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# 'It's sharing a point in time': the temporal dimensions of shared reading in families

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# 'It's sharing a point in time': the temporal dimensions of shared reading in families

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## ABSTRACT

Applying sociological conceptualisations of temporality in the context of families, this article explores shared reading between parents and young children. The research draws on interviews with a sample of 29 parents/carers with pre-school children (predominantly mothers) from diverse backgrounds. Reading with young children provides an illustration of multiple, varied and enmeshed familial temporalities. It fulfils a purpose for families, cementing and maintaining relationships over time. Data show that reading in families is framed by measurable time, for example, as a finite resource or as shaped by routines. In theorizing reading as temporal, simultaneously as a commodity and as relational, illuminate a specific family practice. The relational framework deployed demonstrates that these familial temporalities are enmeshed and fluid. Findings point towards the value of applying sociological perspectives on family practices in educational research. Conclusions offer insights which have the potential to consolidate understandings and support for home literacy practices.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Reading; families;  
temporalities; literacy

## Introduction

'Shared reading' entails a child's joint attention on a text with another person (typically an adult) over a sustained period and leads to co-constructed meaning. It includes children reading to an adult, vice versa or both. It is *'dynamic activity...surrounded by talk, laughter and play'* (Levy and Hall, 2021, 127) and is 'multi-modal' in that materials may be print or digital. Multiple benefits are equated with shared reading with children, including language acquisition, vocabulary breadth, talk complexity and reading skills. Though important, these reflect 'school discourses'. Research documents how families support children, yet understandings of the purposes reading serves for families is less known. Drawing on interviews with 29 parents/carers in England which sought to understand shared reading in the context of everyday family life, I suggest the merits of conceptualising reading as a familial practice that is shaped by temporality. Time is fundamental to everyday life, and within families (May 2023; Morgan 2020). These findings indicate these temporal relational dimensions can be applied to shared reading. I propose that attention to sociological

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constructions of various familial temporalities should feed into educational support, such as reading interventions, to ensure they reflect everyday family life.

Although research has illuminated reading in families, the samples are typically self-selected, white and middle-class, and studies tend to centre educational, rather than relational facets (Nichols 2000). In focusing on reading in families from diverse backgrounds, this study develops understandings of shared reading. Applying sociological theorizations highlight that reading is a family practice shaped by temporality (May 2023). I suggest that sociological approaches to family life have the potential to inform literacy studies (which includes reading, speaking, listening and writing) and educational research more broadly.

## Contextualising shared reading

Neoliberal policy and rhetoric considers parents as crucial to children's social, emotional and educational development. However, when it comes to reading, schools are positioned as 'experts' and families cast a mere supporting role (Nutbrown et al. 2017). Conceptualised as a skill, reading has become a specific area of concern leading to interventions to boost shared reading practices and a desire to understand barriers (Justice, Logan, and Damschroder 2015). However, such endeavours typically focus on formal activity and overlook incidental, everyday practices like reading road signs or deciphering labels and need to acknowledge the breadth of practices and relationships implicated (Rowse and Pahl 2020). Furthermore, limiting reading to a formal sense risks merely attending to the practices of a narrow section of society and overlooks social class, language or culture.

The article focuses on parents/carers and children who are by and large co-located. However, family relationships and living arrangements are diverse. Shared reading, its place in family life and the making of family through these practices is informed by '*diversity of family composition and the fluidity of family relationships*' (Finch, 2007, 67). Families are defined by what they *do*, rather than by what they *are* (Morgan 1996). Shared reading is simultaneously a literacy event and family practice (Hall et al., 2018). Thus, sociological family practice approaches (Morgan 1996) and literacy as a social practice (Rowse and Pahl 2020) complement one another and facilitate attunement with the minutiae of family life which is lived in time, as I will go on to demonstrate.

Time is a fundamental organising aspect of everyday life (May 2023). For sociologists of family life, families are about time and relationships take place *in* time. If time is defined as a measurable, linear, cyclical, finite commodity, determined by capitalist society, it shapes family life. Factors such as who is in paid employment or not, when they are at home, who provides childcare, when children are at school, number of languages to accommodate each come into play. Sociological conceptualisations of time emphasise on holistic approaches which encompass relational dimensions (Mason 2018; May 2023; Morgan 2020). They suggest a fluid, recursive relationship between these constructions as time-as-resource shapes family dynamics (May 2023; Zerubavel 1981). For example, the concept of *quality time* to offset limitations on time together (Gabb 2008). This provides the backdrop for shared reading. It is a family practice, an educational practice and requires time. If families and educators are to collaborate with this endeavour, a thorough understanding of both the temporality of family life and of shared reading is crucial.

Additionally, shared reading is located in childhoods. The *life course* encapsulates the mapping of lives by temporally marked phases from birth to death (Hunt 2017). Biology and/or cognitive development render childhood a distinct chapter and inform the construction of children's educational practices and routines, which include reading (James and Prout 2015). International and national policy emphasises the importance of infancy in terms of life chances, e.g. UNICEF's First 1000 Days and the Early Years Foundation Stage. In the UK, the School Readiness agenda has gained traction, establishing behaviours and benchmarks for young children ahead of school (Kay 2021). Formal education dominates childhoods, including school-age, academic years and timetables (James, 2005), and in turn, family life. This includes reading, illustrated by reading schemes which map onto age-based expectations, albeit according to arbitrary criteria, with class and culture being seen to come into play (Kay 2021). Neoliberal constructions of childhood conceptualise children as human capital, requiring investment (time and money) with a view to improved future outcomes, rather than as *children* (Qvortrup 2014). Schools apply temporal expectations to reading, making recommendations regarding how often and how long children should be reading with their families.

Conceptualising reading as a temporal family practice has the potential to consolidate literacy support, and this should be informed by a range of families in the interests of social justice (Jones 2019) and diversity of practices, so that it doesn't reflect narrow constructions of shared reading.

## Researching families

This article draws on data from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 29 parents/carers in two cities in the North of England. The study was a distinct strand of a broader research programme designed to understand shared reading and children's language development. This qualitative package explored parents' perspectives on drivers and barriers to shared reading.

## Participants

Participants were aged between 21 and 36 years, primarily aged 26 and 35. Fourteen had two or more children, predominantly aged between 3 and 5 years. The sample includes single parents, co-parents living apart, couples and multi-generational households. Participants tended to discuss the family as a whole throughout interviews. Despite seeking even representation of men and women, the recruitment strategy (outlined below) garnered interest from mothers, and just one father. This reflects the gendered nature of parenting, i.e. that recruitment spaces were typically attended by primary carers who tend to be women. Therefore, the article documents mothers' accounts, and is indicative of the suggestion that 'parent' is not a gender-neutral term and the persistent burdens on women (Vincent 2017).

Around half of the sample comprised ethnicities including Asian/Asian British ( $n=7$ ), Mixed White and Other ( $n=4$ ), Arab ( $n=3$ ) and Black ( $n=1$ ), while half identified as White British/Irish ( $n=14$ ). Four of the participants stated that their children were exposed to other languages at home either as the main language or at least on a regular basis (Arabic, Farsi, Hindi, Iranian). Educational levels were mixed: 12 participants possessed a degree

or higher qualification; 8 to GCSE/equivalent; and 5 did not have any formal qualifications. The sample includes stay at home parents (12), those in paid employment at the time of interview (13) and students (3). Of those who were employed, 5 were in educational settings as teaching assistants. Three participants were not currently employed but had prior or current experience (voluntary or paid) in education. While this could be construed as a source of cultural capital, this is undermined by the lack of recognition given to the early years workforce (Osgood 2004).

The sample consisted of two cohorts of participants, Cities A and B, recruited via different means. In both cities, participants were from areas defined as disadvantaged according to the Indices of Multiple Deprivation. This was designed to ameliorate the middle-class bias in prior children's literacy research. In City A, a researcher distributed a study flyer to parents/carers of nursery children from five schools. To broaden recruitment, a researcher attended playgroups, children's centres and health visitor drop-ins in low- and mixed-income areas. Participants with children of pre-school age were targeted to minimise the influence of school discourses of reading. In City B, participants were recruited from two parent cohorts who were attending city-wide reading sessions hosted by The Reader Organisation within schools and libraries. They had volunteered to complete a questionnaire for the main project, administered by another researcher. This colleague provided information on the qualitative study on which this article is based. A researcher leading this qualitative strand contacted prospective participants via text message.

The recruitment strategy maximised sample size and diversity. While participants resided in areas of relative disadvantage, these were predominantly white communities and so endeavours to increase the sample led to inclusion of families from more backgrounds. However, we concede that participants in City B who had registered for reading sessions, and the wider study, potentially had a prior interest in reading. Nevertheless, given the sample were largely derived from community settings ( $n = 20$ ) and the research design, we are confident in the data integrity. In recognition of their time, participants received a £10 shopping voucher.

Findings provide insights into reading as a family practice from the perspective of a mixed sample, contrasting with previous conceptualisations of parenting informed by middle-class perspectives (Dermott and Pomati 2016b). Although 11 participants were educated to degree level, 2 of whom also had a postgraduate degree, to suggest that this measure tips the sample towards the higher strata would be to overlook nuance. Firstly, the relationship between degrees and graduate careers has been weakened, exacerbated by social class, gender and ethnicity (Bathmaker, 2021). Secondly, interrogation of the demographic of these 11 participants indicates that the social mobility historically afforded by a degree may not simplistically apply to those who comprise non-white backgrounds and speak English as a second language (5), are not currently in paid employment (2) or work part-time and are in households earning less than £24,000 (2). See Table 1 for an overview.

### **Data generation**

The research set out to understand the routines, practices and relationships within families so as to ascertain how shared reading did, or did not feature in families' everyday lives. Interviews yielding participants' detailed accounts of family life were consistent with this endeavour. We were keen to understand family life broadly in acknowledgment of reading

**Table 1.** Participant details.

	Name	Age	Qualifications	Ethnicity	Child age	Household composition	Household income
1	Hadra	31–35	No formal qualifications	Asian British	3	Lives with the children's father	£24,000–£41,999
2	Katie	21–25	Degree	White British /Irish	4	Lives with child's father	£24,000–£41,999
3	Hannah	36+	Postgraduate	White British /Irish	3	Lives with child's father	£42,000+
4	Laura	31–35	Degree	White British /Irish	3	Lives with child's father who is of Asian heritage	£42,000+
5	Rebecca	36+	Degree	White British /Irish	4	Lives with child's father	£14,001 to £24,000.
6	Tania	26–30	5+ GCSEs	White British /Irish	3	Lone parent	<£14,000
7	Natalie	26–30	1–4 GCSEs	White British /Irish	3	Natalie is a lone parent; the children have regular contact with their father	<£14,000
8	Sumaira	31–35	No formal qualifications	Asian British	3	Lives with child's father	<£14,000
9	Amy	26–30	1–4 GCSEs	White British /Irish	3	Lives with child's stepfather; Maddie visits father weekly	<£14,000
10	Kylie	31–35	No formal qualifications	White British /Irish	3	Lives with child's father	£14,001 to £24,000.
11	Victoria	36+	Postgraduate	White British /Irish	3	Lives with child's father and their newborn son	£42,000+
12	Lisa	26–30	5+ GCSEs	White British /Irish	4	Lives with her children's father.	£14,001 to £24,000.
13	Bina	31–35	Degree	Asian British	3	Lives with child's father	£24,000–£41,999
14	Elizabeth	31–35	Postgraduate	White British /Irish	3	Lives with the children's father	£42,000+
15	Fiona	31–35	GCSE	White British /Irish	4	Lives with child's father	£14,000–£24,000
16	Javid (father)	36+	GCSE	Pakistani British	3	Lives with his wife and children	£14,000–£24,000
17	Latika	31–35	Postgraduate	Indian	3	Lives with child's father	£24,000–£41,999
18	Cathy	31–35	A-Level	White British /Irish	3	Lives with husband	£14,000–£24,000
19	Sarah	36+	Data not collected	Mixed White British and Black British	3	Lives with two of her four children	<£14,000
20	Mia	31–35	Degree	Pakistani British heritage and children were mixed white and Asian British	3	Lives with husband and two sons	<£14,000
21	Amal	36+	GCSE equivalent	Amal is Palestinian and her children are Palestinian /British	3	Lives with husband and three children	<£14,000
22	Roshana	36+	Degree	<i>Roshana was Iranian and her daughter was Iranian British</i>	3	Lives with husband and two children	<£14,000
23	Zainab	31–35	Data not collected	Pakistani British	1 year, 9 months	Lives with husband	£14,000–£24,000
24	Tara	21–25	NVQ Level 3	Mixed heritage including Black British, White British	4	Lives with husband	<£14,000
25	Farah	31–35	Degree	Farah was Iranian and her daughter was British Iranian	3	Lives with husband	£14,000–£24,000
26	Jo	36+	Postgraduate	White British /Irish	4	Lives with partner and two children	£24,000–£41,999
27	Kerry	31–35	5+ GCSEs	White British /Irish	4	Lives with husband and two children	<£14,000
28	Allison	26–30	A levels/NVQ Level 3	White British /Irish	4	Lives with husband and two children	£42,000+
29	Elaine	31–35	1–4 GCSEs	White British /Irish	3	Lives with her 4 children	<£14,000

as socially desirable (Kurschus 2015) and to allow reading to emerge as part of everyday family life. Consequently, interviews did not immediately interrogate reading practices but prioritised family biographies and routines. The approach applied the principles of narrative inquiry to family life (Phoenix, Brannen, and Squire 2021), eliciting narratives of family life, household members and extended networks, drops off, evening meals and bedtime. The approach facilitated rich insights into reading as located within family life. Interviews were individual, however most participants discussed the whole household and other family members throughout. Prompts invited participants to ‘*Talk through a typical day*’ resulting in accounts of daily routines in a linear fashion. The study did not specifically seek to understand temporality, time-use and therefore did not include time-use reports. However, the focus on everyday family biographies, and the temporal nature of family life (Morgan 2020) rendered it prominent.

Interviews were conducted in English in participants’ homes between 2016 and 2017 by a research team with broad sociological expertise, specifically, social inequality (Jenny Preece) and families (Mel Hall), rather than literacy. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

All families were keen to read with their children, with no differences between the cohorts, irrespective of participation in reading sessions in City B. As the study sought to understand families, the datasets were analysed together. For anonymity, this article deploys pseudonyms throughout and identifying information, including names, has been removed.

## Analysis

Analysis followed an open and thematic coding approach influenced by Braun & Clarke (2021). Upon transcription, interview data were analysed independently by each member of the research team, including Mel Hall, Jenny Preece and Rachael Levy, whose expertise lies in literacy. This entailed three phases: open-coding, code clustering and thematic-coding (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Transcripts were repeatedly read, and themes identified and compared. With a methodological approach centred around family life, time was prominent though a specific stage of data analysis interrogated for the theme of time.

Analysis of data from a diverse sample suggests that shared reading cannot be reduced to an educational endeavour but is motivated by elements of family display and practices (Hall et al. 2018). In undertaking home-based research predominantly with mothers, the article illustrates the connectedness of family members through shared reading. Sociological approaches to family temporalities (May 2023) illuminate the significance of the temporal facets of shared reading. The findings echo calls for educational research to incorporate dimensions of temporality (Lingard et al., 2017; MacLeod, 2017).

## Findings

Educational discourses typically conceptualize reading as a skill to be transmitted by practitioners, supported by parents/carers. When families do not conform to a supposed specific dictated by narrow criteria such as frequency or materials utilised, a need for professional support may be identified by educators.

This analysis extends the suggestion of reading is a family practice (Hall et al. 2018) and adds a consideration of temporal dimensions. This article employs a holistic approach



of reading materials, i.e. print, digital and so on, since the goal is to understand and support practices (Levy and Hall, 2021). Findings from interviews among a diverse socio-economic sample, illustrate the importance of temporality in how reading is incorporated, and is experienced, within families' everyday lives. Such insights into how time is utilised and experienced could be harnessed to consolidate literacy support. Data derived from predominantly mothers are used to conceptualise reading as a lifecourse and everyday temporal practice which is relational and underpinned by entangled temporalities.

### **Reading as a temporal family practice**

Time has been cited as a barrier to shared reading (Justice, Logan, and Damschroder 2015), but it is also the supporting context. Interviews indicate this was evident in terms of broad life course temporalities and everyday schedules. Participants conceptualised reading as a childhood practice grounded in life course expectations and a skill measured by age-based educational benchmarks. Across the strata, early childhood was seen to be the principal stage when reading was accomplished, with more than half of participants stating that they read with their children from infancy, or during pregnancy:

I started reading from...about four week old...I think 'cos I knew that children can see shapes and pictures and lines...I remember buying a present to someone that was born at the same time...I gave him books, and they were like 'ooh, when can I start reading to my baby?', and I was like 'now!' (laughs), yeah...it was only because I've worked in [early years settings] with babies...I knew that they'd get value out of it. (Victoria).

When she's very, very small. When she growing to 8 months, she loves this, she start, can't sleep without this story, 8 months. (Amal).

For Elizabeth, reading and childhood were synonymous: *'I think they [books] just are part of childhood to me, that's kind of what it is, and then he's really into them'*. This suggests that an appetite for reading with children informed by chronology.

However, reading with infants could also be considered pointless due to lacking attention span and understanding of the story. Perceptions of infant development and preconceptions about the appropriate response informed motivations: *'there's no point...they don't understand when they're babies'* (Sarah). There was no income-related pattern here. This suggests that reading is situated at a wider level in the contexts of children's lifecourses and in their individual child-rearing phase.

Participants' accounts of shared reading yield an insight into how time as a resource was deployed in families in the everyday. Time as a measurable unit renders it a resource to be managed, a *'commodity and a gift'* (Gabb 2008) which can be finite (May 2023). Responsibilities (e.g. employment, caring commitments), number of children, household adult:child ratios each impact availability (Tammelin et al. 2019). Findings support existing research highlighting lack of time as a general challenge, particularly for working parents (Tammelin et al. 2019), as well as prohibiting reading (Justice, Logan, and Damschroder 2015). Participants suggested time to read with children was aided or impeded by other commitments and family structure - not due to deficiencies routinely aimed at diverse families - but practicality. Roshana had two children, and her eldest had taken an increasing interest in reading, but that her youngest *'will disrupt it'*. Mia stated that her husband *'led on literacy'*

and *'he'll read him [their son] a book and then he'll put him to bed'*. Natalie, a single mother to two boys, aimed to read regularly with her children, and usually did, but it wasn't always possible:

Sometimes no...you don't have time...mostly at the weekends we miss it if they've been out because they go to bed at 7...if they don't go to bed they get cranky so their routine is very strict...sometimes I have to miss it because we just haven't had time.

Natalie raises the routines reinforced in Western culture that are regarded as fundamental to everyday life. As Morgan (2020) suggests, families comprise a complex network of routinised practices and timetables to be co-ordinated. Multiple family members experience interconnected internal rhythms that are daily, weekly or monthly or embodied. Additionally, external timetables imposed by school or 'standard' working days. Some activities are bound by time, others are less strict and can occur according to the ebb and flow of everyday life (Tammelin et al. 2019). Routines are significant to mothering in Western contexts where bedtime routines are emphasised (Lupton 2013). They are not entirely burdensome, but facilitate family life.

Bedtime is considered by family sociologists to be a critical aspect of the day, and a form of family display informed rhythms and convention (Nockolds, 2016). Earlier research has equated reading with bedtime (Nicholls, 2000). The format of interviews – inquiring as to a typical day-in-the-life of respondents – highlighted that although reading did feature at varying points for some participants and although there was no set time for many, reading was commonly the foundation of bedtime routines. Reading was introduced by some, not as an educational endeavour, but to signal bedtime, along with pyjamas and toothbrushing. Reading fulfilled a function in establishing and maintaining the routines which underpin Western households and shape parenting (Levy and Hall, 2021). As Hadra reported: *'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'*. This data shows the significance of reading as a way of managing family schedules.

Crucially, bedtime is not simply a task, but it's location at the end of the day has specific meaning. Within families - where time can be wanting on account of the number of schedules, commitments and chores - time squeezes and intense periods exist. Temporalities can be experienced at a different pace, even in the same measurement and varied emotions are implicated with different slices of time (Southerton 2020; Tammelin et al. 2019). For families, there might be a rush towards the end of the day to collect children from childcare, prepare the evening meal and complete household chores ahead of the next day and an evening associated with rest. As Sumaira stated:

'If I'm feeling well, I mean when my girl comes, it's usually about half 6 when we actually sit down and read a book, 'cos I mean [my husband] comes back at that time and it's you know just before they eat or just after she's ate, that's when she likes to read her book'.

For Victoria, reading had slow tempo and provided opportunity for rest, compared with other aspects of family life:

It's just sort of a closer time, you're sat down and it's quiet and you can snuggle in rather than being active...your life's got all those different aspects...there's a time for being active and there's a time for being quiet.

Despite the close association of reading with bedtime, another dimension worth attention is that reading, in contrast to other tasks, can be negotiated (Tammelin et al. 2019). It could be omitted entirely if time did not allow. While routines can be deeply ingrained, they are also sensitive to disruption in times of illness, difficulty or change (Tammelin et al. 2019). Data in this study described life events such as moving house, new jobs, starting school, the arrival of siblings had displaced reading activity. More mundane disruptions also occurred, particularly because time is embodied, tiredness and mood for example: *'I can't say it's always a bedtime book cos sometimes they're too tired, I'm too tired'* (Cathy).

Family life can also centre around passing time together and the perceived need to 'fill' children's time (Karsten 2015). Reading played a role here, in a similar way to the purpose it performs for adults (Smith 2000). Participants described children reading in the car, on the toilet and while waiting for adults to get up in a morning or to facilitate errands. Kylie illustrated the demands on her time, describing how she would pick up books from the supermarket: *'The easiest thing to do is go to the book aisle, let him pick a book, sit him in the trolley and then I can do my shopping'*. These might not have been shared reading activity, but showcase reading in the context of families.

Families are also the context for child/adult relations that are temporally located and this impacts reading practice. Children's agency is seen to emerge over time, and certain behaviours are considered appropriate or inappropriate depending on age. This includes skills, negotiating independence and tactile behaviours (May 2019). In narrating accounts of reading, participants illustrated relational aspects. In Cathy and Lisa's families reading presented an opportunity for intimacy, bound by time:

I want him to do it himself and not depend on me, but I'll be sad when he actually does read 'cos he won't come for cuddles or anything. (Cathy).

He gets a reading book every week from school, so we do that together, erm, but he's not as much into reading books now that he's getting older (Lisa).

Therefore, opportunities for this specific practice were anticipated to decrease over the lifecourse, finite because of changing interests and routines and reduced opportunities for physical intimacy. Additionally, the fluctuating nature of time use illustrates children's emergent agency over the lifecourse (May 2019). Bedtimes can be imposed by parents and negotiated by children who employ tactics including reading (Williams, Lowe, and Griffiths 2007). Elizabeth and Cathy each observed that children used reading – shared and independent – to postpone bedtime. The value of reading relative to other interests renders this possible in a way that might not be so successful, were it games consoles or television.

There's nights where it's like 20 past 8, half 8, he's just still sitting reading stories. We don't wanna say no to him reading stories, you know?

Sometimes I can see him looking through the pages by himself. That's a fairly new thing...that he will use the book as a way of extending his bedtime.

These relational aspects, informed by sociological conceptualisations of family life consolidate understandings of educational practices. The domestic location encourages the reorientation of this practice to encompass relational temporalities, rather than simply schooled frameworks.

## Relational temporalities and reading

Transcending linear models, relational constructions of time illuminate the contention that affinities between kin develop over time (May 2023). Shared reading facilitates close time together, repeatedly, thus developing relationships over an extended period. For example, Farah was motivated to read with her child *'Just to spend the time together'*. As Tania described:

It's dead cuddle when he's doing it...so it's always been like a bonding thing for us as well... we both gain from it, definitely, it's a good quality time... like he knows he can run round all day...and dance...but you know once you get them books out, especially for bedtime, it's our little time.

Sociological accounts of familial temporalities draw attention to the emphasis on *quality time*, particularly to counteract any loss of actual time together in Western contexts (May 2023). Modern parenting and notions of 'good' parenting, and particularly mothering, give weight to time spent with children (May 2023; Tammelin et al. 2019). This can include unplanned and unstructured 'quality moments' (Kremer-Sadlik and Paugh, 2007). Data show that reading was a conduit to 'quality' time, partly on account of its affective properties. Compared to other activities, reading was regarded as quiet and calm, an intimate practice which entailed close proximity. Reading provided an opportunity for togetherness and calm at the end of an otherwise fragmented, frantic day. As Laura stated: *'It calms him down at the end of the day...you're not running about'*. Shared reading can thus be conceptualised as an 'affective peak' which is temporally located (Kinnunen and Kolehmainen 2019). This togetherness was notable in families where there were multiple children as shared reading provided opportunities for one-on-one time with a particular child. Research has indicated the impact of siblings on young people's relationships, and how these affect educational practices as this data also reflects (Davies 2019). Elizabeth, who had recently had a second child, described how her son had needed to adjust to having a sibling. She credited reading together as supporting their relationship:

'He probably misses the one-on-one time with each of us so I've, you know, I'll leave [the baby] downstairs with his Dad and I'll go up and do bedtime and it means that me and [my son] get half an hour without [the baby], just have that one to one attention.'

Of significance here is the interplay between linear time and relational temporalities (May 2023). There is a recursive relationship that can be identified between frequency and the affirmation of relationships and practices. Repetition is salient in provoking family affinities (Baraitser, 2017). The cyclical nature of bedtime, and the intricate relationship with reading provides conditions for learning to read in Western contexts, recognising that separate sleeping spaces and times for children are not universal. There are parallels with literacy practices since the development of reading skills is contingent on repetition: sound, context and regularity of practice are each vital (Horst 2013).

Data illustrate the way in which time resources, routines and rhythms, in addition to individual, historical and familial time are entangled (May 2023; Morgan, 2011). Relationships shape families' use of time, and time builds relationships. Time is a resource to be balanced and reading is aided by the routines which structure and bind it (Scott 2009). Quality time suggests a desire to make the most of the time shared and is shaped by the pressures on everyday family life, resulting in intense and calm periods (Gabb, 2008). This

impacts how time is experienced hence the focus on quality time. Even fleeting moments are sufficient to formulate connections or 'affinities' to one another (Mason 2018). Shared reading facilitates this and thus makes an important contribution to family life. Educational research can benefit from an engagement with this and practitioners may embrace these dimensions to promote reading.

### ***Entangled temporalities***

So far, the data has focused upon the use of time in the present. However, it is vital to consider that relationships in the present are informed by past and future temporalities. As has been shown, relationships are accomplished over time, and the past, memory and shared biographies constitute intimacy (May 2023). For instance, Mia recalled her own childhood, *'my Mum and Dad told us a lot of stories, like in Punjabi...he tells that to my son as well'*. The past existed in participants' constructions of reading with their children. Alison was read with as a child and had replicated that with her own daughter.

We had a story every single night. And I've brought that in with Madison, because she has to have her bedtime...There were seven of us, we'd sit around, me Mum would read story and we'd go to bed at different times but we'd all have that story together.

This resonates with Holmes (2019) research on material culture which draws attention to temporalities of particular objects and that passing objects to kin binds relationships. Similarly, shared reading as a practice achieves this, including materials adopted. Memories of childhood reading informed the reading materials parents chose for their children. Elizabeth and Tara had returned to favourites from their own childhoods, evoking nostalgia.

I remember sorting out things for the baby, and I remember bringing down from the attic all the baby books that I wanted to definitely read with him, so I made like a pile of books and most of those books were books that I'd read with my Mum, so it was kind of a sentimental thing, 'oh I definitely wanna read Baby's Catalogue, 'cos I remember reading that with my Mum', and 'oh, what's this book I've, I don't remember that at all', and rejecting it...It was kind of definitely a memory thing for me (Elizabeth).

My Mr Men books from when I was little...you put them all together it said 'Mr Men and Little Miss' when you stood them all up...so they've still got them, I kept them, and they've got them, they love them. (Tara)

This suggests that it is not just time as a unit to be measured in reading, or relationships in the present, but that the past bleeds into the present, both as a unit of time and as relational because experiences can't be quantified (May 2023). Reading is an example of 'relational flows' (Mason 2018).

Use of time in the present was informed by the future. As Luotonen (2022, 2) states, *'Imagining and anticipating future trajectories shape our understanding of the present'*. This maps onto children's lives as they tend to be positioned as 'becomings', proto-adults in the future, rather than themselves in the present (Qvortrup 2004). Thus, policy places emphasis on what parents/carers should do in order to produce skilled and valued citizens *of the future*. Those who don't conform to these expectations may be constructed as deficient (Shirani, Henwood, and Coltart 2012). There is an explicit link to the economy in terms of future skills, including literacy. There is a persistent framing of a deficit among lower socio-economic groups (Gillies 2011) contradicted by research which indicates a desire

among working class parents to ensure their children's skills for the future (Lareau 2003; Reay 2005). Social mobility is itself a future orientated goal, contingent on the acquisition of cultural capital and skills in the present. This maps onto children's reading. Data confirm that families from a range of backgrounds are keen to work towards academic success (Fakou, 2024).

When discussing motivations for reading with their children, some of this was rooted in their children as future beings, as Tania said of the time she spent reading with her son: *'It's all going towards his future, isn't it?'* There was a desire to ensure children developed skills to learn in the future or a love for reading as adults, correlating with literacy as a skill and reading as cultural capital, and future educational endeavours (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977):

I've got certain memories in English where I couldn't read certain words and I used to have to ask the teacher and obviously you don't wanna have to ask the teacher in front of kids, I can remember it was a big long word and I remember thinking, I didn't know what it was and I got the question wrong...I don't want them to have to do that, want them to be able to read it and just worry about what the question says (Natalie).

Getting him familiar with books and that...as he goes to primary and secondary and then, all being well university...just like education...give him that good foundation for later life' (Javid).

'I want him to have a love for reading' (Victoria)

This reflects the normative tendency to situate children as future beings, highlighting theorizations of child development and socialization as rooted in a journey towards adulthood (James and Prout, 2003). This speaks to the aforementioned discourses of school readiness (Kay 2021). Numeracy and literacy are key indicators and it is parents and carers who are under scrutiny - for some than others, e.g. on account of social class and languages (Gillies 2011). Future-oriented approaches to reading has implications for what we understand reading to be *for* which in turn impacts children's relationships with reading and can be counterproductive. Extant research on reading schemes and the so-called 'schools discourse' of reading which privileges skill over enjoyment deter children from reading and can be detrimental to the very skills that they seek to promote (Levy 2011). Conceptualising reading simply as a future oriented skill demonstrates the pervasive role of adulthood employment in children's everyday lives (James and Prout 2015). The present study however, underlines the merits of valuing enjoyment of reading in the present (Cremin, 2022). The data demonstrates that shared reading makes a contribution to families' everyday lives in the present and that education can benefit from understandings of this.

Data also demonstrate how past family practices influence current ones and affirm bonds. They indicate that envisaging the future, and parents' perceived roles in their child's education informs present activity. To conceptualise time simply as a quantitative resource in too short supply does not capture what time does for families. Time permeates family relationships, with a multitude of temporalities – understandings of time and specifically, the movement between past, present and future - fostering intimacy and belonging (Mason 2018; Morgan 2020). While time is typically organised according to a linear flow of past-present-future, these temporal modalities are entangled. Experiences of the present might be shaped by our pasts vis-a-vis biographies and memories, or of our expectations of the future (Adam 2013) and these are experienced in family, relationships and education.



Reading is not merely an instrumental skill but is located in biographies, relationships and entangled temporalities. What is notable about this data is that families in a range of circumstances – single parents, working patterns, number of children, languages spoken – were committed to shared reading with their children, and highlight the contribution it made to their family lives.

## Conclusions and implications

I have theorized how the temporality of family life shapes shared reading practices among a diverse sample in terms of income and ethnicity. Drawing on sociological approaches to families and relationships, I suggest that reading fulfils a multitude of functions for families, managing schedules and facilitating relationships. Family practices which happen behind closed doors, are mundane with personal meanings taken for granted. This data details a specific family practice and presents a tangible means of exploring the often abstract, intangible dimensions of family life. Families spend time together in a multitude of ways as scholars in personal life have shown, for example, sharing mealtimes and holidays. A focus on time together, proximity and social interaction has yielded unique insights into shared reading and family life. Shared reading practices allow families to showcase their *'uniqueness' while 'also reflecting social conventions and reproducing commonplace ritual and practices'* (Smart, 2007, 51). The lenses utilised in studies of family and personal life are useful for understanding literacy practices. Because reading practices are embedded in routines, it is vital to acquire a comprehensive appreciation of everyday family life, including temporalities. The data indicate that shared reading is something that families across the piece do for a variety of reasons and temporality informs this: the availability of time as a resource in the present, a relationship to the past and a look ahead to the future. Reading illustrates the temporality of family life and the fluidity of these temporalities. The temporal divide between home/family and work/education is increasingly porous, for example, the increase in work from home practices, and this is viewed as a threat (May 2023). What has been demonstrated in this article is an activity that can be conceptualised as simultaneously educative and familial.

Framing reading as a family practice has implications for educational practice (Levy and Hall, 2021). Literacy support tends to position educators as the experts, with families providing crucial support (Nutbrown et al. 2017) – and findings suggests that families are meeting their end of the bargain. To ensure a reciprocity here, this data offers insights for practitioners to understand the family contexts for children's reading. In centering family practices, the data have illuminated the significance of reading to families which have the potential to be apprehended by practitioners. Family support designed to boost reading have assumed a deficit and distil reading practice from family contexts (Levy and Hall, 2021). However, that families who are economically disadvantaged or with lower educational status do not participate in 'high profile' and 'good' parenting practices is a fallacy (Dermott and Pomati 2016a). This research has developed existing scholarship to show that families across the social strata are motivated to read with their children for educational purposes but that the value transcends this. The data indicate the important contribution it makes to the mechanics of family life and intimacy and these lenses illuminate literacy practices. Families enjoy shared reading practices and do so in the context of routines and struggles. Insights into shared reading as temporally situated can inform support for families embarking on, sustaining, enhancing shared reading. Given that

previous research (Justice, Logan, and Damschroder 2015) cites time as a barrier to reading with children, attention to the temporal dimensions of this family practice is required. As I have suggested, shared reading happens precisely because of everyday family life, but any endeavours that are designed to promote this should be informed by sociological understandings of family life. Practitioners of course occupy an important role to play but efforts must be embedded in family life and position families as experts, contrasting with schooled constructions that typically dominate constructions of reading and privilege practitioners.

The data point towards the benefits of uniting branches of sociology. In this case, applying families and relationships to literacy and educational research consolidates understandings of overlapping practices such as reading. The family centred approach also opens up the possibility of a collective approach to reading, reframing it not as an individual challenge to work on in a neo-liberal sense but relational and to be enjoyed. The data demonstrate the gains to be made from heeding the calls of academics in family and intimacy, who suggest a *'move away from a goal-oriented, individualised framework which limits articulations and understanding of what it means to be a parent and instead acknowledge the significance of intimacy, emotionality and reciprocity; elements that are present- rather than future orientated'* (Dermott and Pomati 2016a, 139). There is potential to apply these sensibilities to reading support. This typically focuses on skills and resources, for example, story sacks and library located sessions. Practitioners might encourage parents/carers to reflect on their family lives with a view to considering how reading already happens and how this might be capitalised upon. Indeed, interest in the temporality of shared reading and family routines is apparent in endeavours to promote reading with babies with interventions such as the Booktrust's *Book, Bath and Bed* campaign seeking to embed shared reading in family practices to inform future activity. Being informed by everyday family life could enhance this and family sociology offers valuable insights to be capitalised on, with the added advantage of meeting the preferences of multiple family members (May 2023). To conceptualise reading as a temporal, family practice augments understandings can offer a starting point for those seeking to support families with this practice.

Understandings of parenting practices are permeated by a socio-economic bias with intensive parenting and concerted cultivation framed as the preserve of the middle-classes (Vincent and Maxwell 2016), while working class parents are maligned (Allen and Osgood 2009). The mixed sample extends a growing body of research that calls such assumptions into question, including in literacy. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that the influence of class is consistently underplayed while the impacts of material deprivation are compounded and neglected (Skeggs 2004). Endeavours to change family practices, such as reading, require family members to change their use of time. The number of schedules that require co-ordination and the well-established routines mean that this is a significant undertaking. The temporal analysis here reflects Gillis' (2005) argument that it is not that individuals need to use time better – they are using it – but structural inequality such as social class, the gendered nature of parenting and atypical working patterns impact this (Tammelin et al. 2019). The diversity of the sample in terms of languages spoken highlights that those who predominantly spoke languages other than English in the home, (Latika, Farah, Roshana, Amal) were making time to read with their children in English, challenging any assumptions around deficits that might be applied to such families. It is clear that more



research is required to understand shared reading in multilingual families, which takes into account agency and nuances of practices.

The study highlights the merits of temporal methodologies during data collection *via* biographical approaches as well as during the resultant analysis. The study had not purposely set out to explore the temporality of shared reading, but in employing a biographically-informed approach, yielded a description of the role of reading in families' everyday lives, centering families and their agency. To fully understand taken for granted, hidden and socially desirable practices, such approaches are useful. The field of families and relationships has an established track record here (Gabb, 2009). The findings extend calls for educational research to further consider temporality (Lingard and Thompson 2017; McLeod 2017). This is especially important in accessing experiences of phenomena that examine socially desirable phenomena, such as reading, and expose the moralities applied to parenting. That some groups are subjected to greater scrutiny compared with others, for example, social class, ethnicity or gender adds weight to this (Dermott and Pomati 2016a).

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