report*. Institute of Education, University of London/ DfES

11   Taggart, B *et a*l. (2015) *Effective pre-school, primary and secondary education project (EPPSE 3-16+)*.

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        https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/756020/Improving_the_home_learning_environment.pdf

imitate and adopt for themselves.

EARLY LITERACY STRANDS

	Print	Books	Writing	Oral Language
Opportunities				
Recognition				
Interaction				
Model				

FAMILIES PROVIDE

The ORIM framework supports parents in becoming more attuned to their children's development. Interwoven with the strands of early literacy (print, books, writing and oral language), the structure provides pedagogical framing that enables EY practitioners to plan family literacy experiences and thus have a positive impact on the HLE.

2.2 How creativity provides additional value

There are a number of reasons why a creative approach to family literacy provides value above and beyond simple language-based interventions. Foremost amongst these is that it builds on children's own natural creativity and the holistic nature of their learning and development. Young children are instinctive communicators who spontaneously represent their ideas in a multiplicity of modes as they seek to make meaning from the world about them. As they express themselves with a variety of materials through two or three-dimensions, or bodily through movement, dance and gesture, children's representations extend their mental engagement and critical thinking; this provides strong foundations for the abstract symbolic complexity of literacy. Loris Malaguzzi of Reggio Emilia referred to this as 'The Hundred Languages of Children'.[13] Reggio Emilia in northern Italy is internationally renowned for its high-quality preschool education, visited by study groups from across the world. What makes the Reggio provision exemplary is its art-based approach with an *atelierista* (artist) attached to each setting, working with EY educators. Together

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13 Edwards, C *et al*. (eds) (2012) *The Hundred Languages of Children* (3rd ed) Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.

they facilitate children's open-ended discovery and symbolic representation through artefacts, signs and language, a process recognised as supporting children's intellectual growth by transforming their understanding to the next level.[14]

An additional benefit of a creative approach to family literacy is that an impoverished HLE is frequently due to parents' own insecurity about literacy and academic learning in general. Whereas explicit literacy-focused intervention may feel threatening to such parents, creative activities for their children are far less daunting and so are liable to increase parental take-up and engagement.

Finally, it is important to remember that creativity goes beyond the arts and has long been acknowledged as a crucial component of twenty-first century education[15]. In an era of rapid technological change there is a need to foster creativity in children and young people. Beyond formal skills they require flexibility, critical thinking, the ability to problem-solve and to make connections; all of these cognitive processes are enhanced by opportunities that foster the latent creativity of young children.

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14   Vygotsky, L (1978) *Mind in society: the development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
15   National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (1999) *All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education*.

Findings

3.1 Children

Over the eight settings, 45 children were selected to take part in this programme. For the most part these were children identified as having slower than expected language development for their age, some lacked confidence in spoken language and a few had difficulties in socially integrating with other children and adults and so needed support with communication. Six of the children are EAL (English as an Additional Language); they use their mother tongue at home and are at varying stages of learning English. The majority of children (80%) were in an age range between 41 and 53 months with others a few months younger or older; the median age was 48 months.

Quantitative data was collected before and after the project by means of two different assessment forms (see Appendix). These show evidence of children's progress in the four main areas of language development as well as parents' reports on their child's involvement in literacy activities within the home.

3.1.1 Areas of language development

The four areas of language development – listening and attention; understanding; talking; social communication, all showed improvement by the end of the project. Each of these areas is interconnected but it cannot be assumed that a good level of development in one area necessarily implies satisfactory progress in others, for instance a child may be verbally competent yet lack the ability to listen with attention, or vice versa. Competence in each area was measured by means of the ESCC language monitoring tool through highlighting those statements which each child securely met. Statements cover expected milestones across broad developmental bands, those most relevant to this project being 30-50 months and 40-60 months; children would usually be expected to display the behaviour by some point within this time frame. For instance at 30-50 months children's attention is still 'single channel', ie focused on one thing at a time, sometime between 40-60 months they develop the ability to both listen and do simultaneously. Overlap between age bands allows for the fact that typical child development is not uniform and may advance more rapidly in certain areas than others.

Each child was assessed at the beginning and end of the project, enabling individual progress to be measured and tracked on a database. All children within the sample group made substantial progress in each area over the time period, more than would be accounted for by typical development.

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Listening and attention

Listening and attention are an important aspect of self-regulation and one of the prime indicators of 'school readiness' [16]. Without the ability to focus and maintain their attention children will struggle with the expectations of school and be unable to take advantage of learning opportunities available to them. Moreover, children who have difficulty with listening and attention are prone to being diagnosed with behaviour problems which has implications for their future confidence and motivation.

Whilst all children showed marked development in listening and attention, for the purpose of this report one setting has been chosen to display progression across the range. This nursery was selected as representative because all the children are within a couple of months of the median age range, none have specific language delays requiring specialist intervention and all are native English speakers.

At the beginning of the programme all the children in this setting were reaching between 40-80% of the expectations for 30-50 month olds. None were yet demonstrating any of the milestones in the next age band despite all being at least 40 months of age.

	30-50 months	40-60 months
K	40%	0%
	100%	100%
C	80%	0%
	100%	100%
J	80%	0%
	100%	75%
A	60%	0%
	100%	100%
S	60%	0%
	100%	75%
B	60%	0%
	100%	100%

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16 McDowall Clark, R (2017) *Exploring the Contexts for Early Learning: challenging the school readiness agenda*. Routledge

Analysis of the post-project data reveals that every child was fully secure on all the 30-50 month expectations and most were achieving at least 75% of the markers for 40-60 month olds; four out of six children were displaying 100% of the statements in this older age band.

Although this table shows data for only one of the groups, the findings are similar for the entire cohort across all eight settings.

Talking

Children's speech develops rapidly in the early years. Not only are they learning new words but also key grammatical structures necessary to communicate meaning such as conjunctions (and, because, so) that join bits of language together and different tenses to be able to talk about what happened yesterday and what will happen tomorrow. Sensitive interaction from an interested adult is essential to model and encourage conversation. Children unable to express themselves fluently become frustrated and struggle with social interaction which interferes with learning.

Data from the same representative setting demonstrates considerable increase in the children's verbal expression.

	30-50 months	40-60 months
K	60%	0%
	100%	100%
C	40%	0%
	100%	100%
J	60%	0%
	100%	100%
A	80%	0%
	100%	100%
S	60%	0%
	100%	40%
B	20%	0%
	100%	100%

Initially this group displayed between 20% to 80% of average expectations for 30-50 month old children; none of them could demonstrate any statements for the next band of 40+ months. By the end of the project all the children, to varying degrees, were showing an ability in line with their chronological age and all but one securely met 100% of expectations.

Although it must be expected that young children of this age would naturally make progress in spoken language over the course of several months, the level of improvement was nonetheless greater than would be expected without intervention. Data from NCB monitoring forms corroborates measures of verbal competence gathered through the ESCC language tool in showing 82.5% of children (across the entire cohort) speaking in complete sentences – an increase of 17.5%.

Understanding

Children's understanding of language is usually considerably in advance of their spoken language. For everyone, adult or child, receptive vocabulary (ie words understood) is greater than expressive vocabulary (words actively used) and this has important implications for children's learning and later academic success. Limited vocabulary is one of the root causes of the achievement gap, placing constraints on learning and making it difficult to access the curriculum. This gap is evident before a child begins formal education and widens further throughout school [17] so the earlier it is addressed the more likely it is that adverse consequences can be averted.

> *It's not the toys in the house that make the difference in children's lives; it's the words in their heads.*
>
> Trelease (2013)

There is a strong correlation between the number of words a child comes in contact with on a daily basis and their receptive vocabulary. It is estimated that by age seven there is a gap of about 4,000 words in the vocabulary of children in the top and bottom quartiles[18]. The sharing of books and stories is of particular

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17   Oxford Language Report (2018) *Why closing the word gap matters*.
18   http://www.sec-ed.co.uk/best-practice/pupil-premium-closing-the-vocabulary-gap/

importance because that exposes children to a richer vocabulary and range of grammatical structures than they would typically experience in everyday conversation.

Children attending the representative setting all demonstrated a considerable increase in their understanding.

	30 – 50 months	40 – 60 months
K	100%	12%
	100%	100%
C	82.5%	0%
	100%	100%
J	82.5%	0%
	100%	100%
A	66%	0%
	100%	100%
S	100%	12%
	100%	50%
B	66%	0%
	100%	100%

Learning to read is dependent on receptive vocabulary so this growth in understanding, evident across each setting, is critical for future success. It seems likely that the emphasis on books and stories throughout the project was a key influence in the development of children's understanding of more complex language structures. In addition, outings and visits provided opportunities to put a vocabulary to new experiences and so build up each child's wordbank.

Understanding poses particular difficulties for EAL children who have smaller vocabularies than native speakers[19]; this is not surprising as they face the difficulty of both learning English and learning *through* English at the same time. Whilst EAL children quickly develop conversational fluency when exposed to language in the environment, it can take around five years to catch up with native speakers in other aspects

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19 Murphy, V (2014) *Second Language Learning in the Early School Years: Trends and Contexts*. Oxford University Press.

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such as understanding[20]. It was noticeable that the EAL children involved in the project (13%) made progress in line with their peers which suggests that they are now more likely to start school ready to succeed.

Social Communication

Although social communication is identified on the ESCC language monitoring tool, it was not a priority of the project so was not a focus for planning or implementation. Nevertheless it is worth noting that improvement in social communication was evident across the cohort. Incidental comments from EY staff and parents often identified a marked increase in children's confidence as a result of their involvement in the events. One mother said:

It's given her so much confidence... chatting away now whereas before she was so quiet - she'll ask for help if she needs it instead of just sitting there. She's starting school in September and I'd been worried about how she'd cope - if you'd asked before I'd never have thought she'd be able to manage but now...

There is a strong connection between verbal fluency and the confidence needed for successful social communication. When I observed a visit to DLWP, a parent recently arrived from Africa confided that six months previously her daughter spoke no English at all. As an independent evaluator I was unknown to parents and children but shortly afterwards the child came and whispered, 'I'm having a sausage roll for my lunch', demonstrating not only verbal fluency but the confidence to initiate conversation with a new adult. Children with poor social communication skills struggle to interact with their peers and with adults and this has consequences once they begin school; the secondary effects of increased social competence reinforces the project's impact in providing young children with the tools that will enable them to succeed.
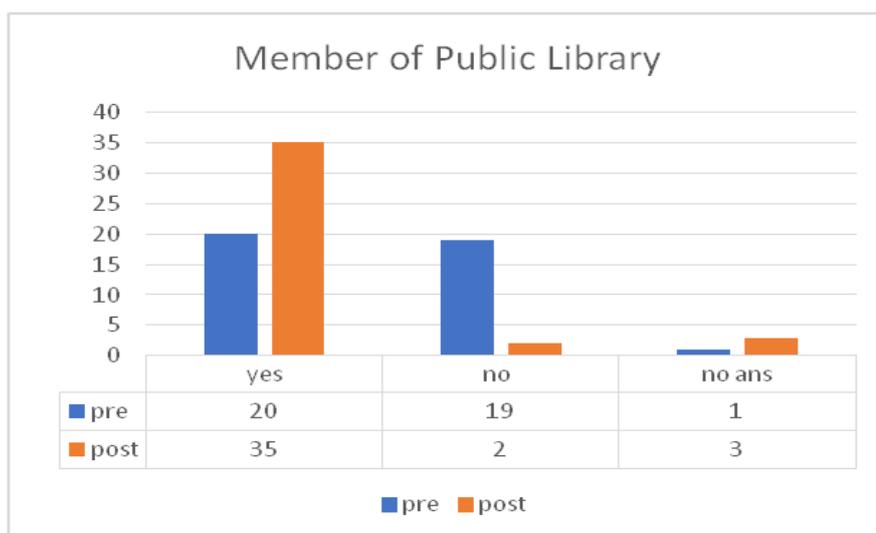
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20 Ibid

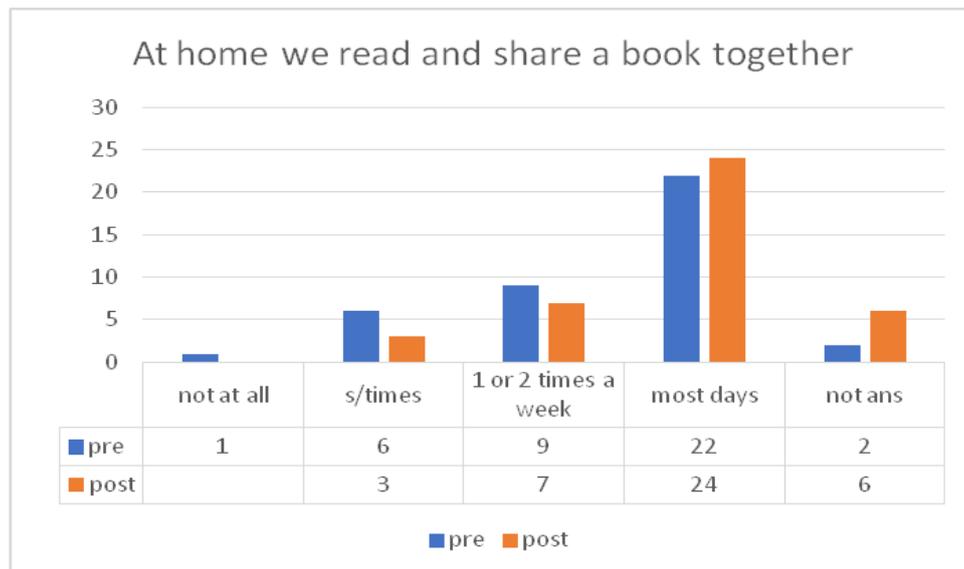### 3.1.2 Children's involvement in literacy activities within the home

Children acquire their first understandings of literacy within the home in response to their families' social and cultural practices. For instance print awareness arises incidentally as children are exposed to books and they begin to realise the purpose of writing when they see parents and siblings write.

At the start of the project only half of the families were members of their local library. Adults who do not use a library themselves may never have considered its value for their children but following the library trip, organised as the first literacy event, that number had risen to over 87%. From previous low levels, all parents now report that their children enjoy visiting the library with 70% enjoying it greatly.

Many EY practitioners also talked about the effect of the library visits on children during interviews. Jigsaw Nursery commented on how the trip '*made [going to the library] normal so it was approachable'.* They noticed that even those children who had already visited the library found it was a different experience and now plan to take other families and groups of children to extend the effect.

It is not surprising that such a marked rise in library membership should impact on how often parents and children spent time looking at books together and on children's interest in books: 60% of parents now report reading and sharing a book together most days and 90% of the children are showing sustained engagement with books, listening to and talking about stories.

At home we read and share a book together

	not at all	s/times	1 or 2 times a week	most days	not ans
pre	1	6	9	22	2
post		3	7	24	6

Christchurch Nursery commented on how much difference library visits had made to one child's interest in books:

'One of our parents struggles with reading and writing, she's quite open about it, but joined the library when we went on the visit. [At the home visit] I'd tried to read a story with her little girl but she wasn't interested, couldn't concentrate, wandering off or turning pages rapidly just to get through it. When we went again she

sat right through it, obviously enjoying the book and talking about the pictures. That's because Mum has spent all that time in between going to the library and reading with her, she's seen that modelled and done it at home. It's made such a difference now she can sit and enjoy a story and interact, making appropriate comments.'

	shows no/v little interest	enjoys a book for a short while	repeats some words or phrases	shows sustained engagement	listens shares and talks about books	not answered
pre	2	4	6	12	15	1
post	1	3	0	9	26	1

Parents also encouraged each other to go to the library, for instance In2Play reported the following exchange between two parents on the bus back from the museum trip:
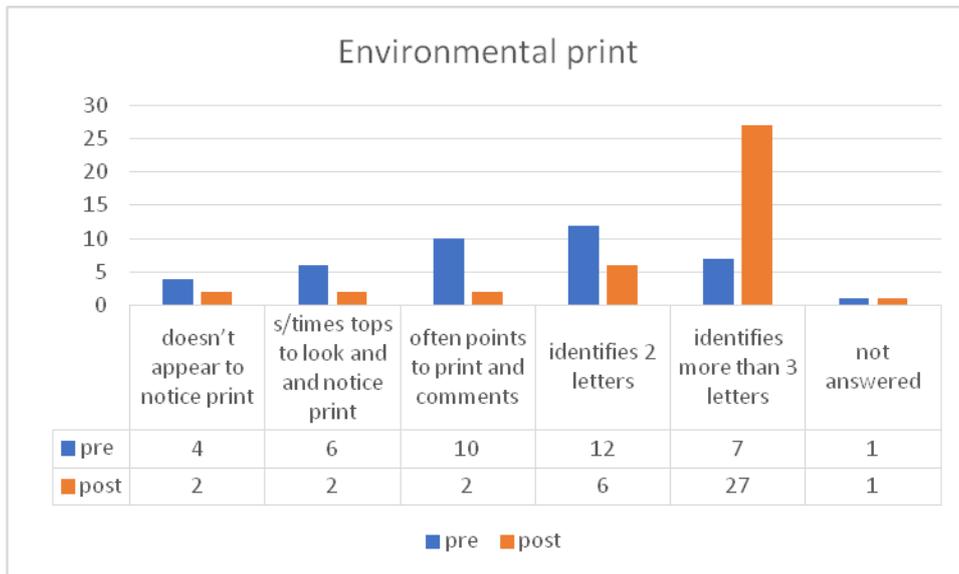
'Have you been back to library yet?'
'No I haven't.'
'Well do you want to go next Monday? We can meet up after preschool and go to the library and change our books.'

Many parents returned to the library with older siblings so the event had secondary indirect effects on the wider family, one that is likely to continue into the future.
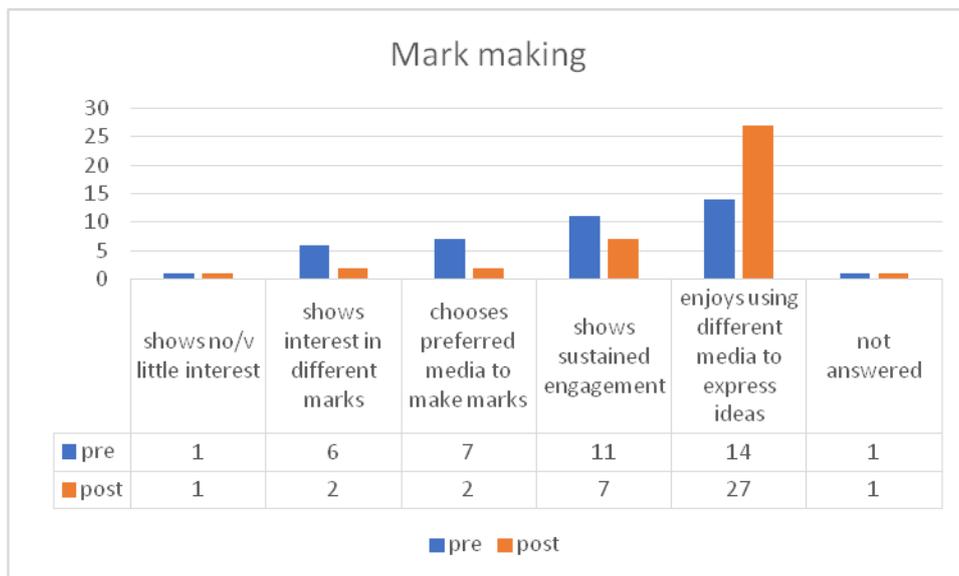
As well as an increased valuing of books and reading, the project developed parents' recognition of other ways that print impinges on children's lives. One such is environmental print, ie print that surrounds us in everyday life such as that on signs and packaging. By the end of the programme parents were drawing their children's attention to environmental print and children spontaneously noticed and could pick out specific letters. The number of children who could identify more than three letters rose from 18% to 69%

Environmental print

	doesn't appear to notice print	s/times tops to look and and notice print	often points to print and comments	identifies 2 letters	identifies more than 3 letters	not answered
■ pre	4	6	10	12	7	1
■ post	2	2	2	6	27	1

■ pre   ■ post

This specific feature showed a particularly high increase over the course of the programme, suggesting that recognising and talking about letters and words has become part of everyday life for most of these families.

Mark-making also showed high levels of improvement and the number of children identified as being able to express their ideas using a range of different media virtually doubled (an increase from 35% to 69%).

Mark making

	shows no/v little interest	shows interest in different marks	chooses preferred media to make marks	shows sustained engagement	enjoys using different media to express ideas	not answered
pre	1	6	7	11	14	1
post	1	2	2	7	27	1

■ pre ■ post

Mark making is an important initial stage in learning to write. As children with a growing awareness of print become more confident in manipulating pencils and crayons they begin to imitate letters in a process known as emergent writing. The project helped parents to reassess their children's 'scribbling' and recognise its value; 82% of children draw, paint and make marks at home most days. This is an aspect of early literacy that is likely to particularly benefit from the creative input of the programme.

3.1.3

Presentation of the data on children's language development and engagement with literacy activities has necessarily taken a general overview in which individual experience is lost to view. To counteract this tendency these brief case studies are illustrative of the specific and various outcomes of the project for two families[21].

Hanna (4 years, 8 months at the start)

Hanna's family had recently moved to England from Eastern Europe and she was selected for the project due to concerns about her speech, both in English and her home language. Adults, including her parents, would sometimes struggle to understand what she was trying to say and she was extremely shy. Her parents were very keen to be involved in Hanna's learning; her mother attended all the events and built on the experiences in between. Together she and her daughters (Hanna's younger sister is due to start in the Nursery next January) made scrapbooks of the literacy activities they had enjoyed and their own follow-up activities such as a fingerprint alphabet. Hanna also made her own book Unicorn and Me – prompted by one of her favourite books Monkey and Me. Since the start of the project Hanna's confidence has blossomed; she is now easily understood and her vocabulary has greatly increased. She will start conversations with new people and has lots to say. She has also been able to form friendships with many of the other children. In addition, being involved in the project has helped the family to establish connections with the school and the community.

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21   names are pseudonyms to protect children's identity

<u>Daniel</u> (4 years, 8 months at the start)

Daniel was selected for the project as he has significant educational needs including autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) and global delay as well as sensory processing disorder. He had no understandable language before the project and was receiving input from ISEND and SALT to help develop his language. Since taking part Daniel has developed more language and a willingness to take part in activities around language such as song time. He now uses these skills independently, for instance singing to himself whilst playing, and this is significantly different from his previous behaviour. Previously he would not interact with other children but has now begun to play alongside them rather than moving away. He has slowly started to interact with others and will accept something offered by another child. He shows keen interest in all singing based activities and is able to focus on these for five minutes, a greatly extended time frame for him.

Daniel's parents showed little interest in any form of literacy saying they did not feel it was important as they are both severely dyslectic. They did become deeply involved in the project however; both parents attended the events and have been eager to be more involved. His parents have begun to realise the value of literacy; they joined the library and now understand there are picture books they can use with their son. Whereas previously severe dyslexia and illiteracy caused Daniel's mother to avoid books, she now recognises ways that she can share books with him and make up stories using the pictures.

3.2 Parents

REAL is targeted at young children through their parents as the most effective way of encouraging and supporting early literacy. The impact of the project on parents is therefore inevitably interlinked with that of their children, as evidenced in the preceding section. However It is also helpful to consider changes in parents' understanding and behaviour because their increased knowledge will continue to affect how they interact with the target children, siblings and even children yet to be born. As the focus of the project was on children's developing literacy there was no systematic attempt was made to gather data relating to parents' attitudes as opposed to behaviour. In informal interviews parents spoke mainly about the effect the project had had on their children, however there was also incidental evidence of altered perspectives regarding how their behaviour influences their child's learning, particularly in connection with reading and sharing stories.

> *I've picked up things to take home, incorporating music and movement into stories.*
> *I've learned new ways to tell stories.*
> *It's made me more aware of the surroundings and what I can talk to [my daughter] about.*
> *It's made me think about how to read stories, how to make them more fun.*

It was noticeable that some parents have begun to adopt concepts from the REAL approach in thinking about how they engage their children in literacy activities and support their language. For instance one mother volunteered that the project had '*helped their **interaction** with their little girl*'. Another said '*We now look out for **environmental print**, we count steps and play games with numbers*.' This level of 'buy in' to the programme demonstrates how parents have become more responsive to their child's needs which will enable the children to flourish.

Parents who never previously considered going to cultural venues now recognise the potential they offer for family outings and how such visits can support children's learning, as one mother commented *'the trips ... opened the cultural world of Hastings'*. Parents can feel anxious about taking small children to public environments but going with the nursery provided a level of security. One acknowledged *'We feel more confident about idea of visiting museums and galleries. I'll use idea of looking through binoculars again'.* At the final celebration event parents talked about how they had returned independently to Hastings Museum and Art Gallery, the De La Warr Pavilion and Jerwood Gallery.

does child enjoy visiting museum/gallery

	has not been yet	not at all yet	a little	a great deal	not answered
■	16	1	15	7	
■		1	16	22	1

Several parents were struck by the visit to Morrisons and how much learning potential it offered; one mother commented *'E always comes shopping with me but this was different. She had to find her things and go and ask people when she couldn't find them.'* This is an important adjunct because it means that parents can carry over ways of encouraging their child's learning beyond special events into familiar everyday routines.

There were also secondary and indirect effects of the project that, although seemingly unconnected to literacy, nonetheless reverberate on family welfare and therefore children's well-being and ability to thrive. Alongside considering individual children's development, settings took account of parents' needs when selecting families to take part. Some were chosen because they had been identified as benefiting from additional support in managing their child's behaviour, lacking in confidence or because they were perceived to be socially isolated. These are not aspects one expects parents to identify for themselves, however many practitioners noted that the project had a marked effect on parental confidence and had encouraged friendships to develop. Artemis nursery pointed out how *'parents got to know each other well and friendships formed. Before they might nod and say 'hello' in the doorway ... now she took [the other parent's] daughter home and was going round for tea later on'.*

Similar comments were observed time and time again by all the settings:

> *It's given them confidence and they've made relationships with each other...*
>
> *They've arranged little meetings...*
>
> *So they took the children to McDonalds for tea – that wouldn't have happened before...*
>
> *She's developed a personal friendship with another parent involved...*
>
> *A couple of parents stayed behind at the museum and had a coffee together...*

It is important to note that social relationships are more than a collateral side effect of the programme; developing a network of connections helps build social and human capital, both of which may partially counterbalance adverse circumstances and so are particularly important for disadvantaged families[22].

A central feature of the project is the way that parents' changing attitudes and growing confidence affected their levels of participation and engagement with the child's nursery. Parental involvement has been consistently associated with higher levels of achievement so is a fundamental part of good early years practice[23]. This aspect also pertains to the EY settings and is discussed in the next section of the findings.

3.3 EY Practitioners

As one of the aims of the project was to increase the skills and knowledge of EY practitioners, opportunities for reflection were built into the programme from the start (see Appendix for details of methodology). Findings follow two clear themes: the impact on practice in the setting and how the project affected relationships with parents.
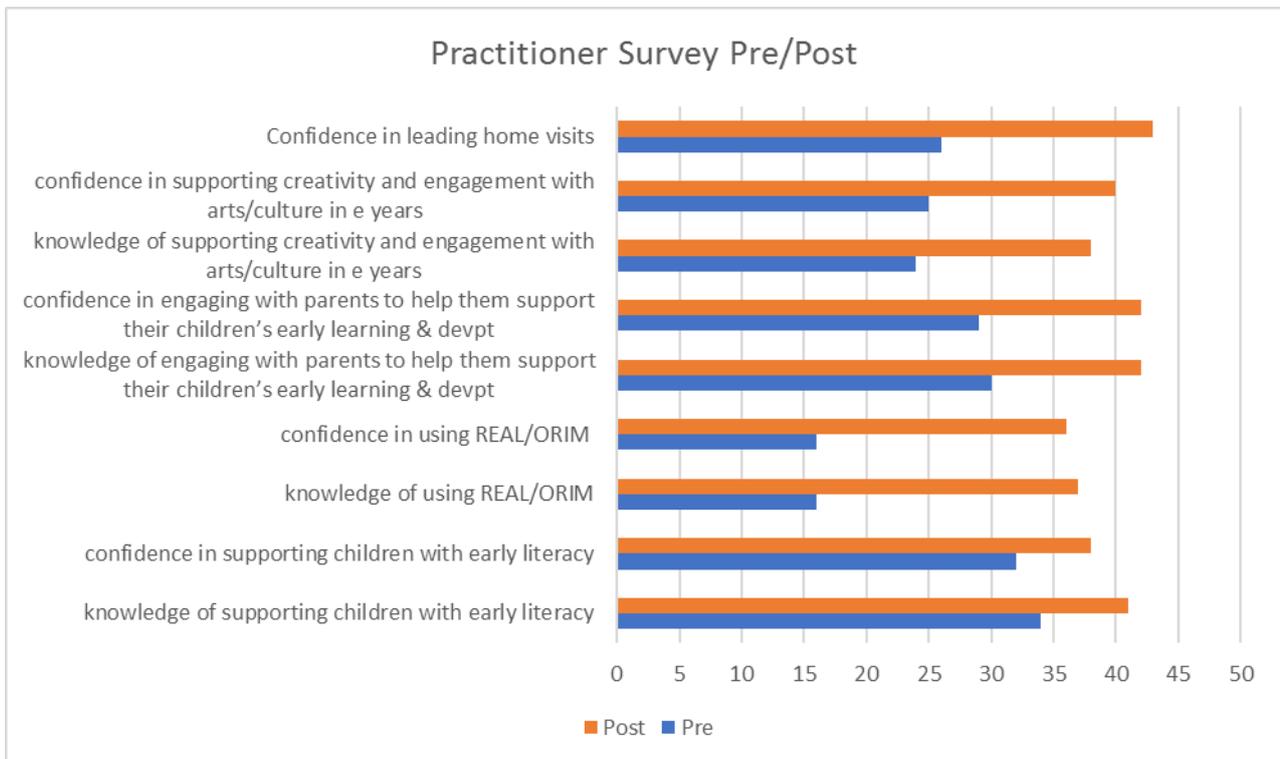
Impact on practice

All the EY educators were unanimous in identifying an increase in both understanding and confidence across four dimensions: leading home visits; supporting children with early literacy; using the REAL/ORIM framework, and supporting creativity and engagement with arts and culture in early years. In particular, knowledge and understanding in using the ORIM framework grew; this is unsurprising as that was the feature of the programme they were least familiar with at the beginning but it has provided them with an effective tool for use in future work with families and children.

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22 McDowall Clark, R (in press) *Childhood in Society.* Sage.
23 https://foundationyears.org.uk/working-with-parents/

Practitioner Survey Pre/Post

Category	Pre	Post
Confidence in leading home visits	~26	~43
confidence in supporting creativity and engagement with arts/culture in e years	~25	~40
knowledge of supporting creativity and engagement with arts/culture in e years	~24	~38
confidence in engaging with parents to help them support their children's early learning & devpt	~29	~42
knowledge of engaging with parents to help them support their children's early learning & devpt	~30	~42
confidence in using REAL/ORIM	~16	~36
knowledge of using REAL/ORIM	~16	~37
confidence in supporting children with early literacy	~32	~38
knowledge of supporting children with early literacy	~34	~41

■ Post ■ Pre

Some bias towards positivity in the responses is to be expected due to the novelty of the project, but nonetheless qualitative data from interviews, focus group discussions and other built-in feedback loops corroborate these perceptions. Practitioners identified changes in their practice as a result of taking part, such as how consciousness of print and literacy had increased so they were able to build on everyday opportunities or how they had gained new insights into creativity and were now observing children's engagement more closely. Several remarked on developing greater awareness of the power of stories beyond simply reading texts:

> *It really made me think, especially in terms of storytelling and how I share stories with children.*
> *He showed us different ways in which stories can be told and how to expand on this.*
> *It was amazing how K [one of the creative practitioners] could just spin a story out of an object.*

A telling fact is that increased understanding has not been restricted to those practitioners undergoing training and taking part on the programme but has spread throughout their settings - it has impacted on Jigsaw's rearrangement of the nursery, incorporating signs that children can recognise and 'read'; staff from In2Play were pleased that the children's excitement made their colleagues interested to learn more and were keen to support this. Participants have shared knowledge and insights in staff meetings, developed displays about language and literacy and have involved colleagues in extension activities arising from the project. Four nurseries (50%) reported increased use of environmental print – '*we hadn't thought much*

about it for raising literacy so now we're sharing practice at preschool'; they have explained the value of this to other practitioners and modelled ways to integrate environmental print in daily routines. Most were also keen to find ways that the benefits they saw in the programme could be spread beyond those children directly involved, for instance Christchurch were able to involve other staff and children in making maps, an activity they had developed for their home visits. Artemis took photos of artwork produced at the Jerwood to use as a basis for work in the setting and also developed a scavenger hunt for other parents to use at the museum.

EY educators identified the impact that working with creative practitioners had had on their practice, their thinking and their recognition of potential. Beyond the inspiration that many identified from training and planning with artists, it is clear that the synergy brought about by working together towards the same goal *'changed the mix'* as one nursery noted. All practitioners interviewed[24] acknowledged in some way how their own professional knowledge and approach had been complemented by an alternative perspective on planning, execution and evaluation. Christchurch Nursery summed this up well:

'It's the experience they have in using creativity. When I went to DWP I was struggling with the Chicago stuff – not sure how to get parents to engage, never mind the children! A's experience– she talked about fabric and textures... so we could start to think of a treasure hunt and take objects that connected with the art work... you start to find your way in... If she hadn't been there we wouldn't have known where to start. Where she had creative focus we had a teaching focus and her experience, things she'd done before, and her resources were really valuable. And she was confident in using those things – we had 3 days training but it's still a hard transition and it helped embed the training having that person with you.'

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24 Changes of staff at one setting meant that not all those who began the project could be interviewed

Relationships with parents

What EY practitioners most identified and seemed to value was the effect of the project on relationships with parents. Working in partnership with parents is central to the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) but engaging parents in their child's learning can be challenging. However it is this engagement which has the greatest impact on children's learning dispositions and outcomes[25] so is crucial in narrowing the achievement gap. All settings appreciated how the project had established good working relationships with parents and many practitioners rated this as the most helpful and enjoyable aspect of the programme:

Parents have become more open and talkative with staff and more confident to express themselves.

They're more relaxed with us, we know them more now.

Parents are able see us in a different light instead of just 'Good morning, how are you? Got your lunchbox?'

One particular parent never really spoke to me before but now she's chatty and communicates on a whole different level.

Many particularly associated this better communication with the home visits which are an integral part of the REAL approach:

Parents have been able to share concerns and ask questions freely - and the home visits especially provided a space for this to happen.

The most enjoyable part of this process has been the home visits. They've provided an opportunity for us to plan activities adapted for each individual child and to build relationships with the families in their own homes, where they are most comfortable.

We've found the home visits most beneficial, building trust with parents … we hope to continue with home visits and are taking on 2 apprentices to free up staff time for this.

Although 100% of the practitioners and settings noted how the project impacted positively on relationships with parents this was not universally achieved by means of home visits. A few settings struggled with this aspect, either because the need to ensure appropriate staffing ratios in the nursery did not permit practitioners taking time out for home visits or else due to working parents' circumstances. One setting suggested that whilst parents may be sufficiently committed to take a day off work to accompany their child on a visit, they had more difficulty justifying doing so for a 45-minute home visit.

Where home visits did take place they were appreciated by parents too. One mother reported: *'I think the home visit was such a fantastic idea, B loved it and has enjoyed telling everyone that her teachers come to*

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25   Taggart, B *et a*l. (2015) *Effective pre-school, primary and secondary education project (EPPSE 3-16+)*.

her house.' Knowing a child well is fundamental to establishing the good relationships with parents that support better outcomes for children[26] Coming out of the nursery environment and seeing parents and children interacting elsewhere, both in cultural spaces and the home, supported this greater knowledge of individuals. As one nursery put it – *'We discovered more about those children than we'd ever imagined.'*

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26 http://www.keap.org.uk/documents/eyfs_eff_prac_parent_partner.pdf

- Parents have recognised the importance of their role in supporting their children's learning; they are engaging in early literacy practices in the home, such as sharing stories and mark-making, on a regular basis.

- Children have made significant progress across all areas of language and early literacy.

- Parents are making frequent use of their local libraries and sharing books with their children which has benefits across the whole family. The project enabled libraries to connect with families they would not otherwise meet.

- EY practitioners are significantly more knowledgable and confident in supporting early literacy and this is having a positive impact on practice in their settings.

- Cultural and social capital has been increased for vulnerable families, giving them confidence to explore cultural venues and local opportunities, integrating them into the local community and supporting peer networks for parents at risk of social isolation.

- Artists contributed significant additional value to the project, providing richer learning opportunities and new perspectives and giving confidence to EY practitioners and parents.

- Partnerships between EY settings, artists and representatives from cultural venues has allowed knowledge to be shared and has increased understanding for all parties; joint training was integral to this in the initial stages.

Conclusion

Educational disadvantage is an accident of birth; it is not about ability but about opportunity. The achievement gap sets in early so interventions to ameliorate disadvantage are most helpfully aimed at young children and their families. The long-term outcomes of REAL Creative - for children as they move through the education system, and on parents bringing up families - cannot be established for some years, nonetheless evaluation of the data suggests the project has been successful in enabling parents to engage with their children to support developing literacy. The full impact will emerge as children start school more able to benefit from future learning opportunities.

Children across the cohort made substantial progress in all areas of communication: listening and attention; talking; understanding and social communication. This was true of all the children, including those whose development along the typical trajectory cannot be assumed, such as EAL children and those with identified special needs. Perhaps more importantly, parents' attitudes altered and their ability to recognise and act on learning opportunities increased significantly, indicating the probability of long-term improvement in the HLE. It is recognised that low-income parents are apt to underestimate the impact they have on their child's cognitive development and learning and therefore may be less inclined to engage in the sort of activities that can support their children's language development[27]. By providing parents with tools and strategies the project modified this tendency, enabling parents to recognise the importance of conversational interaction and of books and stories, the two key factors for developing literacy. In addition the project has made a considerable difference to the lives of vulnerable families, increasing social and cultural capital.

Taken altogether the evidence demonstrates wider impact beyond the target group of children, not only in the ripple effect on siblings in the home but also supporting professional development within EY settings. Working alongside artists significantly increased practitioners' understanding and confidence in providing activities and experiences to promote early literacy - this will prolong and amplify the effect of the project. It has also offered opportunities to develop closer and more productive relationships with families. In addition, representatives of cultural venues reported that the project enabled them to reach families they would never usually come in contact with and would affect how they think about programmes in the future. The multi-agency nature of the programme has strengthened local networks, increasing family access to resources and improving other cultural conditions that shape children's well-being.

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27 Education Policy Institute (2018) *Key drivers of the disadvantage gap: literature review*.

The project's success in promoting early literacy is in line with the proven effectiveness of the original Making it REAL programmes[28] but what makes REAL Creative distinctive is the additional element of a creative approach. This has provided a number of benefits, both practical and educational. From a pragmatic perspective, outings to cultural venues attracted the involvement of families who may be less inclined to take part in explicitly literacy-focused activities (see, for example, case study 1, p23). Although further enquiry would be necessary to ascertain the degree of fathers' involvement, it is conceivable that, as fathers tend to be less involved in providing literacy opportunities than mothers[29], the approach encouraged their participation. A telling example is a father who now regularly takes his daughter to the beach where they make collages of found objects, recording their creations in a scrap book. Men are commonly found to be more uncertain about their role in their children's learning though it has been established that fathers' encouragement positively affects the child's academic performance, leading to higher achievement, better school attendance and fewer behavioural problems[30]. This is particularly the case with children from disadvantaged backgrounds and is an aspect of the project that warrants further investigation[31].

The other benefit of the creative element in this early literacy project is that it took advantage of children's naturally playful and exploratory dispositions. Formal academic models, being meaningless to young children, are ineffectual whereas open-ended investigation promotes self-esteem as there are no wrong answers. Discovery of novel and interesting artefacts, in the museum and galleries for instance, introduced children to new vocabulary whilst joint attention between parent and child provided a focus for more extensive verbal interaction. At the same time specific skills were developed. For instance, examining art works through binoculars they had made helped children to focus on detail; this develops visual discrimination, essential for letter identification, so is an important foundation for reading. Similarly creating their own artworks with objects and materials built on children's natural modes of representation, enabling them to record their own ideas and narratives. This supports children's cognitive development and provides a strong basis for later written communication.

An additional aspect of the REAL Creative project was that all participants - parents, practitioners and particularly the children - evidently found the project exciting and stimulating. Whilst enthusiasm might be seen as simply a happy by-product, I would suggest that it is more than this; as a spin-off of the creative

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28   Early Intervention Foundation Guidebook (2017)
29   Morgan et al. (2009), Fathers' involvement in young children's literacy development: implications for family literacy programmes. *British Educational Research Journal*.
30   Clark, C (2009) *Why fathers matter to their children's literacy*. National Literacy Trust.
31   ' Father' as used here refers to biological fathers, father-figures and other significant male caregivers or role models.

approach it was an important element in ensuring full engagement and therefore greater impact. The involvement of artists was central in this regard, helping to connect EY settings and cultural venues in ways outside everyday routines.
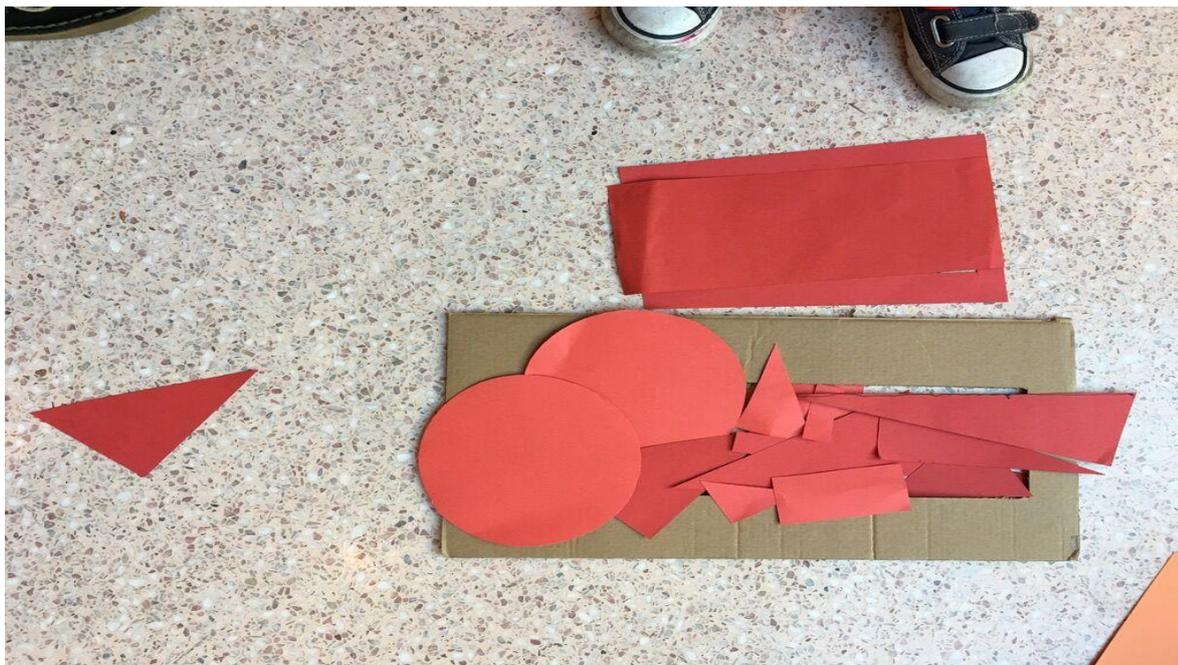
REAL Creative may have had additional benefits besides its impact on early literacy. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this evaluation, it is likely that this approach simultaneously supports children's numeracy and could therefore be double-pronged. The Early Years Foundation Stage requires that:

Children use everyday language to talk about size, weight, capacity, position, distance, time and money, to compare quantities and objects and to solve problems. They recognise, create and describe patterns. They explore characteristics of everyday objects and shapes and use mathematical language to describe them[32].

Many of these expectations would have been supported as an indirect effect of the project. What is more, any effect would be long-reaching because verbal ability continues to impact on mathematical progress throughout schooling[33] The potential of the programme to support emergent numeracy is another aspect that merits further investigation.

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32   EYFS Statutory Framework, https://www.gov.uk/early-years-foundation-stage

33   Palmer, M (2019) The Vital Importance of Vocabulary in Maths.
        https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/guest-blog-the-vital-importance-of-vocabulary-in-maths/

The lifelong consequences of early disadvantage points to a need for strategic investment in early childhood, but for this to be truly effective more is required than financial input and localised initiatives may remain on a small scale without more widespread awareness. REAL Creative has pioneered a new approach to supporting family literacy and this project potentially has national significance; it also provides a model which could be adapted for other contexts. The APPG urges the sharing of best practice across the country so that others may learn from it[34]. As they acknowledge, there are limited mechanisms for this as yet, but further dissemination of the findings from the project could make for extended awareness of this unique initiative and thereby multiply its effects.

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34   Closing the regional attainment gap. https://www.suttontrust.com/research-paper/appg-social-mobility-closing-the-regional-attainment-gap/

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Methodology

A range of methods were employed to monitor and measure progress towards anticipated outcomes and impact. Summative data was collected before and after the project to compare children's starting and end points. This was carried out by means of NCB forms, developed for evaluating REAL projects and adapted for local use by Culture Shift. These provided quantitative measures of the HLE as well as information on children's progress in relation to the key literacy strands for REAL: oral language, love of books, mark-making and environmental print. NCB evaluation forms were supplemented by ESCC Language Monitoring Checkers which provided more detailed information on the four aspects of language and communication related to children's age and expected stage of development. Both forms were completed by both EY practitioners and parents to give a more rounded picture and increase their validity as it is possible that parents may under- or over-report their level of involvement. As statistical data inevitably obscures the particularity of individual experience, EY settings were also asked to supply pen portraits of two of their chosen children. A proforma was provided to support this but the request delayed until the end of the project to ensure no child would be singled out for particular focus.

Additional quantitative before and after data was collected by questionnaires for EY practitioners. These were designed to measure knowledge and understanding of both early literacy and supporting creativity. Opportunities for reflection were built into the project from the start - two network meetings, bringing together all practitioners and artists, were held at the mid and end point and smaller focus groups enabled sharing of experiences. Semi-structured interviews were held with practitioners from 6 out of the 8 settings; changes in personnel and staff pressures precluded all settings being available for interview, reflecting the reality of the EY sector.

Observation of three of the creative visits (one each at DWP, HMAG and Jerwood) generated an overall impression of the events and levels of individual participation. These occasions, along with the final celebration event, were an opportunity for informal discussions with parents. Observations of home visits would not have been appropriate, however one nursery was visited and feedback gained from a small focus group of parents (5 of the 6 families involved in the project).

The role of qualitative research must not be underestimated in terms of the insights it provides for programme delivery as well as triangulation of quantitative findings. Observation, interviews (including informal interviews with a couple of the artists) and focus groups supplemented statistical data and took account of the perspectives of all participants; in addition it enabled capture of more nebulous effects, such as the development of social and cultural capital.

Dr Rory McDowall Clark originally trained as a nursery and primary teacher in Brighton and has wide experience in broader social contexts, including community development with charities, voluntary organisations and outreach youth work. Rory worked as an educational consultant for Cheltenham Borough Council and Gloucestershire County Council before taking up a post in the Centre for Early Childhood at the University of Worcester, where she was a senior lecturer for more than fifteen years. Amongst other publications, Rory has written *Childhood in Society* (now in its fourth edition), published by Sage; *Exploring the Contexts for Learning: Challenging the school readiness agenda*, published by Routledge; and *Reconceptualising Leadership in the Early Years* (with Janet Murray), published by Open University Press.

Culture Shift is a not-for-profit arts education organisation with an interest in creativity in early years education. The focus for much of the work has been the role that artists and arts organisations can play in fostering creative opportunities in early years. Between 2005-2011, the team worked with a number of Children's Centres in East and West Sussex as part of the Creative Partnerships programme. This then developed into a pan Sussex programme, Open Sesame (2010-2016), delivered with artists' collective Octopus Inc, the University of Brighton and a number of cultural partners. That work is the focus for a chapter by Clare Halstead in *Places for Two Year Olds in the Early Years*, published by Routledge.