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# **Families' roles in children's literacy in the UK throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the changing roles of families in children's developing literacy in the UK in the last century. It discusses how during this time understandings of reading and writing have been evolved into the more nuanced notion of *literacy*. Further, acknowledging changes in written communication practices, and shifting attitudes to reading and writing, the paper sketches how families have always played some part in the literacy of younger generations; though reading was frequently integral to the lives of many families throughout the past century, we consider in particular the more recent enhancement of children's literacy through targeted family programmes. The paper considers policy implications for promoting young children's literacy through work with families.

## **Key words**

Literacy, reading, writing, family literacy, early childhood, young children.

## **Introduction: From reading and writing to literacy**

Working with families to promote children's early literacy development in the UK is a relatively recent practice, evolving over the last two decades (See Hannon (1995) for a discussion of this). Only in the last decade has policy acknowledged the home learning environment as important in developing young readers (Sylva et al., 2004, DfE, 2012). However, it is important to understand the historical roots of reading in families that have brought us to a point where family literacy is, at the least, not unusual.

Of course, in the hundred years that this paper spans, 'literacy' itself is a relatively recent term, and we adopt as a starting point the UNESCO definition of it as the:

*'...ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts' [which] 'involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society' (UNESCO, 2005: 27).*

To this we add Hannon's earlier recognition of literacy practices as part of the socio-cultural tools of community:

*Literacy is the ability to use written language to derive and convey meaning. In the teaching of literacy one generation equips the next with a powerful cultural tool. Written language enables members of a culture to communicate without meeting: to*

*express and explore their experience; to store information, ideas and knowledge; to extend their memory and thinking. (Hannon, op.cit. p.27)*

These fairly simple definitions show most policy definitions to be merely functional, and anticipate the idea of literacy as *social practice* (Barton and Hamilton, 1998).

### **The emergence of literacy**

‘Literacy’ is a relatively recent term, which first took on some shared currency in the UK as an umbrella term for reading and writing in the late twentieth century (however, interestingly, the first documented instance being in the United States in 1880). Whilst referred to as ‘English’ in the UK Education Reform Act 1988, which heralded the National Curriculum in English schools, ‘English’ became known in primary schools as ‘literacy’ with the advent of the National Literacy Strategy from 1997 (Jolliffe, 2004; Machin and McNally, 2008; DfE, 2011). For most UK national and local policies, literacy is broadly identifiable with a traditional notion of reading and writing skills (with more recent acknowledgment of oral expression as an important co-function). Other current uses, such as in the terms ‘*visual literacy*’, ‘*emotional literacy*’ and ‘*e-literacy*’, indicate a heterogeneity which enhances a broadly politicised conception of ‘competence’ or ‘aptitude’ as functions of enhanced identity.

It would be naïve to proceed with the assumption that literacy can be viewed as simply ‘the reading and writing of written language’. Although functional definitions of literacy may be useful, they have in recent years become overwritten with ideology, often politically saturated. Perspectives on literacy include the complexity of abilities to understand and use persuasively the dominant symbol systems of cultures. These abilities include, to varying degrees, the manipulation of media and electronic text, in addition to alphabetic and numerical systems, and they vary in different social and cultural contexts according to politicised needs, demands and forms of education (Merchant 2007; Lankshear and Knobel 2003).

Literacy practices, the way we use text to interact with others, are interwoven with individual and group identities and practices. Fast-developing digital technologies have prompted particular emphasis on new multimodal practices, such as use of graphic, spatial and pictorial elements, and evolving typographical conventions (Finnegan, 2002), in addition, literacy is now part of wider multimodal communication practices. Whilst ‘*literacy has always developed hand in hand with the technologies*’ (Bazerman, 2004) today’s technology explosion is effectively redefining literacy and its practise in homes, schools and communities.

There is an academic argument about the extent to which consideration of oral expression should contribute towards a definition of literacy. In a close examination of the historical development of literacy, Graff argues for the ‘*vital role of socio-historical context*’ and a belief that literacy is ‘*profoundly misunderstood*’ (Graff, 1987:17). Havelock (1976) makes a strong argument that because human beings have used speech for far longer than the graphics of alphabetic literacy, oracy should take precedence within any definition. Galbraith (1997) similarly argues that as recently as in late nineteenth century Britain ‘*there was no clean break between orality and literacy, but instead a mix of the two within individual life cycles and in families and communities*’ (Galbraith, 1997: 3). In some families and cultures oracy remains the dominant form of communication and in others writing is more strongly related

to the visual than the oral mode (Yamada-Rice, 2015) and awareness that systems of reading and writing vary between cultures carries implications for understanding home literacies in the multicultural context of the UK and indeed in cultures across the world. Thus, we need to remain mindful of the complexities of definition and of their relation to multiple lived realities. Though not easily captured in convenient conceptualisation, any exploration of the evolution of literacy highlights the need to recognise from the outset that terms such as ‘literacy’, ‘orality’, ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ must be viewed from the perspective of the social, political and economic context across time and space.

Two related assumptions impact on the ways in which literacy has been perceived and defined: firstly, *that concepts of literacy acquisition are often regarded as synonymous with concepts of education and schooling*. Etymologically there is a link between literacy in the sense of being ‘lettered’/able to read and write, and having access to education through ‘literature’, and hence being ‘literate’ in the broader sense of ‘learned’. This illustrates the cultural capital long associated with written text. Olsen (1975:149) argues that the ‘*currency of schools is words*’ and that schools are themselves ‘*shaped up for the requirements of literacy*’. Olsen goes on to state that literate people, such as educators, tend to place an unrealistic value on the role of literacy in society, stating that literacy ‘*is overvalued because of the very structure of formal schooling*’ (Olsen, 1975:149). Olsen is here suggesting that it is a mistake to assume that the ‘*values and pleasure*’ of literacy are so great that all individuals will want to at least seek a high level of literacy through the medium of education. This misconception is further recognised by Elasser and John-Steiner (1997: 361) who question the widely held belief that ‘*education in and of itself can transform both people’s sense of power and the existing social and economic hierarchies*’, and go on to claim that this view is naïve because ‘*educational intervention without social change is, in fact, ineffective*’.

A second assumption is that *the literacy skills acquired through education are in themselves agents of change*. Graff (1987: 18) cautions against the temptation to assign ‘*consequences*’, ‘*implications*’ or ‘*concomitants*’ to the acquisition of literacy, arguing that literacy in itself is simply ‘*a learned or acquired skill*’ and must therefore be viewed as a ‘*basis or foundation*’ rather than ‘*an end or conclusion*’ in its own right (Graff,1987: 19). Graff recognises that what follows from a *foundation* is possibly of greater concern, whilst Nutbrown argues that understanding the literacy capabilities of young children should be the basis for their future literacy development in the social context of the home: ‘*literacy processes and outcomes cannot be divorced from the range of social contexts in which they occur*’ (Nutbrown,1997: 27).

Literacy *practices* provide children with values, attitudes, motivations, ways of interacting, and perspectives, which together construct the primary identities that children acquire through early socialization (Gee, 2004) in their families and communities. So, a child becomes ‘*a person like us*’ (Gee, 2004: 23), a member of a particular family belonging to a particular socio-cultural group. For Gee ‘*people like us*’ do and value ‘*things like this*’ that involve specific types of language. This notion that ‘*people like us*’ do and value ‘*things like this*’ can mean that for some children the ‘*things they do*’ are extensive and wide ranging; for others they are restricted by poverty, ill-health and limited social and cultural capital. The challenge for education, then, is to discover and widely replicate those literacy experiences which enhance children’s capital.

## **Research questions and methodological approach**

## ***Research questions***

This paper is focused around the broad question: *What part have families played in the development of children's literacy in the UK throughout the twentieth century?* And more specifically we ask, first *How has reading been part of family life in the UK throughout the past century?* By understanding how reading has been rooted in the home, the longevity, everydayness and perhaps futures of home literacy practices can be appreciated and better understood. Secondly we consider *What part family literacy programmes have played in supporting young children's early literacy development?* With Early Intervention being an espoused policy of the UK Government (Cunha and Heckman, 2007; Heckman, 2006; Chowdry and Oppenheim, 2015) it is crucial to have a critical understanding of the contribution of programmes to enhanced family literacy.

The focus in this paper on literacy learning in families called for an historiography of literacy, for whilst current meanings and practices of literacy are often contested, they are also readily understood in the 'everyday'. The methodologies which have been used to define literacy practices – and the pedagogies which have been thus generated – have changed radically since the emergence of 'Enlightenment' values.

## ***Methodological approach***

### *The period of time studied*

We have drawn on select scholarship, policy and legislative literatures in a systematic search of the academic and 'grey' disseminations on reading, writing, literacy in families throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and focussed fairly exclusively on reports and studies from 1900 to 2000. At the margins of this period, we reached farther back in the case of UK education legislation so as better to understand the educational context at the start the given period; and we have drawn on studies published in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century where they shed light on our focus period. The salient features of this period include two world wars, extensive expansion in state education, varying economic conditions, and significant demographic changes in the UK.

### *Data bases and search criteria*

To find research and grey literature pertinent to our study, systematic searches were carried out through the Education Resource Information Centre (ERIC) and British Education Index (BEI) education databases; and through key journals in the field of early and family literacy for the period under study. As relevant research articles were identified, their citations were followed up to identify further sources. Key search terms included: reading, writing, literacy, family literacy, early literacy, parents, home literacy, family literacy programmes, and family literacy practices.

We also identified major educational legislation in England, to seek to understand values and priorities which lay behind the particular formulation of a policy within a specific socio-political context and more or less embedded conceptions of literacy. Examples include the 1944 Education Act (McCullough, 1997), or the serial raising of the school-leaving age during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries from 13 in 1880 to 18 by 2015.

### *Analytical processes*

Our analysis was governed by our research questions and sought to uncover understandings of family literacy *practices* over the last hundred years or so, a period spanning two world wars, extensive expansion in state education, varying economic conditions, and significant changes to the population of England. We were also seeking to understand the part that family literacy *programmes* had played in the later part of the period under study. We categorised the literature identified in our search according to three main themes: i) Reading, writing and ‘literacy’, ii) family literacy practices, iii) family literacy programmes. There was, of course some overlap with some sources referring to one, two or all three main themes. Other secondary themes, such as gender, social class, age, language, digital literacies and learning difficulties also emerged in our analysis but, whilst important, these are not the primary focus of this paper.

Having described our methodological approach the next section will identify and discuss the emergence, throughout a century, of written communication practices from reading and writing to *literacy*.

### **What part have families played in the development of children’s literacy in the UK throughout the last century?**

Learning to read and write has long been a key part of the UK education system. From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>1</sup> we can see that major educational legislation in England variously supported the development of reading and later ‘literacy’. Subsequent education legislation<sup>2</sup> had at its core a desire that children should learn to read (and later write). Such legislation discloses both the values and socio-economic priorities of their times, and thus point to the quotidian circumstances (of schooling, for example) which informed an attitude towards reading and writing ability in the UK by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Most significantly, however, education legislation in the past mostly failed to acknowledge the part that many families played in the development of young readers. Neither does it seem that literacy difficulties of parents was paid sufficient attention, as Moser (1999:23) argued, ‘when parents have trouble with reading, writing, or numeracy, it is more likely that their children will start with a similar disadvantage at school’. Vincent (2000:348) demonstrates the disconnect between education policy and home lives of many children:

*‘... recent research has demonstrated that the likelihood of a child benefiting from contemporary literacy campaigns is strongly influenced by the level of attainment in its family background’.*

The role of the family in children’s learning was highlighted in the 1980s when parents’ roles in their children’s learning began to receive official policy recognition. The Rumbold Report (DfE, 1989), for example, identified parents as the ‘first educators’ of their children, arguing that what children learn at home, with their families, before they attend any form of group and well before school, was a crucial part of a child’s learning experience. From this point, subsequent policies have made explicit mention of parents’ involvement, and schools and other early years settings today are required positively to involve parents (DfE, 2014), many running specific programmes for them focussing on literacy.

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<sup>1</sup> The 1870 Forster Act

<sup>2</sup> The Elementary Education Acts of 1880 and 1891, the Voluntary Schools Act of 1897, the Balfour Act (1902) and Fisher Act (1918)

## *How has reading been part of family life in the UK throughout the past century?*

If we look across the decades we can see how reading has long been part of many families' lives and responsibility for teaching children to read has passed variously between home and school throughout the last century and across the social classes, for different reasons. Most European countries made mass literacy a goal over the course of the twentieth century, moving from homes and communities being the places where reading (and writing) were often learned and used, to establishing schools as the locus of control (Vincent, 2000). This move established the school as the place where reading was *taught*, and the home as the place where children *practiced* their learning.

Despite some sporadic initiatives from as far back as the late 1800s to promote home reading, it remained the case during the 1950s that parents in England were still largely excluded from the mysteries of *teaching* reading - it being the clearly marked territory of the school. Yet the pendulum swings, and in June 2014 the Chief Inspector of schools in England stated that parents who did not read to their children should be fined. Whilst over the years, the home has played a part in supporting the development of children's reading (Auerbach, 1989; Baghban, 1984; Hannon, 1995; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Neumann and Roskos, 1997, Petellier and Brent 2002), in the main it has been mothers who have been the main supporters of their children's home reading activity (Mace, 1998). Hartas (2011) identified that literacy development in young children at age five is more directly related to the mother's level of education than it is to family income, also a finding of a study by Nutbrown et al., (2005) which also identified considerable involvement of fathers in their young children's literacy at home (Morgan et al., 2009)

The literature on home reading in the UK following World War Two is sparse, yet something of the 'therapeutic' potential of books was seen to be important (Moore, 1943). Frank Smith offered an important justification for supporting parents to help their children learn to read and to enjoy reading at home through a range of media, arguing that:

*until education ... became systematically organised in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the prevailing point of view had for centuries been that you learn from the company you keep. (Smith, 2011: 14)*

Between the 1950s to the 1980s, a number of studies shifted the emphasis towards schools working with parents, explicitly to encourage them to teach their children to read. Reading at home was becoming an activity that was no longer left to chance, but actively facilitated (Larrick, 1959; Gomberg, 1970; Niedermeyer, 1970; Hannon and Jackson, 1987). Hansen (1969) identified significant links between the home environment and later reading habits, and encouraged schools to work with parents to address reading difficulties. In the US, Taylor and Strickland (1986) followed families who regularly shared story books with their children, and provided advice for other families, explaining why sharing books is 'good', how it helps with writing, and which books to read. The influence of parental attitude towards reading and its resulting motivational influence on children was also explored by Baker et al., (1997) who found that only 6 per cent of young children in the study did not enjoy being read to, and that parents made conscious efforts in their reading to foster motivation. While access to books is crucial, the role of a mediator, a parent or other close adult, who spends time with the child and makes reading 'exciting', is also important (Cullinan, 2000). Nutbrown et al., (2003) found that despite the fact children in their first term of full-time school and required to read with their teacher every day, they identified the home as the place for reading, which is echoed by Collins' and Svensson's (2008) finding

that rich home-literacy environments where parents discussed books with their children were factors contributing to the development of confident young readers. This built on earlier work which highlighted a positive enhancement of rich home-literacy environments by a book-gifting scheme or library membership has been shown to contribute to the accessibility books and improved parents' and carers' attitudes towards reading with their children, (Wells 1986; HM Treasury, 2004; Hines and Brooks 2009).

The international literature acknowledges the importance of reading at home (Swain et al 2014; Corter and Petellier 2005; Harper et al 2011; Brown et al 2013) however, it was not always the case, and in England, two important national initiatives in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century changed access to books for all – opening the way for the changes seen in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The establishment of public libraries<sup>3</sup> made books freely available to all, and the National Home Reading Union, 1889-1930, positively promoted reading for pleasure (Collins, 1890; Baker et al., 1997; Snape, 2002; Buckingham et al., 2013). In England in the 1980s, Gibbs (1983) argued for special training for children's librarians to take their important role in child development into account. The role of libraries has evolved, from a source of freely available books to use of digital devices, magazines, e books, music, film, and electronic games. Where they have survived savage cuts in public spending, more recently libraries have become community spaces where children experience literacy in a multitude of forms (Pahl and Allen, 2011) In 1948, Banton Smith argued that reading material tended to be chosen on the basis of presuppositions, political leanings, and so on, with the majority of readers looking to read material which reinforced their opinions. In essence, what Banton Smith (1948) and her contemporaries describe is what Bourdieu (1986; Bourdieu et al., 1994) would later refer to as 'cultural capital'. Today, reading still functions as a vital access point to society, and can lead to increased social engagement, and 'even the benefits of democracy, and the capacity to govern ourselves successfully, depend on reading' (Cullinan, 2000); thus reading as part of an individual's social identity and/or cultural capital is reinforced.

As reading choices and modes have expanded with the advancement of technology, increasing numbers of children now have access to smart phones and tablets, using these to communicate across various social media (Ofcom, 2012) with much of this including literacy practices (Marsh et al., 2005; Merchant, 2007). Rapid developments in digital technologies have opened access to global communications inconceivable a century, or even a decade, ago. These developments have prompted new understandings of what reading and writing *are* and how literacy is shaped (Prensky, 2001) and as words, images, sound, colour, animation, video, and styles of print now be quickly combined, this highlights the importance of context, purpose and practices around print, including family literacy practices (Marsh et al., 2015). A key message is that whilst literacy has changed, fundamental *practices within families* have not. For, regardless of changing modes or practices of literacy, for some in every generation, literacy has been a part of family life. However for others this has not been the case, and so in order to try to ensure that all had the benefits of reading at home, *family literacy programmes* have been introduced in various parts of the world as an intergenerational response to reduce the perpetuation of low levels of literacy.

### ***What part have family literacy programmes played in supporting young children's early literacy development?***

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<sup>3</sup> The Public Libraries Act 1850



Hannon et al., (2005) stress the importance of family literacy that *acknowledges and makes use of learners' family relationships and engagement in family literacy practices*. Wasik and Van Horn (2012) suggest that:

*The intergenerational transfer of literacy has intrigued educators, researchers and policy makers and served as a fundamental rationale for family literacy programmes. ... Not only does the family determine the child's early language, but a family's culture, beliefs, and traditions also influence the way children use words for discourse (Heath, 1983). Their family's literacy levels also influence whether children develop strong language skills and literacy at home, having many print materials available and modelling the use of reading, writing and math in daily life. (Wasik and Van Horn, 2012: 3)*

Family literacy has, for the past three decades been seen as a way of minimising some of the inequalities in children's literacy development when they begin school (Swain et al 2014; Corter and Petellier 2005; Harper et al 2011; Brown et al 2013). Family literacy *practices* embrace the ordinary and *everyday literacy events* that take place (often little or no conscious planning) in families, whilst family literacy *programmes* are planned systematically and specifically to encourage and maximise the potential for children's engagement in those practices. There is clear evidence that family literacy can positively enhance children's engagement in literacy (Nutbrown et al., 2005; Brooks et al., 2012; Swain et al 2014).

Whilst family literacy *programmes* recognise the family dimension in individuals' learning, *literacy practices within families* form a crucial part in developing children's literacy. The term 'family literacy' is first attributed to Taylor (1983) in the United States who showed how young children's early literacy practices were influenced by parents' and other family members' uses of written language. Many studies have illuminated existing family literacy practices (Weinberger, 1996) in a range of social classes and ethnicity groupings resulting in a strong international research base, depicting a variety of language and literacy practices in families: **on reading** (Heath, 1982; Baker et al., 1997; Harper et al., 2011; Brown et al 2013); **on bilingualism** (Moss, 1994; Gregory, 1996; Hirst, 1998; Harper et al., 2011); **the impact of home background** (Teale, 1986; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Purcell-Gates, 1995); **differing views of parents and teachers** (Hannon and James, 1990); **on the role of communities** (Cairney and Ruge, 1998; Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Corter and Petellier 2005); **on the benefits of family literacy programmes** (Swain et al 2014) **and on digital technologies in family literacy** (Marsh et al., 2015).

Shared experiences of intergenerational family literacy and family involvement and encouragement of young children's literacy have ranged for example, from the whole family gathering together for the reading of the Bible (in the earliest part of the period under study) to shared internet searching for information and online gaming. Educational initiatives with parents since the 1950s have been aimed at encouraging parents to be involved in their children's learning, and work since the 1980s has focused on parents being actively engaged in supporting early literacy development (Hannon, 1995). We now know much more about family literacy practices (Weinberger, 1996, Wasik, 2012; Auerbach, 1989; Wolfendale and Topping, 1996, Brown et al., 2013), and programmes to help parents support their children's developing literacy are well established in many parts of the world (Edwards, 1994; Nutbrown et al. 2005; Brooks, et al., 2012, Swain et al 2014). Such programmes to encourage home reading highlight the importance of owning and reading a wide repertoire of books through book loan or book gifting schemes (Jerim, 2013).

In England in the 1980s, initiatives were introduced, to connect school and home reading, and so the concept of ‘parents as educators’ (Topping, 1986) emerged. The Haringey Reading Project (Tizard et al., 1982) persuaded schools to send children’s reading books home regularly. Later, the Belfield Project (Hannon, 1989) encouraged children to take books home daily and offered support to parents in reading with their children. Nowadays, this is basic practice, but in the 1980s this was innovative, and extended children’s opportunities to practise reading at home. That school and home shared responsibility for children’s learning and development (Glynn, 1996) prompted the development of partnership models specifically to promote literacy development. Amongst these was the home reading model PACT - ‘Parents and Children and Teachers’, (Hewison and Tizard, 1980) where children took books home from school on a regular basis to read with their parents and similar schemes grew around the UK (Branston, 1996; Glynn, 1996). Awareness that literacy practices differ between families led to a model of ‘family literacy’ by the Basic Skills Agency in 1994 (Brooks et al. 1997, 1999) which focused on adults’ and children’s literacy. It also sought to reduce the achievement gap at school-start age by encouraging parental involvement in the pre-school years (Hannon, 1996).

Around the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, concerns from schools and politicians about a lack of reading surfaced - particularly in the US and UK - and researchers looked for ways to persuade parents about the positive impact of home reading. Here again, the notion of cultural capital comes to the fore, with reading at home being connected to Bourdieu’s notion of habitus – a way of being which is multiply influenced by notions of family, culture, society, history, language, and so on. Reay (1998) argued that while white middle-class mothers were comfortable in becoming involved in their child’s education, mothers from minority backgrounds and ‘working-class’ mothers found themselves in a position where they were expected to transform habitus, a prospect with which they often engaged unsuccessfully. Of course, combining all mothers from several different minority backgrounds into one single grouping of ‘minority group’ raises its own difficulties because ‘minorities’ represent many different social backgrounds, and this illustrates the difficulty of ‘reading off’ such research to identify single pertinent issues to be resolved. In the US, Edwards (1994) argued strongly that black working-class and unemployed mothers should be taught the skills that white middle-class mothers already had, so that they, too, could support their own children’s literacy development. Hartas (2011) also suggested that mothers who are ‘educated’ may be more likely to be able to identify and access activities for their children, and argued for educating parents so that they may be best equipped to help their children. In Hartas’s view, parental involvement, whilst strongly effective, should not be seen as the ‘*panacea for making up for the effects of socio-economic inequality*’ (2011: 909), but part of a coherent policy designed to address social justice issues. Researchers seem to agree that, whatever social class or family heritage, parents are in the main, keen to support their children’s literacy learning and see reading as important (Auerbach, 1989; Blackledge 2001). Our analysis indicates that in recent years family literacy *programmes* have become better adapted to the range of needs, interests and backgrounds of the diversity of families who participate.

## **Conclusion**

As we have seen, what is understood by *literacy* now is very different from the more simply defined acts of reading and writing at the beginning of the twentieth century. The types of ‘capital’ associated with literacy and the extent to which oral expression in the development

of communication practices have become inseparable from the 'literate' mean that what one reads and how one speaks hold different 'capital' in different strata of society. It is clear that reading and writing are now part of wider 'literacy' practices incorporating digital technologies non-existent in the early 1900s.

Definitions and constructions of literacy are highly context-dependent and we must acknowledge the vital role of socio-historical context. This means that, as we move further into the twenty-first century, we are obliged not only to recognise the impact of digital technology, but also the need to strive actively to understand how advancement in media and electronic text is changing constructions and practices of literacy in families and how these practices connect to other communicative modes and change the very nature of text (Cook-Gumperz, 2006). This in turn challenges modern notions of what it means to be literate, and what it will mean in the future.

This paper has highlighted the importance of the home in children's developing reading along with the need for children to engage with home literacy practices from their earliest years. Families can and do support their children at home, and whilst literacy has changed throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, fundamental *practices* in families have not. In recent years family literacy *programmes* have become better adapted to the range of needs, interests and backgrounds of the diversity of families who participate, and this needs to become further embedded in educational practice so that more parents can confidently support their children's literacy development and enhance their socio-cultural capital.

In this paper we have highlighted the powerful role that families play in developing the literacy of younger generations. We have also seen that this role can be positively extended and supported by planned work with families. However we should be cautious about the ways in which current policies ignore hard-won insights into the crucial role of the family. For whilst literacy has become broadly defined, English policy - particularly in the Early Years - has effectively re-narrowed this definition, and seems somehow to have reverted to an earlier conception of Reading and Writing which was a defining characteristic of educational practice in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Further, whilst family literacy practices are now invigorated by the realm of the digital, education policy in general, and again most particularly in the Early Years, has yet fully to embed the technologies that are inexorably part of the character and terrain of quite what it is to be literate; and of course, this drives a wedge between home and school literacy practices. In a manner reminiscent of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, we are hearing again a distinct echo of the failure to realise the vital continuity of home-school partnership worthy of the name.

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