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‘No-one would sleep if we didn’t have books!’: Understanding Shared Reading as Family Practice and Family Display

Abstract

Families are pivotal in terms of facilitating children’s language development including their ability to read. However, to date there is little research designed to understand how shared reading operates within the realm of everyday family practices. Drawing on data from a study which set out to explore shared reading practices in the home, this paper considers reading within the context of the family and everyday family life. In-depth interviews were carried out with 29 parents of pre-school children to investigate shared reading practices within a socially and culturally mixed sample. This study revealed that the relationship between shared reading practices and family practices is recursive. In particular, building on the seminal work of Finch (2007) reading was seen to be a specific feature of family practice and routine, and acts as a form of family display. Furthermore, this paper demonstrates how shared reading contributes towards the ways in which structure and agency may operate in a family setting. Constructing reading as a family practice and a form of display makes an important contribution to understandings of home literacy practices and behaviours. This paper concludes that endeavours to engage families with shared reading therefore require a comprehensive understanding of family life and family practices and the role of shared reading within.

Keywords:

Introduction

It is well known that literacy activity is not confined to the context of the school. For some time now, researchers have explored the role of the home and community in children’s development of language and literacy skill (Heath, 1983; Minns, 1997). While much literature has acknowledged the value of the home in shaping children’s literate identities (Cameron and Gillen, 2013; Perregaard, 2010), research has also shown how ‘schooled’ constructions of literacy can undermine children’s home literacy practices from their earliest years (Levy, 2008). As Kajee (2011: 434) points out, this relates to the fact that all contexts of learning are ‘imbued with power’, including families and schools. However, as a major task of the school is to teach learners to be literate, literacy often becomes viewed

as ‘schooled literacy in the dominant language’, therefore undervaluing home literacy practices that are not closely aligned with school curricular.

This has particular implications for young children’s interactions with reading. We know that there are substantial benefits for children who engage in shared reading practices with parents and caregivers in the home. Previous research suggests that children who read on a regular basis prior to school entry are at an advantage in terms of learning language, vocabulary size and success at reading in school (Bus et al., 1995; Mol et al., 2008). As shared reading results in complex talk when compared with caretaking or play (Snow, 1994), there is a positive correlation between the frequency of parents reading with children and their child’s language and emergent literacy. What is more, this remains the case for families with lower levels of literacy (Bus et al., 1995).

While this all supports continued efforts to encourage parents to read with their children in the home, much of this work is also grounded in the assumption that the main purpose of shared reading activity in the home is to support children’s ‘schooled’ reading. Consequently, this also suggests that interventions designed to encourage parents to read with their children are built on the assumption that there is a ‘right’ way to read with a child. Given that this view fails to acknowledge the individual and unique ways in which families operate, and indeed carry out literacy activity, this may explain why many reading interventions are unsuccessful (Justice et al, 2015).

This strongly indicates a need to look at shared reading practices from the perspective of the family. While a number of researchers have helped us to understand the multiple and unique ways in which family literacy operates (Pahl, 2002; Gregory et al, 2004), very little research has attempted to understand how, and why families from different social and cultural backgrounds engage in shared reading activity with their young children. Subsequently, this research sought to obtain an understanding of shared reading practices, from the perspective of the parents themselves. Given that this demanded a qualitative approach, where participants were offered opportunities to talk in-depth about features of their everyday lives, and role of shared reading within, sample size was naturally limited. This study drew from interviews with 29 parents of pre-school children, in two cities in the UK.

These interviews yielded insights into day-to-day family life and activity, family relationships and the role of reading in this context. In this respect, this study was never designed to draw conclusions about ‘families’, or even families within particular socio-cultural groupings. Rather the study allowed an opportunity to understand how certain families view, perceive and implement shared practices within the context of their everyday lives. Exploring reading in this manner revealed that just as families are crucial to reading, reading practices play an important role in family life, notably in terms of family routines and interactions. In particular, building on the seminal work of Finch (2007), the findings revealed that shared reading was deeply embedded in the everydayness of family practice and family ‘display’. The purpose of this paper is to outline the findings from interviews with parents with regard to these connections, however before we can present these

findings it is important to explore what is meant by the terms 'family practices' and 'family display'.

Theoretical underpinning

Any attempt to define the construct of 'family' will be met with difficulty. As Williams (2004) pointed out in *Rethinking Families*, most of the influential work on families carried out in recent years has emphasized 'the essential diversity of family composition and the fluidity of family relationships' (Finch, 2007, p.67), meaning that it has become increasingly difficult to ascertain what is meant by the term 'my family'. Indeed Finch (2007) makes the point that 'family does not equate to household', arguing that rather than being preoccupied with the structural and functional components of a typical 'family', a focus on the relational aspects of 'the family' is more helpful than a definition of *who* family is. As Finch asserts:

'Contemporary families are defined more by 'doing' family things than by 'being' a family... 'Family' is a facet of social life, not a social institution, it 'represents a quality rather than a thing' (Morgan, 1996: 186) (2007, p.66)'.

Finch's assertion is encapsulated in the notion of 'family practices' which Morgan (1996: 190) describes as 'often little fragments of daily life which are part of the normal taken-for-granted existence of practitioners [i.e. family members]'. This definition emphasizes that individuals are social actors and that they actively build their own social world. Moreover it allows for modification over time. To take this point further, theorists such as Finch (2007) and Morgan (1996), claim that the word 'family' is not a noun, but is an adjective. This suggests that the concept of 'family' can be viewed in terms of daily practice and everyday activity.

This notion of family practice is helpful in that it allows for research to acknowledge factors such as the diversity of family relationships, constitutional change and the knotty relationship between individual and family identity. However, given that it is also well known that ways of 'doing' family are socially and culturally situated (Morgan, 1996; Williams, 2004) and embedded in discourses power (Ren and Hu, 2011), it is important to recognize that certain family practices may be privileged above others. In order to understand this further, Finch (2007) went on to develop the notion of 'family display' which draws attention to the idea that family activities are not just performed, but are also *seen* to be performed. Finch clarifies this in her definition of the concept of 'display' arguing that it is the process through which individuals, and groups of individuals, convey to each other and to relevant others that particular actions do constitute 'doing family things' and thereby confirm that these relationships are 'family' relationships' (p.73). She goes on to argue that family practices are inherently social, and therefore, 'the meaning of one's actions has to be both conveyed to and understood by relevant others if those actions are to be effective as constituting 'family' practices' (2007, p.66).

Drawing on the concept of family display, various researchers have shown how family display can be linked with 'moral accountability', whereby people communicate, to each

other and external audiences, that their family adheres to a construction of a social norm. This was clearly seen in Harman and Cappellini's (2015) study of middle class mothers' daily routines of preparing lunchboxes for their children. Harman and Cappellini found that in the preparation of lunchboxes for their children to take to school, these mothers were 'displaying, to themselves as well as external audiences (such as school teachers and lunchtime supervisors, the researchers) that they are competent, caring mothers' (2015, p. 776). They concluded that their study revealed that despite being part of a relatively hegemonic group of white middle class mothers, anxiety about the display of their mothering meant that these women 'felt under scrutiny and potentially under attack' (2015, p.778).

In recent years, a number of other researchers have drawn upon these related notions of family practice and family display in order to understand aspects of personal life (Harrington, 2015; MacDonald, 2017) particularly with regard to the awkward relationship between individuality and the reproduction of social norms. For example James and Curtis (2010) explored how Finch's (2007) concept of display sheds light on Smart's (2007) 'new sociology of personal life' (James and Curtis, 2010, p.1163), through the context of an investigation into family life and eating practices. They concluded that while displays of family can take different forms, personal lives must always be understood as being embedded in 'particular social and cultural worlds' (p.1163). In doing so, James and Curtis (2010: 1164) argue that it is this 'cultural connectedness' at the heart of display 'which may help explain the paradox of how 'families can be experienced as unique, while also reflecting social conventions and reproducing commonplace ritual and practices' (Smart, 2007, p.51)'.

It is this recognition of families' 'reproducing commonplace ritual and practices' while also maintaining a uniqueness that is of particular interest and importance to the study of shared reading activity between parents and their children. As raised in the introduction, the advantages of shared reading are well documented, with research showing that children who engage in reading activity before they start school being more likely to learn language faster than those who do not, while they are also more likely to become successful readers at school (Bus et al., 1995; Mol et al., 2008). However, as discussed in the introduction, as literacy activity is often dominated by the school discourse (Kajee, 2011), literacy activity taking place in the home can become regarded as insignificant, or inferior to those practices defined by school curricular (Long et al, 2013, Levy, 2008).

This presents something of a dilemma for educationalists wanting to encourage parents to read with their children in the home. While some reading interventions have indeed reported positive results (Sim et al, 2014; McNicol and Dalton, 2002), a meta-analysis conducted by Justice et al (2015) concluded that it is often the case that shared reading interventions in the home environment do 'not always reach the levels intended by the intervention developers' (p.1852). This suggests an urgent need to begin with the family, rather than the intervention, and take time to understand how shared reading practices operate within families.

Research has indeed revealed that schooled constructions of literacy can impose and undermine what happens in the home, however it is important to acknowledge that this is not always the case. For example, further research has indicated that parents can, and do use schooled activity, such as homework, as a positive link between home and school, valuing the activity as a ‘family event’ that cemented relationships with the school (Fox, 2016). For this reason it is important to draw from the sociological study of family practice and family display, in order to understand how families are using shared reading activity within the context of their everyday lives. This paper now goes on to present findings from one study within a larger ESRC-funded project, which aimed to understand how and why parents do, and do not read with their children, and how shared reading operated within their family environments. As the remainder of this paper goes on to show, understanding how shared reading can function from a perspective of family practice and display, offers valuable insights that have the potential to support many families in reading with their children.

The study

This paper draws on findings from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 29 families living in two cities in the North of the UK. The study is part of a larger program of research across a number of cities, exploring the impact of shared reading on children’s language development. Participants were aged between 21 and 36+ with the majority falling into the 26 - 35 bracket. Of the 29 families, 14 had two children. Children were mainly aged between 3 and 5 years of age ($n = 26$). Around half of the sample described their ethnicity as White British/Irish ($n = 14$); the remaining participants described themselves as Asian/Asian British ($n=7$), Mixed White and Other ($n=4$), Arab ($n=3$) and black (1). In terms of qualifications, 12 participants were educated to degree level or higher, 8 to GCSE and 5 did not possess any formal qualifications.

Table 1 provides an overview of the participants. It should be noted that although we were keen to talk to fathers and mothers, it was mothers who responded to our request for participation in the vast majority of cases. As a result, interviews were conducted with 28 mothers and one father, however most participants spoke about the whole family during the course of the interview.

(Insert Table 1)

Interviews did not immediately set out to explore reading practices in isolation, but sought to ascertain a picture of family life more generally, paying attention to family structure, daily activity and everyday routines. This approach resulted in narratives that provided a holistic account of family life. By seeking to understand the detail of family life, we were able to understand how reading did, or did not fit within the context of the everyday. Additionally, we hoped that this approach would reduce the potential for desirability bias, since reading is a socially desirable activity (Kurschus, 2014).

Participants were drawn from two samples. In City A, 20 participants were recruited from areas that were considered as relatively disadvantaged on the Indices of Multiple Deprivation, in order to ensure the sample included families with low socioeconomic status

(SES). The research was advertised via a flyer distributed to parents of nursery children at five schools. In addition, we conducted face-to-face recruitment in playgroups, health visitor drop-ins, and children's centres in low and mixed-income areas. We checked that each potential participant had a child who had not yet started school. All children were aged 3 and 4 years, with the exception of three children aged 35 months, 31 months and 21 months. Participants received a £10 shopping voucher of their choice as a gesture of appreciation for their participation.

In City B, nine participants were drawn from two cohorts of parents who had signed up to attend reading sessions hosted by The Reader Organisation in schools and libraries in the city and had volunteered to participate in the wider research project. The rationale for recruiting from two cities was to expand the sample and make the study more robust. We acknowledge the different approaches to sampling, notably that participants in City B had already signed up to a study, indicating an interest in literacy. However, we do not believe that this had a negative impact on the study. Participants were largely from areas of relative disadvantage, but tended to be from white communities which meant that broadening the sample ensured a more ethnically diverse sample than had we limited the research to city B. The findings revealed that families across the board were interested in promoting their children's literacy and there was little difference in interest in literacy between families in City A compared with families in City B. Furthermore, since the study sought to understand families, rather than compare different families, we have not analysed the two data sets separately. Each participating parent completed a questionnaire, administered by a colleague at the lead university, as part of the broader study. They were invited to participate in a second strand of the research which involved interviews and video observations, however it should be noted that this present study only drew from the interview data. As with the participants in City A, participants were considered as relatively disadvantaged on the Indices of Multiple Deprivation, children were aged 3 – 4 years and all participants received a £10 shopping voucher for taking part in an interview.

This paper draws on data from both samples. To preserve anonymity, pseudonyms have been used and all potentially identifying information has been removed. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. They were then analyzed within Nvivo which is a software package designed for qualitative data. Analysis followed the principles of grounded theory analysis, with three distinct stages taking place; open coding, clustering of codes around categories and thematic coding (Harry et al., 2005). Open coding and axial coding were conducted by three researchers, independently. The resulting analyses were compared and the researchers agreed a set of emergent core themes.

Analysis revealed that reading, for many of these families, is not necessarily related to educational endeavor, but interacts with, and underpins, other everyday family practices. The following section reports the findings that emerged under three themes; reading as a family practice, reading as a form of 'family display' and children's agency.

Findings: Reading as a family practice

Parents' accounts illustrated the vital role that shared reading played in family life. The theorization of reading as a family practice drew attention to the everyday, yet significant, nature of shared reading, and the ways in which it functioned in the overall construct of 'doing' family. It should be stressed from the outset that many of these parents did report that they read with their children because they saw it as 'educational' and important in the development of literacy skill. However, the data also revealed that many of these families used shared reading as a tool to cement family practices and support their unique and individual constructs of 'doing' family. Interviews opened with the invitation to 'Talk me through a typical day' and participants generally described their day-to-day family routines, structured around tasks, according to linear time. Interviews revealed the family practices and displays were both facilitated by, and produced, as a consequence of shared reading activity. These themes will now be explored.

The role of reading in family routines

The concept of routine is well documented as being an important aspect of family life. For example Fiese (2006) discusses how the routine practices of events such as mealtimes provide organizational aspects of family life, through which interaction often takes place. Research indicates that shared reading practices are often embedded in the routines of middle class families (Nichols, 2000) and stories are a common feature of the bedtime routine (Staples et al, 2015). Interviews with parents in this research revealed that shared reading was firmly embedded in the daily routines of most families. However for many of these families it was not necessarily regarded as an educational endeavor, but was seen as being crucial to the execution of daily routine. Parents reported that they included reading into the day and, for many, the bedtime routine in particular. Many claimed that this made it 'easy' to read with their child because it was such a crucial part of the bedtime routine. Parents also reported that the practice of reading served as an important message for their children that it was bedtime, thus signaling the important role of reading within the bedtime routine. For example Hadra (mother of Saira, aged 3) told us:

'We only incorporated it into a routine so she would know bath, book and bed, for her to identify that it's bedtime, to get her into a pattern, and she would've just stuck with that' (Hadra).

Similarly Katie (mother of Nathan, aged 4) reported:

'We got the routine established really early, bath, story, bed...he was eight weeks old and I remember one night going 'I need to get a routine, I just can't do this random kind of going to sleep when he's ready for it'. I was just like, you know, this is, we need to get his routine sorted out, and it's been like that really since he was about two months old'.

This data highlights the importance these parents placed on the role of shared reading as a critical element of a bedtime routine. Infact, some parents went as far as to suggest that an absence of reading could disrupt bedtime routines. For example having reported that

it is not difficult to read with her children because it is simply *'something we do before bedtime'*, Hannah (mother of Sidney, aged 3) went on to state:

'I think they'd pick up that the routine had changed and then they'd act differently, and bedtime would be different and it, yeah, it's just what they expect'.

Laura (mother of Alex, aged 3) went even further with the comment:

'I don't think anyone would sleep if we don't have books so at the very least we'll get two books before bed everyday' (Laura).

This is not to suggest that these parents did not see shared reading as a worthwhile activity in itself, however what is clear is that, for these parents, reading to their children was regarded as an essential component of everyday family practice that was crucial to the establishment of important routines, such as those at bedtime. However reading did not just occur at bedtime. Rebecca (mother of Oliver, aged 4) told us that she always kept some books in the car so that *'he's reading to himself and then we'll discuss it'*. For others, reading was used as part of daily discipline in promoting desirable behavior. Moreover, many parents spoke about buying books as a 'treat' to reward good behavior when shopping at the supermarket for example. In fact Tania (mother of Ethan, aged 3) reported that she threatened her son with losing his bedtime story if he didn't behave appropriately. She told us:

'I use it like a reward system. Now if he's been naughty in the day, I'll tell him 'it's your bedtime story' ...it works'

As stated, Nichols (2000) argued that reading practices are often embedded in the routines of middle class families, however this data has shown that reading can also be part of the everyday routines of families who can be described as of low socioeconomic status. However, this data is suggesting that rather than families choosing to read with their children for the main purpose of enhancing literacy skill, shared reading was being used to cement certain daily routines which were critical to the smooth running of family life. This is important as it has serious implications for the design of interventions to encourage shared reading practices in the home, as will be discussed later in this paper. However, the data also suggested that for many other families in the sample, shared reading activity made an important contribution to the 'display' of family life; in other words it not only provided a signal to others that family practices were occurring inside this family unit, but also operated within families to maintain structures and solidify notions of 'being family'.

Reading as a form of family display

There is little doubt that reading is portrayed as a 'good' parenting practice, which is then 'normalized' and reinforced by policy (Nichols et al, 2009; Dermott and Pomatti, 2015). Whatever the individual motivation for shared reading, many parents in this study recognized that being seen to read with one's children is met with approval by society, and is regarded as a 'good' thing to do. This could sometimes result in concern amongst the participants about their own reading practices, or how others were judging them. For example when asked to talk about shared reading in the home Hadra hesitantly responded:

'I'll be honest with you, like, in terms of reading during the day, other than nighttime, I don't really do it, I don't, don't have time'.

Other participants spoke directly about judgment from other parents. Natalie reported that she felt as if she was 'being watched' by other parents in her reading group, going on to state:

'You think other parents are going 'oh well do you read with your children?' It's like, if you miss a day, you don't want people thinking bad of you'.

While it was clear that some parents felt that shared reading practices displayed notions of 'good parenting' to others, the vast majority of comments relating to shared reading as a form of display were made in relation to the participants' own families. For example, in some cases parents reported that reading contributed to the enforcement of hierarchical structures between siblings. To illustrate, Natalie explained that when she was reading with her two boys, Matthew (the youngest), would always get to pick the first book, and this was permitted by the older sibling. She reported:

'Matthew has to pick the first. He has to be first or there's murder. So I think he does enjoy it because he'll sit and do it...he'd have a big tantrum on the floor and his brother would say you pick first, and let him get away with it'.

Other participants spoke of older siblings reading with younger siblings however this was often used as an opportunity for the older child to demonstrate a sense of authority over the younger child. Sumaira, mother of 3-year-old Asha gave an animated account of her older daughter Zara 'teaching' the younger son through the context of sharing a book. She reported:

'She will sit down with him, and she will say 'What's that color?' 'What's this number?', 'How many fingers is this?'. And she likes to be the boss sometimes. And when you say that to her, she gets really excited, and then she will, she will really put him down and say 'right, let's do this', and she'll sing along with him, 'ABC'

These examples show how shared reading activity was being used to reinscribe and develop the structure of relationships between siblings in the home. In the first example, the activity allowed for the younger child to assert a position of power on the basis of being the younger sibling, however in the second example the older child was using shared reading to assert a sense of authority over the younger. This suggests that shared reading was being used by the children to demonstrate features of everyday life, such as hierarchical family structure and authority.

However the data also showed how shared reading practices helped to create a display of 'doing family' within the family; this was apparent in many different families however it appeared to be especially important if the child's biological parents were separated. For example Amy, who was separated from her daughter's father, spoke with frustration about the time her daughter, Maddie, spends with her ex-partner and his parents. She reported:

'I don't know what goes on down there when she goes...I think she'd be learning a lot more if she was here. It's annoying because I know he doesn't do anything with her, it's just sad'.

To Amy, the fact that her ex-partner does not engage in structured activity with Maddie was a problem, however, in a later interview Amy went on to say that Maddie has a good relationship with her new partner (who had now moved in with her), which was evidenced in the shared reading activity that they enjoyed together. When asked about the shared reading that took place in their home Amy responded:

'Most of the time, it's my boyfriend, he's much better and she laughs more when he does it, he's got better voices. She would like 10 books and is 'right let's go'...She's excited, she loves it. I think as well, her Dad doesn't do anything like that...so she looks at Jamie as [pauses]... I don't wanna say 'as Dad' but he looks at her as his own daughter'

Amy's data provides an illustration of the ways in which shared reading practices can send powerful messages within a family that confirm that they are 'doing family' successfully. This data strongly suggested that Amy saw the shared reading relationship between Jamie and Maddie as a representation of a father-daughter relationship. This again shows how shared reading activity can function as a form of display, demonstrating that 'family is what family does' (Morgan, 1996); given that families read with their children, sharing books helped to affirm that this 'is' a family because they are doing things that families 'do'.

For other families, the act of shared reading allowed parents to 'parent' their children in different ways. Kylie, for example reported that reading activity allowed her and her husband to interact differently with their children. Speaking about her son, Brady, she stated:

'He's boisterous, everything is exciting and I'm just no good at that, my little girl, I can play Barbies with her. But him, everything dies. Why?! I can't do that, the boys they do the boisterous thing, and I do the reading and the Play Doh'.

At first glance it appears that Kylie is suggesting that reading is a passive activity that takes place between herself and her daughter, however she goes on to talk about the fact that her husband tends to read with Brady but in a way that is very different to how she engages with shared reading with her children. Kylie reported:

'His Dad reads differently - his Dad is a lot more into the voices and all that, and I sometimes think, 'Do I bore you?' Cos his Dad goes 'raaaaaaar' but then when his Dad reads to him, it doesn't settle him, it makes him hyper. If his Dad's reading, Brady doesn't get into his book, he'll get into more the story in his head so he'll be acting it out whereas when I read he'll sit...it's just two different ways of doing it really. He'll sit and look at the pictures but with his Dad the book is more in his imagination, not looking at the words and the pictures'.

This data indicates that shared reading allows Kylie and her husband to adopt different roles in their parenting, and therefore provide different experiences and opportunities for their children. Kylie claims that she is 'no good' at engaging with boisterous play with her son, but reading allows her to interact with her children in a manner that suits her. However Kylie's husband also engages in shared reading, but in a much more dynamic way. Kylie recognizes that there is value in both forms of reading, for example she is aware that her husband's reading 'doesn't settle' her son, and can make 'him hyper', while her reading is calmer and allows more engagement with the book, however she also argues that her husband's shared reading activity allows her son to get more from 'the story' and trigger his imagination.

This notion of using shared reading as an opportunity to 'parent' was also mentioned by many participants in relation to spending time with their children. While many participants spoke of enjoying the time they spent reading with their children, emphasising factors such as it providing an opportunity for being 'close' or 'cuddly', another common theme was that reading allowed for a working parent to spend regular time with the child. This was often reported in relation to fathers. For example Victoria (mother of Greg, aged 3) told us:

'My husband works really long hours and I'm on maternity leave. I've got more time during the day, so at night time my husband reads the stories, erm, because he wants to and he wants to spend time with him'.

Similarly, Hadra made the point that shared reading not only allowed her partner to spend time reading with their daughter, but also provided an opportunity for him to talk to her about her day and engage in conversation. Hadra stated:

'He gets her changed and reads her her book, and then just tells her some stories and asks her about her day. So they talk, I wouldn't say rubbish, they talk randomly, and then he'll tell her a story'.

This section has shown how families use shared reading in a wide variety of ways to display features of 'being' family. While the data does show that shared reading can allow families to display their 'familyness' to others and demonstrate to the world that they are 'doing family', the participants in this study seemed more concerned about the ways in which reading helped to affirm their own family's internal structure. This was evident in the ways in which siblings displayed their place in the family, or parents displayed aspects of parenting practice. Importantly, the data also indicated that shared reading practice contributed to the acceptance of a new partner within the family unit, as this again provided evidence that 'family' activity was being performed by these people.

This paper has so far presented an insight into the ways in which shared reading operates in families to embed structure and routine, display family relationships and afford opportunities for parents to 'parent' in their own ways. However what is missing in the data presented so far is an understanding of the child's agency in shared reading practices. While the study did not attempt to access the voice of the child directly, the data strongly

suggested that children were far from passive recipients within the activity, and that shared reading actually allowed many children to assert their agency within the family domain.

Children's agency in shared reading activity

For some time now there has been a call to recognize that even the youngest children are active agents in their own lives (James and Prout, 1990). This study supports this claim, revealing that the children themselves often led shared reading activity. What is more, parents often spoke about this as being an accepted and indeed *expected* element of everyday family life. For example, Lisa reported:

'I like reading with her. If she didn't like it, I wouldn't do it, but because I know she does like it, she does ask to read, and she enjoys it'.

Like Lisa, Kylie agreed that shared reading happens because her child wants it to. She told us:

'His books are out and he'll just go and get them. When they want to read, you can't say no' (Kylie).

Much of the data strongly suggests that parents were motivated to read to their children because their child either asked to be read to, or demonstrated that they were enjoying the activity. Subsequently this meant that parents were receptive to cues from the children which demonstrated that the child did *not* want to be read to for some reason. For example speaking of reading with her 3-year-old son, Alex, Laura stated:

'He definitely drives a lot of it. If he doesn't want to then we don't...today, before his nap he didn't want to, he just wanted to go to sleep' (Laura)

Similarly Bina, mother of 3-year-old Hadra, reported that if her daughter didn't want to read then she would just 'walk away' or 'take the book and walk away', giving a clear signal that she no longer wanted the activity to continue. Elizabeth also acknowledged that there were times when her son did not want to read and that she thought this was 'fine'. She told us:

'If he's, like, very upset, or very tired, or a bit poorly, then he'll just skip it out and, just say, or he'll just say 'just one book tonight'. I'm like 'that's fine! It's not, it doesn't have to be a chore', like 'it's fine, we don't have to read!' (Elizabeth).

The data revealed that the children not only played a crucial role in deciding whether reading took place or not, but were also instrumental in selecting *what* was read and indeed *how* it was read. For example when talking about how she and her daughter chose books for shared reading Fiona stated:

'She goes through these phases. She makes you repeatedly read. We'll say like 'Do you want to pick a story?' and she'll go to her bookshelf and, and pick her own story... You

can't tempt her with books like 'Oh, what about this book?' ...It's 'no, I wanna read my Funnybones again' (Fiona).

These examples suggest that the children's agency in reading was, for many, simply part of everyday shared reading activity and that the parents were happy to 'go with the flow' (Javid, father of Karim). However other parents provided data that suggested that they actively encouraged their children's agency in reading. This was illustrated in the following extracts:

'The other day we've been to Tesco's and then she said 'I want to buy'. First thing she wants to buy is book, so, which is a good thing, so we buy a book' (Latika).

'If she's mentioned a book that they read at nursery, then I will go out and buy it, but then that can be dangerous 'cos then she wants to read it every night for three weeks' (Fiona).

Both of these examples show parents accessing books that had in one way or another been chosen by the child. However parents were not only receptive to what their children wanted to read, but also to the way in which they wanted the books to be read. This was again evidenced in a number of cases, with Sumaira, for example, explaining that sometimes her son will instigate reading and pick a book and will want to 'turn pages' and ask questions such as 'What's he doing', 'What's this person doing?' (Javid, father of Karim). Javid also spoke about the way in which his son manages the reading activity by not only choosing the book, but in asking for certain paragraphs to be read and in 'boycotting' pages that he doesn't want to have read to him.

As the data in this section has shown, the children's role within shared reading practice tended to be highly active. As a family practice, shared reading appeared to allow many of the children in this study an opportunity to not only decide when they would engage in shared reading, but assert their preference for what would be read and how it would be read. In summary, many of these very young children appeared to have gained a sense of ownership of the reading practice, which was either accepted or indeed actively encouraged by their parents.

Discussion & conclusions

There is little doubt that there is much value in families engaging in shared reading in homes (Bus et al., 1995; Mol et al., 2008; Snow, 1994). While certain interventions designed to promote shared reading in homes have demonstrated positive results in the short term, these studies are generally situated within a highly 'educational' discourse that sees shared reading as a standardized practice. As a consequence, little attempt has been made to develop interventions that begin with the family and build on what families already do. Yet this seems to be crucial if interventions are to be successful on a wide-scale and effective in the long-term. This paper has used the concepts of family practice and family display (Finch, 2007; Morgan, 1996) to understand how shared reading operates within families who are from a socially and culturally mixed sample. In this

respect this study has shown how shared reading practices contribute towards the ways in which families display their ‘uniqueness’ while ‘also reflecting social conventions and reproducing commonplace ritual and practices’ (Smart, 2007, p.51).

We know from previous studies that shared reading often takes place in middle class families (Nichols, 2000), however this present study indicates that families from a variety of social and culturally diverse backgrounds engage with shared reading practices. While families do read with their children for the purposes of educational endeavor, this study has shown that shared reading serves a number of important functions in families that are not necessarily grounded in literacy-based purposes.

Findings revealed that families use shared reading to cement daily routines that are critical to the smooth running of every day family life. For some, shared reading sends a message to the outside world that they ‘are’ family and are ‘doing’ family successfully, however for many others, shared reading serves a more internal function within the home. This was evident in the ways in which siblings displayed their relationship to each other, but also in the way parents displayed their parenting practices, including those of new partners who needed to be accepted into the family unit. Finally, this data also revealed that shared reading actually allowed many children to assert their agency within the family domain. What is more, parents appeared to welcome this and were keen to develop their children’s agency within this context.

In conclusion, this study has shown that it is naïve to view shared reading activity from a purely ‘educational’ perspective. While families may well view shared reading as educational, this research has shown that the relationship between shared reading practices and family practices more generally, is recursive. This has important implications for intervention because it suggests that the starting point should not be to encourage families to ‘do’ shared reading, but rather to understand how shared reading is already a part of ‘doing’ family. Only then can we begin to appreciate how shared reading operates within homes, including those who do not engage in shared reading activity. Understanding shared reading as an everyday family practice and a form of family display therefore provides the foundation for supporting all families in starting, developing and/or extending shared reading practices in their homes.

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