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# Co-production of family literacy projects to enhance early literacy development

Cathy Nutbrown, Julia Bishop and Helen Wheeler

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – *The purpose of this paper is to report on how early years practitioners worked with the ORIM Framework to support work with parents to promote early literacy experiences.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *Co-produced Knowledge Exchange (KE) was used to develop and evaluate work with parents to facilitate their young children's literacy. Information was gathered in discussion groups, interviews with parents and practitioners and feedback from all the parties involved.*

**Findings** – *Practitioners and families engaged with each other in the further development of an established literacy programme, and families demonstrated "ownership" of the co-produced knowledge after the end of the project.*

**Research limitations/implications** – *Project design in co-produced research and KE is necessarily flexible. The focus is on practitioners' knowledge and ownership of the process, sharing knowledge with parents and enhancing children's experiences.*

**Practical implications** – *Practices that can enhance parental engagement in their children's early literacy are varied and multiple and ORIM can be used flexibly to plan, develop and evaluate innovative and community – (and family –) specific practices.*

**Social implications** – *Where parents have more knowledge of children's early literacy development they are in a better position to support them; for learning communities there are implications in terms of future development of work with families to support early literacy development.*

**Originality/value** – *This paper contributes an original approach to the co-production of research with early years practitioners. It also identifies specific issues around the ethics of ownership in co-produced research.*

**Keywords** *Early Intervention, Knowledge Exchange, Parents, Co-production of knowledge, Early literacy development, Early years practitioners*

**Paper type** *Research paper*

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## Introduction

This paper discusses how practitioner knowledge, skills and confidence around family literacy can be enhanced through a co-produced Knowledge Exchange (KE) project. Family literacy in the context of this paper is defined as an initiative which regards parents' and children's literacy as inextricably linked, and through which adults have the opportunity (though not the requirement) to develop their literacy and learning as well as that of their children (Nutbrown *et al.*, 2005). The paper describes and discusses how a co-production model of KE was used to help practitioners to develop family literacy practices with parents of children under the age of five. It includes an overview of ORIM, an established family literacy framework (Hannon and Nutbrown, 1997), a discussion of a collaborative model of co-produced KE, and evaluation of the work done within the KE project by 20 practitioners in different parts of England, and concludes with a reflection on the usefulness of a co-production approach to KE work with practitioners and parents.

A framework for family literacy (Hannon and Nutbrown, 1997) was adapted to new communities of practice through co-produced research involving 20 practitioners around England. Taking a co-production approach to the methodology, the project developed and employed original approaches to method and methodology within a rigorous and collaborative evaluation design.

### Purpose and discourse in Early Intervention (EI)

A national conference hosted by the Early Intervention Foundation called Early Intervention: Right for Children, Better for the Economy was held in London on 12th February 2015. The clear message was that EI is essential to prevent later, serial and more costly intervention to resolve social difficulties, health, employment and levels of crime. With the main political parties signing up to endorse the importance of EI, the strong common message was that EI makes economic sense. With an emphasis on programmes and targeted support, little in this national conference or in the associated report on Spending on Late Intervention (Chowdry and Oppenheim, 2015), mentions how the importance of positive, well-crafted experiences for children and parents are important in and of themselves. Chowdry and Oppenheim (2015) point out that some £17 billion is spent annually in England and Wales on mental health problems, young people in care, unemployment, youth crime and other initiatives to address difficulties affecting children and young people. This arguably rests the case for spending early and casts EI as an effective cost saving measure; hence the conference banner “Right for Children: Better for the Economy”. However, seeing EI merely as a series of programmes targeted to address potential deficit is to miss the opportunity to embrace the importance of well-informed and confident practitioners working holistically with families.

Early work with families to prevent later difficulties is an international issue, of no less concern in the USA and Chile, for example, where provision for families is often seen to be a means of securing “social order and economic success [and] implying that children’s personal and social development are subjugated first to the society’s needs” (Galdames, 2011, p. 110). Whilst we concur with Lowenstein’s (2011) argument that “efforts to support children’s long-term success must extend beyond the Early Childhood Education (ECE) setting into elementary school”, we also suggest that it is work with parents to enhance what happens at home that is the real place of “intervention” for longer term gains in achievement. For Lowenstein (2011, p. 96) “The values that formed the basis for the creation of what can be called EI programmes reflect the belief that high-quality ECE programmes can compensate for suboptimal home environments”, thus potentially leading to sustained gains in development. Some argue that EI programmes for low-income children should be provided so as to bring about higher returns (Cunha and Heckman, 2007; Heckman, 2006). The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project (Sylva *et al.*, 2004) concluded that the most effective settings shared information with parents about their children’s learning and encouraged parents’ involvement in their children’s learning and development – in the setting and at home – with more work required of staff in disadvantaged areas to encourage parental engagement and support home learning.

Vandenbroeck (2014) points to the increasing influence of neuroscience as a main foundation for early childhood policies (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007; Shonkoff, 2011; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000), the argument being that it is cheaper (as well as more developmentally effective) to intervene early when the brain is at its most plastic, thus making savings later on welfare funding, delinquency and unemployment benefits, (Barnett, 2011). Vandenbroeck (2014, p. 2) argues that:

We need to be aware that each time we use the economic argument to advocate for investments in early childhood education, we implicitly or explicitly also argue that the economic argument is the one that matters most. And consequently, by doing so, we reaffirm that the meaning of early childhood education is not to be found in early childhood, but in the integration in the future labour force of a meritocratic society. The danger is then that the inherently social nature of ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care), as well as the care in “care and education” are pushed to the background.

We believe that the important contribution of the work reported in this paper is the foregrounding of collaboration. In the work reported here we did not “intervene” in families, nor work “on” them as passive subjects, but embraced them as key and valued partners in enhancing their children’s learning through co-produced knowledge.

## Methodological approaches and issues

### *Co-produced Knowledge Exchange*

An early form of co-production is thought to have been developed in town planning work in 1960s America where members of the community were encouraged to co-produce the services they needed. Arnstein (1969), who is credited with leading work on Citizenship Participation, sets out eight levels of participation: *Manipulation, Therapy, Informing, Consultation, Placation, Partnership, Delegated Power, Citizen Control*. In many senses these are self-explanatory and it is clear that the bottom rungs of Arnstein's ladder, *manipulation* and *therapy* are non-participative approaches, with the top rungs *Delegated Power* and *Citizen Control* being the states where most collaboration and co-production takes place. Although Arnstein's model cannot be fully translated to the field of educational research, some lessons around coproducing knowledge can be drawn, especially where Participatory Action Research is used with practitioners and parents.

The resurgence of interest manifest in Action Research and Co-Inquiry Action Research (Armstrong and Banks, 2011) provides meaningful tools and strategies for the design and development of research with/in communities. According to Pain *et al.* (2011, p. 2):

Participatory Action Research is collaborative research, education and action used to gather information to use for change on social or environmental issues. It involves people who are concerned about or affected by an issue taking a leading role in producing and using knowledge about it.

Much as Lawrence Stenhouse in the 1970s called for teachers to carry out their own classroom research (Stenhouse, 1975), current developments in co-produced research seek to draw together (and develop new) democratic models of participation. Such collaboration can lead to collective development of new understandings and bring about change – with and for those involved. Such work frequently draws on constructs from Communities of Practices theory (Wenger, 1998; Hart and Wolff, 2006), adapted to promote collaborative practices to strengthen and develop co-produced community research. Describing the potential of co-produced research in the context of Higher Education KE, Pahl (2014) suggests that such moves have led to a more democratic approach to research with a focus on “creating equitable community-university partnerships” as well as “methodological and theoretical challenges”.

Finally, we wish to claim as axiomatic in this work the principle that it is essential not to “do unto” families but rather to work collaboratively with them, and we attach this statement as not merely characteristic but a *sine qua non* of co-produced, community-based work with families: schools, pre-schools, teachers and other early childhood educators have something distinct to offer families and families have something specific and no less distinctive to offer their children and to their schools, pre-schools, teachers and other early childhood educators.

### *The “Framework For Early Literacy Development with Parents (FELDP)” project*

The FELDP[1], built on project in previous early literacy development work with families (Nutbrown *et al.*, 2005; Morgan *et al.*, 2009; Hannon *et al.*, 2006) using a collaborative model of co-production. The ORIM Framework (Table I) was the organising concept of the FELDP project, which involved a nationally recruited group of 20 early years practitioners working in a range of contexts. Of the 20, 14 had no prior experience of ORIM and all had some prior experience of working with parents.

**Table I** The ORIM framework

		<i>Strands of early literacy development</i>			
		<i>Environmental print</i>	<i>Books</i>	<i>Early writing</i>	<i>Oral language</i>
Parents	Opportunities				
Can	Recognition				
Provide	Interaction				
	Model				

The ORIM Framework (Hannon and Nutbrown, 1997) was central to the KE project discussed in this paper. *ORIM* identifies four key roles for parents whereby they can provide *Opportunities, Recognition, Interaction* and a *Model* of literacy and distinguishes four key strands of early literacy: *environmental print*, made popular mainly by US research during the 1980s (Payton, 1984; Baghban, 1984; Schickedanz, 1990; Bissex 1980; Goodman *et al.*, 1978; Hiebert, 1981); *books and early reading* (Weinberger 1997; Lonigan *et al.*, 2000; Mol *et al.*, 2008; van Steensel *et al.*, 2011); *early writing* again studied by US researchers during the 1980s and taking the form of “emergent” writing (Goodman, 1980; Harste *et al.*, 1984; Ross and Brondy, 1987; Ferrerio and Teberosky, 1989) and particularly supported by the seminal studies of Sulzby and Teale (1988) with a small number of studies continuing to develop work in the field (Rowe and Neitzel, 2010) and finally, key aspects of *oral language* found to support the development of others aspects of literacy (Goswami and Bryant, 1990; Maclean *et al.*, 1987; Wells, 1987; Muter *et al.*, 2004; Justice *et al.*, 2005). Each of these four strands also incorporates digital, technological and multi-media practices that are now part of many young children’s literacy experiences (Marsh *et al.*, 2015; Yamada-Rice, 2014; Stephen and Plowman, 2014). Such experiences should support children’s literacy achievements in school and group settings throughout the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2012) and beyond.

Schools and pre-school centres have used the ORIM Framework systematically to plan practical work with parents, which supports and extends their literacy role with their children (Nutbrown *et al.*, 2005). The ESRC funded KE project reported here focused on practitioners adapting and adopting the ORIM Framework to develop work with families that they were working within a diverse range of communities around England. The project focused on how practitioners in early years settings could make meaningful use of the ORIM Framework to support their work with parents to promote early literacy experiences.

### ***Research methods and processes***

An important dimension to the project was to co-create an ongoing discussion, through joint working, group discussions and innovations of practitioners and researchers, in order to establish a democratic, two-way process of KE. The FELDP project involved a series of three residential events to facilitate the co-creation of inclusive sessions where the programme of work was mutually agreed between the research team and all project practitioners. The residential meetings provided a space for practitioners to appraise the ways in which they had used and adapted the ORIM Framework for work with children and families on literacy and other curriculum areas.

Processes included: some input on the original underpinning project, theory on early literacy development and the ORIM Framework, practitioner-led sessions, paired discussions, group work, practitioner presentations to the whole group, “writing spaces”, open-ended and flexible approaches to project progress, planning for future work and peer to peer critique and support.

The 20 project practitioners used and adapted the ORIM Framework to:

- extend their existing family literacy practices;
- initiate such practices, where this was new to them; and
- try the ideas in relation to areas of work other than literacy.

The evaluation of the FELDP project was twofold: first, work with parents on early literacy development, and second, practitioners’ views of the usefulness and effectiveness of ORIM in their projects. In order to evaluate the first aspect – work with parents on early literacy development – all sessions were documented by the practitioners who summarised their work in posters, slide presentations and leaflets which were added to the project web site[2]. These materials, created by the practitioners for other practitioners and for parents, were used together with post-project interviews with all practitioner participants to identify their views of the usefulness and effectiveness of ORIM in their projects. In individual face-to-face interviews practitioners were asked questions about their motivation, prior experience of ORIM, their learning, how they used and/or adapted ORIM, benefits of the Framework, any influence on their work with parents and their experience of being part of the project:

Why did you apply to join the project?

What prior experience, if any, of ORIM did you have?

(What) did you learn about theory, practice?

How do you think ORIM can be used?

(How) did you change and develop ORIM during the project?

What do you think are the benefits of ORIM, if any?

(How) has ORIM influenced your work with parents?

Can you sum up what working with ORIM and being on the project had meant to you?

Interviews were recorded, transcribed and checked by the practitioners. They were coded according to the following themes: motivation, prior experience of ORIM, practitioners' learning, uses and/or adaptation of ORIM, benefits of using ORIM, influences on practitioners' work with parents, practitioners' experiences of being part of the project.

### *Ethics and ownership*

As the exercise involved co-produced KE work, it was important from the outset to consider the ethics of collective ownership. This was discussed at length with project participants and it was agreed that participants and their settings would be acknowledged (unless they requested anonymity, though none did). Specific permissions were obtained from project participants and from the families they worked with to use information and images they provided. All documentation on the project web site which features project participants' work fully acknowledges their contribution and includes logos and individual and setting names, as decided by those practitioners and families. The success of the project depended on all involved sharing ideas and practice, with each other and then more widely. Work done by individual participants (and colleagues in their settings if others got involved) is fully acknowledged. Our starting point on ownership was that everyone who contributed should be recognised for their part in the project. The final report to the ESRC also listed project participants and their places of work. All participants commented on the report and received copies, and the materials they developed were placed on the project web site. All published work bears the name of the project and logos of the funders, the University of Sheffield and the National Children's Bureau alongside other logos of settings and local authorities wherever and whenever it is appropriate. Specific permissions were sought to use photographs, on the web site and in other forms of dissemination.

As part of the ethical review process the project was reviewed by the University of Sheffield Research Ethics Committee and the project abided by those codes of practice for research ethics and integrity. All involved gave informed consent and confirmed that they understood and were happy with the aims and workings of the project.

Whilst most researchers agree the importance of obtaining informed consent and issues of confidentiality, concerns that overzealous ethical governance procedures may lead to limited research where participants (including children) are categorised as "vulnerable" remain (Füredi, 2006; Hill, 2005; White, 2007). Some of the new metho-ethical challenges, faced by researchers (Nutbrown, 2011, p. 10) include the need to "trouble" over the "right" way to do justice to research participants and collaborators is the main task. Keeping the issues of ownership, power and participation centre stage throughout the research process is the responsibility of all researchers, never more so when it involves co-production of research.

## **Engaging with families to make a difference: outcomes of the Framework for Early Literacy Development with Parents project**

### *Work with parents on early literacy development*

The 20 practitioners worked in 14 settings or contexts, Table II summarises the types of settings, the focus of work and the issues and interests they sought to address. Nine settings had one representative each at the meetings, five had two and one setting had three representatives attend.

**Table II** Summary of the types of settings, the focus of the work and the issues and interests practitioners sought to address

Group type	Number of practitioners on the project	Age range of children	Literacy focus with parents	Type of activity	Specific issues and interests
Islamic pre-school	2	3-4	Reading	Workshops	Bilingualism
Primary school	1	4	Early writing	Home visits	Boys' literacy
Independent nursery school	2	2-5	Environmental print	Group event	Engaging parents
Primary school	1	4-5	Reading and environmental print	Workshops library visit	Bilingualism
State funded nursery school	2	3-4	Images as communication	Environmental walk, photographs by children	Using images
Private day care setting	1	0-5	Early writing and environmental print	Evening workshops	Enhanced parental engagement changes in children's attitudes
Community childcare centre	1	2-4	Early reading	Book loan scheme home visiting	Encouraging parents to borrow books Developing home visits
Primary school	2	3-5	Early writing	Home visits	Boys' literacy, Nursery/reception transition
LA consultants – Children's Centres	3	2	Play, Storytelling, Rhymes	Home visits, Provision of resources	Engaging families from black and minority ethnic groups, Enhancing practitioner skill
Children's Centre	1	2-5	Early writing, talk	Workshops, Saturday event	Bilingualism
Children's Centre	1	1-4	Toddlers' communication	Home visits	Parental engagement, Children's confidence and self-esteem
Home-based childcare	1	2-3	Environmental print	Print walk	Childminders' awareness
Travellers' education service	1	3-5	Oral language	Home visits	Travelling families
Pre-school group	1	2-4	Reading	Book loan scheme	Increasing books in the home

The ORIM Framework was adapted and adopted by practitioners to develop work with the families in their own learning communities:

- A Saturday morning event for 40 families at an independent pre-school promoted the concept of environmental print. Parent: "I realised how we can use items all around us for learning". Practitioner: "Parents now see more opportunities to develop language and literacy as part of everyday life, and how to model the use of environmental print in meaningful daily contexts".
- Two Primary Schools used ORIM on home visits. Parents said information about early writing development helped them to recognise achievement.
- Reading sessions for bilingual parents in a primary school focused on home learning. Children have developed a keen interest in books; parents now use the library and report improvements in children's reading vocabulary and confidence.
- A Nursery School used ORIM to focus on images in homes and neighbourhoods. Parents said children showed more interest in images and ORIM helped them to encourage their child's understanding of images.
- A Community Childcare Centre introduced a book loan scheme. Despite initial reluctance, many families now borrow books.
- Early *Writing Bags* developed by a Children's Centre are popular with some bilingual families. A Saturday *Family Writing* event was well attended.
- A Children's Centre supported toddlers' language development through home visiting, resulting in improved parents reporting improved parent/child bonding. Practitioners reported enhanced toddler communication, improved toddler behaviour and noted increased parental confidence and self-esteem.

- A group of Childminders used aspects of ORIM in planning and shared with parents.
- A Travellers' Education Service developed initiatives around storytelling and talk.

Of the 14 practitioner projects summarised in Table II, space permits the inclusion of just two here. These two examples have been selected to show variety in the settings and the different uses of ORIM to work with parents. Example 1, written by the pre-school teacher, illustrates work on early writing and environmental print and Example 2, jointly written by the pre-school leader and the Local Authority Early Years Consultant, focuses on books and reading.

### **Example 1 *Early Writing and Environmental Print***

*Katie Ward Holmsdale Manor Nursery, Ibstock, Leicestershire*

#### **Context**

Holmsdale Manor Nursery is a private day care setting for babies through to pre-school children. We are an eco-nursery with an emphasis on the use of natural materials and outdoor experiences including Forest School. We have a history of good parental involvement at numerous events during the year. These range from training sessions for parents to Easter Egg Hunts and our annual "Party in the Woods". I am the pre-school teacher and Forest School leader at the setting.

#### **Evening Workshops for Parents**

Using the ORIM framework I held two evening workshops looking at ways in which parents could provide: *opportunities, recognition, interactions* and *modelling* in relation to *early writing* and to *environmental print*. Twenty-five per cent of parents attended each workshop.

At an *Early Writing Workshop* parents watched a PowerPoint slide show of early writing development. We used resources from the project web site and had time for discussion. Each family took a pack of early writing resources to use at home. A few days later, one child brought his letter to Santa, written at home using the materials we had provided, to show us what he had done at home.

In an *Environmental Print Workshop* we made a display of photos and examples of print in the community, which we had taken during a print walk with the children before the workshop. Parents had an interesting discussion about using print when out and about.

#### **Future work**

Owing to the success of these workshops, we have incorporated this work into our annual planning. We intend to hold four workshops each year in future, one on each of the four strands of literacy, for the parents whose children attend the full-time pre-school. We will also involve the team leader of the sessional pre-school to develop a suitable model for the parents who are more likely to attend events during the day.

#### **Impact**

The impacts of the ORIM framework in our setting have included:

*Excellent feedback from parents, who are keen to attend future sessions,*

*Our Ofsted report, mentioned workshops and our involvement in the REAL project contributing to our result of "outstanding" in all areas,*

*Increased parental involvement in children's literacy,*

*Positive changes in children's attitudes towards developing literacy skills, parents bringing in or emailing examples and photographs of early writing and use of environmental print at home, which we can include in learning journeys,*

*Parents making the project their own, sharing their own ideas such as packaging jigsaws and 'A-Z of environmental print' scrapbooks.*



### **Example 2 Bilingual Parents as “Recognisers” of Readerly Behaviours**

*Zhora Dabhad Blenheim Pre-School and Kay Davies, Dewsbury Kirklees LEA*

#### **Context**

Kirklees LEA and Blenheim Pre-School in Dewsbury worked in partnership to explore how the ORIM Framework could promote ‘readerly behaviours’ in 3- and 4-year-old bilingual children. The challenge was to engage every family in the setting to:

**recognise** what early “readerly behaviours” looked like in the setting *and* in the home.

**commit** to regularly supporting their child at home with language and reading and to share this back in the setting.

Some parents were concerned:

*I don't have the time to read with my child, so I worry.*

*I have a lot of children and don't feel that I am giving my children the chances they need.*

#### **Process**

The ORIM Framework informed our thinking.

**Opportunities:** The parents were invited to a literacy and play event where practitioners interacted with them and the children around “readerly behaviours”.

**Recognition:** “WOW!” cards identified positive “small steps” in reading at an appropriate developmental level.

- Talking about stories.
- Talking about pictures.
- Holding the book/turning pages.

**Interacting and Modelling** Parents and practitioners jointly noted children’s WOW moments. One example was “*Huzaifah is great at discussing his story book, he uses words to point out characters in the story. Well Done*”.

Parents were then asked to do this at home with one parent noting “*At home Huzaifah uses his books to recognise lots of animals*”.

#### **Engagement**

Through the “recognising together” process practitioners and parents were co-constructing a dialogue about each child’s learning. This process also identified which families needed extra support for early intervention and special strategies have been put in place to keep up parental engagement.

#### **Evaluation: Growing recognition between the home and the setting**

The ORIM framework made a difference to our approach because the *Recognition* stage ensured that there was dialogue with families – their ideas and concerns were taken seriously and “shaped” the interactions. All families borrowed books to read with their children at home.

These examples show how practitioners in two contrasting pre-school contexts used the ORIM Framework to develop work with parents. Furthermore, the reach of the FELDP project was considerable, with the 20 project practitioners sharing their work with some 300 other early childhood practitioners and also disseminating their practice in a series of eight articles on a popular practitioners’ magazine[3]. An estimated total of 6,000 families in different parts of the country came within the reach of the project.

### *Practitioners' views of the usefulness and effectiveness of ORIM in their projects*

Practitioners reported that they used the ORIM Framework to engage parents in enhancing their own children's literacy experiences. However, we need to consider whether this particular framework was the influential factor or whether such engagement could have happened without ORIM. To ascertain practitioners' perspectives on ORIM we drew on their work, documentation of our meetings and individual interviews. When interviewed, all practitioners said they continued to use ORIM in various ways: ORIM incorporated into a school strategic plan for family learning, literacy home visits using ORIM to support home-school transition, regular family literacy workshops, adapting ORIM for two-year-olds, whole team development to promote family involvement, working in different languages and extend ORIM to environmental artwork, maths and play.

Asked about their motivations for working with ORIM practitioners spoke mainly about enhancing children's literacy said:

Home visiting wasn't happening [at the Children's Centre] at all and I knew from experience home visits were a really good way of building up relationships with families (Children's Centre Teacher).

Making a difference for children's learning (Preschool teacher).

We've got a lot of children that come into Foundation 1 with language and literacy very below then national average and [who] have a lot of delay in those areas (Teaching Assistant).

Some also were attracted by the opportunity to engage in research and be part of a group with a shared focus:

The University team have an excellent record of really thinking deeply about disadvantaged, hard-to-reach parents and families and it was the challenge of wanting to learn and do some action research (LA consultant).

I was interested in the ORIM Framework and using that in home visiting. I wanted to be part of a network of people being supported through home visiting (Children's Centre Teacher).

Others talked about their own learning and the importance of being part of a group:

To see the broad spectrum of ways it can be used with parents was the big thing that I've really enjoyed (Preschool Co-ordinator).

The parents taught us so much (LA consultant).

It was just the sharing of ideas and information and how everybody had a different spin on the content and the vastness of the ideas that were coming round (Reception class teacher).

It's been a lovely community of learners. I've learnt things from the model and the theory and I've also learnt a lot along the way from the stories and ideas that people have brought (Nursery nurse, family learning coordinator).

In terms of ORIM's influence on work with parents, practitioners felt that ORIM had something in particular to offer their work with families:

It's helped me to think about it more deeply (Reception teacher).

(ORIM was useful in) Home visiting parents of children who had already started school and engaging parents of children who have already started school (Teaching assistant).

Anything now that I want to do, I feedback with the parents. I'll always look at the ORIM framework first (Foundation Stage Teacher).

Reflecting on the processes of co-production overall practitioners expressed positive views about learning from parents:

It's not just about you telling or you setting an agenda and there are surprises with your work with parents, that you need to unpick not dismiss.

It has increased my awareness of working with parents. It has given me a huge background to work from (Traveller Education Worker).

It's looking at it from the point of view of parents [...] what do parents need to know to help their children? (Preschool teacher).

Finally, there was a sense of renewed emphasis on the importance of relationships in work with parents and awareness of their perspectives:

Talking through different opportunities they can provide to their children and it builds a good relationship (Childminder coordinator).

It has enhanced relationships between practitioners and parents AND between parents (Nursery assistant).

It blurs the professional/parent boundaries [...] in very positive ways (Early Years Practitioner).

As the practitioners' words illustrate, there was a strong feeling that they themselves had learned as well as there being a change in practice to support parents in enhancing their children's literacy experiences. The project overall was an important, in some ways unique, professional development experience for the practitioners that might not have been predicted from the outset.

### **Conclusions: the usefulness of a co-production approach to Knowledge Exchange work with practitioners and parents on early literacy development**

This paper has shown how a co-production model of KE was used to develop family literacy practices that enhanced both parental engagement and early literacy achievement. The key elements of a co-production approach to such KE work are

#### *Working with parents to enhance children's early literacy experiences*

All practitioners developed their own early literacy initiatives with parents in their communities and settings. Their individual projects indicated that they used the ORIM Framework flexibly to enhance early literacy work with parents through:

- organising events and workshops at times to maximise family engagement – including Saturdays and evenings;
- developing home visiting as a way of working with parents individually;
- developing work with bi- and pluri-lingual families;
- maximising use of environmental print in homes and communities;
- developing and encourage families to use book loan schemes;
- providing writing resources for children to use at home;
- supporting toddlers' language development; and
- working with and through a range of practitioners including: teachers, childminders, classroom assistants, nursery officers and pre-school volunteers.

As noted earlier, there are examples of positive changes in children's attitudes towards developing literacy skills and parents identified examples of their children's early writing and use of environmental print at home. They also developed their own initiatives by making jigsaws and "A-Z environmental print" scrapbooks using household packaging. Such developments demonstrate a potential for the improvement of children's outcomes if the framework is more widely applied.

These various approaches, stemming from mutual engagement through the ORIM Framework, were perceived by the practitioners to bring about positive change in children's early literacy experiences at home and some accounts of their work indicate this to be the case with individual children engaging in more literacy activities and showing pleasure in doing so. In their professional judgement they identified changes in children's engagement, enjoyment and skills.

Finally, Nutbrown *et al.* (2005)[4] showed in an original randomised control trial, that practitioner and parent engagement through ORIM could be borne out by longer-term effects as assessed by school outcomes. There is the potential, possibly using existing data sets such as the National Pupil Database, to track pupil achievement. Thus, ORIM could be embedded as a powerful tool in a variety of contexts, and future research could seek further to establish this link. Implications for policy include: a commitment to resourcing teacher/practitioners time for working with parents in small groups and on a one-to-one basis, ongoing training for professionals working with parents and an appreciation in policy of the importance of the home, family and the power of the home literacy environment for children's learning.

### *Developing practitioners' views on the uses of ORIM*

All practitioners learned about, engaged with and adapted the ORIM Framework. Follow-up interviews with practitioners indicated that they found ORIM to be: a simple tool to explain and to use; powerful in its impact on family literacy, adaptable for use with parents and other carers (e.g. childminders), adaptable to different types of early years settings (schools, Children's Centres, nurseries, homes), adaptable for use in relation to literacy, images and play and particularly meaningful for work with bilingual families and for use in contexts of cultural diversity.

### *Making explicit the processes and emerging outcomes in terms of*

*Planning and evaluation.* The ORIM Framework was described as offering structure and direction. As one practitioner put it: "One of the great things about it [ORIM] is that it has a great deal of flexibility. It's sort of open-ended so it can be used at a level that falls within what your interest is and the level of what you're working".

*Refreshing and supporting practice.* ORIM was also used as an aide memoir which helped to identify gaps and extend practice, being described as: "a simple way to approach a challenge".

*Communication.* Many practitioners said that ORIM made sense, describing it as: "A tool for working co-constructively with parents"; "Really useful for explaining to parents that everything can be a learning opportunity"; "Making parents more aware of what they are able to do and what they're capable of doing makes a real big difference to the way children's literacy develops".

*Engagement.* The Framework supported practitioners in developing practices that were attractive to and engaged all parents; as one summed up: "I couldn't believe how much progress came out of it for the children".

### **A co-production approach to Knowledge Exchange**

This paper has demonstrated the use of a co-production approach to KE to first, work with parents on early literacy development and second, understand practitioners' views of the usefulness and effectiveness of the ORIM Framework in their projects. Through a co-production approach, the ethos and metho-ethical conduct (Nutbrown, 2011) of the project involved collaboration and democratic approaches and decision making around innovative early literacy practices with parents of young children.

We suggest that EI can be collaborative, through the enhancement of parent support of their own children. It seems reasonable to conclude that the emphasis on collaboration, designed into the project from the outset, was largely responsible for the strength of feeling about the usefulness of the work done by practitioners in their own projects. Practitioners and parents engaged meaningfully with ORIM as a tool to support and evaluate EI in children's early literacy development.

#### **Implications for policy and practice**

- Importance of the ORIM framework for family literacy work.
- Critique of current EI purposes and approached.
- Further support and opportunities for practitioners to work with families.

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## Notes

1. ESRC: RES: 189-25-0219 [www.real-online.group.shef.ac.uk/framework.html](http://www.real-online.group.shef.ac.uk/framework.html)
2. [www.real-online.group.shef.ac.uk/projectresources.html](http://www.real-online.group.shef.ac.uk/projectresources.html)
3. The Strands of Literacy – published in *Teach Nursery* January 2013–December 2013, available at: [www.real-online.group.shef.ac.uk/the-strands-of-literacy.html](http://www.real-online.group.shef.ac.uk/the-strands-of-literacy.html)
4. see also [www.realonline.group.shef.ac.uk/docs/REAL%20EFFECTS%20POSTER%20FINAL%20with%20copyright.pdf](http://www.realonline.group.shef.ac.uk/docs/REAL%20EFFECTS%20POSTER%20FINAL%20with%20copyright.pdf)

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### Further reading

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