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Family literacy practices in Scotland and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

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Chapter 6
Family Literacy Practices in Scotland and the Impact of the COVID–19 Pandemic

Gale Macleod

Moray House School of Education and Sport, UK

Lyn Tett

iD https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0504-2552

Moray House School of Education and Sport, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on two studies that explored the adaptations made by community learning and development workers supporting family learning and literacy projects during the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland. Both studies were small-scale and largely qualitative, with data generated with parents (Study 1) and practitioners (Studies 1 and 2). Findings suggest that despite all the challenges, including dealing with digital inequality, there was a strong sense of continuation in terms of purpose, principles, and partnership. Both studies identified a desire for a blended approach to continue post pandemic, recognizing that while online made access easier for some groups, in-person provision allows for a sharing of experiences and learning together that can be a challenge to replicate online.

INTRODUCTION

It has been quite a long while (since the "almost" lockdown) for our family to meet and talk to other families (or anyone). It was great to meet and to listen to other people. When others read the book on the Teams meeting, it made us feel that we were all connected. They say no man is an island and we felt so when getting inputs from others.

-Parent talking about his experience of an online group

In Scotland, community learning and development (CLD) practitioners are based in the community and address the learning needs of adults, particularly disadvantaged individuals. They have a key role in supporting parents in their communities and through their children's schools (Tett, 2019). CLD is charged with providing learning opportunities that 'empower participants to address relevant issues in their lives, and that of their community' (Communities Scotland, 2003: 9). This means it has a different focus from mainstream education in its underpinning ideology, its methods, and its curriculum. Its ideology aims to deepen democracy and improve the quality of life for those that are the most disadvantaged in society (Kane, 2013). Its methods are to encourage and engage people in learning that is relevant to them, so it is responsive to community priorities identified *with* people rather than *for* them. Rather than having a pre-set curriculum it uses people's experience and interests to build the learning program because the acknowledgement of learners' lived experiences provides rich resources for their emotional and social development (Baquedano-López, Alexander & Hernandez, 2013). This CLD approach is similar to empowerment-focused adult education in Europe, (Van Steensel et al. 2011) the US (Perkins et al., 2017) and China (Zhang & Perkins 2022).

An important area of practice in CLD work (alongside youth work, adult learning, and community development) is family learning, which includes family literacy. The work is underpinned by a 'funds of knowledge' approach (González et al., 2005) that focuses on the assets that learners bring rather than their deficits. This framework helps practitioners to identify and build on the creative ways families make their way through life by uncovering and documenting families' knowledge and resources and then using these to stimulate learning and inform the curriculum (Lynch & Prins, 2021 p.65). During the COVID-19 pandemic the demand for these practitioners to provide a bridge between home and schools was greatly increased.

In this chapter we draw on two previously un-reported studies which explore the experiences of family learning and family literacy practices in Scotland during the pandemic. Both studies examined the challenges and opportunities afforded by the pandemic for professionals in this sector and assess the extent to which the lessons learned during the period of school closures might continue to influence practice post-COVID. After introducing the Scottish context, and the methodologies of the two studies we report findings first from Study One: an evaluation of a family learning project which started in person in February 2020 but very quickly pivoted online in March 2020. Next, we report findings from Study Two which focused on the adjustments CLD practitioners made to their learning and teaching approaches in response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also explored the changes that these practitioners anticipated would persist once the pandemic is over. By pulling together the experiences from parents and CLD workers in the Discussion we provide a holistic picture of how the pandemic affected and continues to shape home-school relationships in Scotland.

THE SCOTTISH CONTEXT

The Scottish context of this chapter is important because, since the enactment of *Scottish Schools Parental Involvement Act* (2006), the policy has aimed to welcome parents 'as active participants in the life of the school and encouraged [them] to express their views on school education and work in partnership with the school' (Scottish Executive, 2006 p.1). The Act placed a responsibility on the 32 local government authorities to: 1) improve the involvement of parents through recognizing the importance of and supporting learning at home and in the community; 2) ensure home-school partnerships reflected a shared

partnership in supporting children's learning; and 3) provide opportunities for parents to have a say on matters affecting their children's education, through a Parent Council (Scottish Executive, 2006).The argument is made that parents 'play a vital role at all stages of education' (ibid, p. 5) and so parents' active involvement is seen as a positive asset to the school. More recently policy has focused on the twin aims of 'closing the poverty-related attainment gap' and 'improvements in parental confidence and parenting skills' (Education Scotland, 2016 p.4). Because the policy agenda in Scotland gives equal emphasis to the development of parents, family-learning programs (FLPs) are delivered by CLD staff with expertise in community engagement. The CLD role is to negotiate with headteachers (HTs) on the style and scope of the program to be delivered in their schools and then develop and deliver an appropriate curriculum in collaboration with parents.

Research (Milbourne 2005; Tett, 2001) has shown that CLD practitioners can support parents in ways that value their knowledge. This is because they understand the local community and home circumstances and care about parents as people that have a lot to offer the school. They can also act as intermediaries in facilitating effective communication between the home and the school (Timmons & Pelletier, 2015) and help parents to access other services and demystify information about the services that are available (Milbourne, 2005). The FL programs themselves provide supportive social spaces where networks can be built, friendships formed and parents' own development can be prioritized (Marandet & Wainwright, 2017). In these ways the CLD practitioners can act as bridges in building up the capacity of parents to develop their engagement with the school through exposing them to new ideas and perspectives about the value of their own knowledge. CLD practitioners can also help parents to have their voices heard through challenging HTs in ways that are likely to be positively received by them through creating a 'culturally responsive climate' (Auerbach, 2010, p.730) where parents and schools respect the expertise that each brings to the education process.

An important role of the CLD practitioners is to develop connections and build social capital especially the *bridging,* (connections between heterogeneous groups who are dissimilar in a demonstrable fashion, such as age, socio-economic status, race/ethnicity and education, Leonard, 2004; Woolcock, 1998) and *linking* (the extent to which relationships can be built between individuals and the institutions that have relative power over them e.g. to provide access to services or resources, Hawkins & Maurer, 2010; Lin 2001) forms of social capital. In a recent study of home-school relationships in Scotland, Tett and Macleod (2020) found that these types of social capital enabled CLD practitioners to build bridges between HTs and parents through the deployment of a range of strategies including engaging with the HTs so that they were persuaded about the value of working with parents, finding teachers who were allies and providing opportunities for the parents to go into the school.

THE TWO STUDIES

Background to the Two Studies

The first study evaluated a family learning project, funded by the Scottish Government Equalities and Equity fund, originally planned to be delivered entirely face-to-face but quickly adapted to online delivery as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The project was led by the Moray House Read Write Count Group[1] - a collaborative group including members from the University of Edinburgh, The Scottish Book Trust and the City of Edinburgh Council. Since 2015 the Scottish Book Trust has donated Read,

Write, Count (RWC)[2] book bags to all pupils in Primary 2 and 3. The family learning project supported families who were likely to find it challenging to engage with the RWC resource and/or with the school prior to the pandemic in a traditional face to face classroom. Specifically, it worked with groups learning English, fathers, and kinship carers.

An experienced CLD professional was employed to design and deliver a series of workshops for families in a range of settings, e.g., schools, libraries and community centers. She devised a program titled 'Help Your Child to Learn' which had to be adapted rapidly for online delivery. There were four groups, three of which met for two weeks face to face before moving online whereas the fourth, which started later, was entirely online. To enable the online delivery, she developed short videos to continue to support work with the parents. The videos included an arts-based activity based on characters or events in one of the books in the RWC bag. These activities were designed to support learning in literacy and Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematic subjects. For example, one video showed children making a 'rocket ship' out of an old bottle and bicycle pump, another demonstrated ways of decorating the rockets and different ways of measuring and recording the distance they travelled. Several continuing professional development (CPD) sessions were run later in 2020 and 2021 for teachers and libraries staff to introduce them to the video resource and to the principles underpinning family learning approaches, including the importance of a 'funds of knowledge' approach. An evaluation of the 'Help Your Child to Learn' program using interviews with parents, and pre- and post- workshop question-naires suggested the need for family learning professionals to take on a mediating role between home and school during the pandemic.

The second study was self-funded and was designed to examine the experience of CLD practitioners working in community-based adult learning (CBAL) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most CBAL provision involves creating and enacting learner-centered curricula that arise from issues in the com-munity. The provision of CBAL is spread throughout Scotland and practitioners are mainly employed by Local Government (LA). Practitioners work in a variety of community settings that include community centers, libraries and schools that are accessible by the local community.

The focus of the research was on the impact of the changes designed to reduce the pandemic's spread including the closure of community centers and social distancing measures, and the consequential need to move provision away from face-to-face to online learning. The practitioners interviewed were reporting on their experiences of these changes in family literacy and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) projects. The move to online learning generated increased workloads caused by having to find new ways of working with learners, as well as not always having the equipment necessary to enable high quality teaching and learning to take place. However, practitioners were able to support each other through online CPD sessions at both the local and national levels. These spaces enabled them to continue to work in the ways that they valued that were based on empowering learners and treating them with empathy and committed engagement.

Methodologies

In this section we first describe the individual methodologies in each study and then the commonali-ties. Study One used a sequential mixed methods approach with pre- and post- program questionnaires and follow-up interviews. Written and verbal feedback offered by participants was also drawn on. The Research Questions guiding the evaluation were:

- What changes, if any, do parents attribute to participation in the program?
- What effect, if any, did the CLD professional have on relationships between home and school?
- How were parents' experiences of the program affected by the move to online delivery?

Parents participating in the program were invited to complete a one-page written questionnaire before the first, and after the final, meetings of their group. The questionnaire asked parents to rate their confidence on a scale of 1 – 10 across 10 activities such as 'Reading with your child(ren)', 'Visiting the library with your child(ren)' and 'Helping your child(ren) with their homework'. It also asked them to record how often in the past week they had done various things with their child, e.g., listening to them read, talking with them about their schoolwork, and looking at the RWC books and activities with their child.

In total 17 at least partially completed responses were received, 15 of which agreed to be contacted for interview. These 15 parents were invited to an interview first by email and then phone. Of these six did not reply, one was not contactable and three replied to say they had too much on. Individual interviews were conducted with the remaining five; one father and four mothers. Two researchers (this chapter's authors) used the same semi-structured interview schedule to ensure consistency. Questions addressed practical aspects of the group such as ease of access, what they had hoped to get out of it. They were also asked whether there were any changes in what they did with their child and how they thought about it which they attributed to taking part in the group. The four mothers were native Arabic speakers, and their interviews were facilitated by a translator. All the mothers had attended one of the ESOL specific groups. Interviews took place on either *Zoom* or *Microsoft Teams* depending on the preference of the parent and lasted around 30 minutes. Interviews were automatically transcribed by the recording software and a thematic analysis (Creswell & Poth 2018) was carried out. All names are pseudonyms and quotes from the mothers are via the translator.

Study Two was a qualitative research project with the overall aim of investigating what changes impacted CLD practitioners during the COVID-19 pandemic. This led to the following research questions:

- What were the changes experienced by practitioners and how did they respond?
- What were the positive and negative consequences of these responses?

Participants were contacted by email and asked to complete an informed consent form. Following this a questionnaire was sent that asked about: changes in the focus of participants' work during the pandemic, the opportunities and constraints these changes offered, and any changes they anticipated would continue after the pandemic. This questionnaire was followed by an online interview lasting around 40 minutes. The sample of participants was purposive (Patton, 2002) because it involved selecting individuals. Three criteria were identified for participants: they had to be knowledgeable about projects that took a learner-focused approach to practice; they had responsibility for provision in one or more organizations in their geographical area; they had five years or more experience of working in CLD. Key informants were used to identify individuals working in locations that would meet these criteria. Thirty-five individuals were approached and sixteen agreed to participate. They were drawn from eight different Local Authority (LA) areas including the three largest cities. Twelve people were employed by Local Authorities and 4 by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). They were all involved in community-based adult learning, mostly in family literacy and ESOL projects. All the participants were very experienced (working in CLD on average for more than 10years) and well qualified with everyone having at least an undergraduate degree.

In both studies ethical approval was received from the local authority and the host University's ethics committee. BERA's (2018) ethical guidelines were followed to ensure 'an ethic of respect' (p.5). Particular attention was made to ensuring; anonymity, informed consent, the right to withdraw, transparency, and privacy. The questionnaires and recorded interviews were analyzed thematically (Creswell & Poth 2018) in both studies. In the analysis, each data-item was given equal attention in the coding process and themes were checked against each other. This method of analysis has the advantage of giving a holistic picture rather than a fragmented view of individual variables. In addition, the analysis fitted with findings from the literature and therefore evidences analytic generalizability (Yin, 2014).

There were limitations to both studies. The samples are small and self-selecting, so the findings are not generalizable. However, the data are used to illuminate, rather than validate, the findings and so these limitations have not affected the outcomes. Consequently, we believe that the parents' and practitioners' experiences add to a growing body of knowledge about the important role of CLD professionals and their approach to family learning

FINDINGS

Study One

All the parents interviewed were reflecting on their experiences of workshops which had started face-to-face but had then moved online. One of the most successful elements of the program (in terms of increase in confidence measured through pre and post - workshop questionnaires) was the session which focused on sign-posting families to other resources in their community. Family Learning programs often function as bridges to other services through onward referral and this was no different with these online groups. One of the kinship carers wrote to say, *"…thank you for referring us to Discover. Huge big box of fresh food arrived yesterday along with some arts n crafts materials for N. He now has quite the collection when added to your bag of goodies!!"* Confidence in accessing other services and resources increased by an average of more than 5 on a 10-point scale following an online guided tour of visiting the virtual library delivered in partnership with a Lifelong Learning Library Information colleague and 'Visit your Local Library Online' video. The project worker reported that after the session one parent commented, *"I'm confident. I've been on to book out audio books for myself and the children. I use the Libby App that you and the librarian showed us."*. While the following week another noted that once they had started, how easy it was to *"click on the links to find out new ideas to try out"*

Most parents reported a general lack of confidence in helping with schoolwork, and that the workshops helped them understand the approach to learning and teaching used in school. This in turn gave them the confidence to support their child's learning at home as they were less anxious about doing something 'wrong'. The group made a difference both to what some parents did with their children and to how they thought about it. Nalini said that she *"liked the idea of learning through play"*, which was new to her, and this is something that has stuck with her since the group ended. Abeer talked about how her son now uses some of the skills he learned in the group at home, she said that whereas he used to throw toilet roll and kitchen roll away he now *"makes it into castles"*. Abeer also talked about how her own confidence in helping her children with learning activities had improved. She described how she sometimes reads the books herself to improve her English, and reported that *"when my son had 'shapes*

homework' from school I was able to remind him of work we had done in the group" and this enabled her to help him with his homework.

The family learning approach also supported parents to see the day-to-day activities they took part in with their children as learning opportunities and were helped to make connections between such activities and school-based learning. Douglas, one of the fathers, wrote this reflection:

I never thought about it before I talked with you, that the things we like to do together - like walking through the woods, counting the birds and playing games like Monopoly, using the books, games and things from the RWC bag was helping him with his math and reading. You opened my eyes to thinking of things around us at home that we just enjoy doing through our day together as ways to help his learning.

In interview, Douglas added that an important change for him because of his participation in the group was in his relationship with his son because he said he no longer judged the quality of what his son does by his own standards and that this had made helping with homework easier.

Reflecting on their experiences, parents, particularly those learning English reported that they had previously had very little awareness of what happened in the classroom, and welcomed the workshops. When asked their preference for online or in-person working in the future the response from parents was mixed. They both missed the in-person interaction that they had enjoyed before the program moved online, but also appreciated how easy it was to take part from their own home. All the mothers talked about their concern that they were not able to support their children's learning properly because their own English was not good enough. For example, Abeer said she would welcome having someone to check on whether her children are reading properly because, "*normally the child would pick up the word from their mother and the mother doesn't speak the language properly*". Oma had hoped that the group would have more time spent reading the stories to her daughter so that her daughter could learn to say words "*the proper way*".

The schools of the parents attending the workshops welcomed the support because of multiple demands on their time as they worked to develop resources which could be used by families in the home. In the final project-worker's report, reflecting on the experience of adapting an approach traditionally used in in-person settings to the online environment, she re-iterated that the principles underpinning the intervention were the same, regardless of the mode of delivery. These were that the focus should be on interactive learning for parents and their children, based on what parents have at home and drawing on their prior experience. It should involve peer learning, with families taking part in activities and reflecting together on the learning. She also reflected on the isolation experienced during lockdown, noting this was a common feeling experienced by several families. She told how everyone acknowledged the fact that they were all affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the knock-on-effects of lockdown. All the adults, including herself, enjoyed meeting with other adults at the weekly online face to face meetings, and the children were excited to see each other at their weekly club. She reports a solidarity and a real focus on supporting the children's learning with recognition that they were, "*all in the same boat*" and "*on a level playing field*" working together to make progress together through difficult circumstances.

One parent highlighted the sense of connectedness that participation provided:

It has been quite a long while (since the "almost" lockdown) for our family to meet and talk to other families (or anyone). It was great to meet and to listen to other people. When others read the book on

the Teams meeting, it made us feel that we were all connected. They say no man is an island and we felt so when getting inputs from others. (Douglas)

For some of the families this sense of isolation would have been new while for others, for example the mothers in the English as a Second Language (ESOL) group, many of whom were recent arrivals to the city who had not yet formed connections, and the kinship carers for whom taking on the role often results in a reduction in networks (Selwyn et al, 2013), this sense of isolation pre-dated the pandemic.

Despite the success of the project, there were some difficulties encountered in the rapid move to online. Prior to the start of the project initial discussion included access and use to digital devices, broadband and other technical considerations. It was important that all parents had access to a device, and the digital platform chosen should be the same as that used for children by their school so that parents can also be supported when necessary to become comfortable in the use of that technology. Ultimately *Microsoft Teams* was chosen as the appropriate platform with parents and care givers able to join the weekly sessions through their child's online account. This meant that the parents could utilize devices which had been set up by the child's school, which was ideal in reducing this potential barrier to learning. Some issues persisted, for example one family did not have a large enough broadband data package and due to other sibling use of the internet in the house, their connection could be intermittent at times.

Having delivered the project in both off and online forms the project worker concluded that both should be offered in future. This was seen as a way of reaching those families who can often find engaging with the school a challenge, whilst recognizing that many of the features of family learning practice, such as interaction and reflection, are easier to establish during in-person sessions. This important finding was replicated in Study Two to which we now turn.

Study Two

Almost all practitioners experienced difficulties in moving provision online at the beginning of the CO-VID -19 pandemic because of their own limited knowledge about digital learning. CPD opportunities were provided to support online learning and embed safeguarding procedures before classes could restart and some practitioners found this frustrating because of the delay in them being able to contact learners.

Supporting beginning learners to get online and then adjusting teaching and learning approaches so that they were still at the center of provision was often a struggle. One reason was the lack of teaching materials – "*we have had to make our own materials and that has been very time-consuming*" (Jean). Several participants pointed out that online meetings limited the interactions between learners and made small group discussion difficult unless learners had good technology. Some found, however, that if they focused on the learners and offered a person-centered service then it was possible to "*navigate a suitable path*" (Julie). One had "*been able to support learners on a 1-1 basis because if they don't get into a group then they lose confidence, and you need warm-up support*" (Nicholas). In another LA it was reported that, "*Learners have had a lot of input from the team to encourage and support them to go online. … The staff just give it the time it takes. We now have learners helping other learners and it may have really taken off*" (Julie).

As both practitioners and learners became familiar with digital technologies it became more possible to discuss the family learning practices that were taking place in the home. The practitioners reported that this was because participants felt more able to share their strengths and difficulties when they were joining the group from their homes rather than coming into the school. Being in their familiar home-place

where they felt comfortable gave the learners more confidence to express their own views and share their experiences. This was particularly the case when there was a diverse group of people who, despite their differences, found that they had issues in common around helping their children.

Many Refugees and Asylum Seekers, who were in touch with family in countries that had been particularly impacted by the COVID -19 pandemic, were very anxious about mixing outside the home because "*of the horrific problems in their home countries means that they prefer online learning … [because] they are all worried about safety*" (Jane) and found learning online provided a safe space in which they could share issues and practices. Some, however, were "*more digitally savvy because they are used to keeping in touch with their friends and relatives through digital devices*" (Faith). Others only had smart phones that weren't effective for online learning and that meant that staff had to "*find suitable equipment*" (often by applying for external funding) … "*because going online is partly about confidence but also having the right equipment and getting enough on-going support*" (Rory). The effectiveness of online learning depended on the stage that people had reached since with beginners "*contacting them by phone doesn't work as they can't understand you and you need the face-to-face interaction*" (Lucy).

While online learning had some disadvantages it enabled people to go on learning during the pandemic. One result of this was that participants thought that blended learning might become embedded after the pandemic was over. Those working in rural areas found online learning was particularly useful especially where there were small numbers "*because we operate on language levels [online learning] means we can get viable groups together*" (Julie). Others were concerned, however, that if online learning became the main means of engaging with learners, then learners would miss out on "*the opportunity to try out other things that might not have occurred to them as well as engaging in the informal learning that happens through peer support*" (Rory).

There was a consensus that online learning for staff was very useful as it allowed them to "*participate in meetings, training, and networking more easily*" (Olivia). These opportunities were available locally through self-organized groups within LAs and nationally through CPD sessions hosted by *Education Scotland*. The participants reported that they found all these forms of support helpful in enhancing their confidence "*that they were doing the right things*" (Faith) especially because of the opportunities to learn from their peers. One commented that being part of a group that you trusted made it possible to "*share your failures because you knew that this community would help you to do better next time*" (Mary).

Practitioners considered that, once the pandemic was over, they would make more use of online learning because it made provision more accessible to a diverse range of learners. They wanted, however, to continue with face-to-face groups because they considered they offered participants an opportunity to meet with others, combat isolation and share experiences as they learn together in a multi-faceted way that was not possible in online learning. This meant that their preference was for blended learning that would enable both face-to-face and online learning to be offered. This is consistent with the findings in Study One in which the practitioner wanted to see a mixture of online and face-to-face opportunities offered.

Despite the intense pressure from the increased workloads caused by having to find new ways of working with learners, as well as not always having the equipment necessary to enable high quality teaching and learning to take place, practitioners kept going. What kept them going was being part of a professional learning community that supported them to stay true to their values and commitment to adults' learning. This professional culture of being open and responsive to learners and making use of their wider experience, enabled them to focus on engaging learners and respecting the knowledge that they brought with them. Practitioners were able to support each other through online CPD sessions at both the local and national levels and these spaces enabled them to continue to work in the ways that

they valued based on empathy and committed engagement with learners. These shared understandings of 'good practice' were developed through interactions with colleagues that reinforced a collective understanding of what were fundamental principles for delivering programs.

The resilience that the Scottish practitioners showed has also been displayed by people working in adult education in other countries who have gone above and beyond their duties in supporting their students and their communities (James & Thériault, 2020). As Housel (2021, p. 2) argues, to be effective, practitioners "must be approachable and accessible and be mindful of each student's unique learning needs" and it appears that practitioners have striven to do exactly this even in the difficult situations generated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

DISCUSSION

In this section we bring together the perspectives of parents and CLD practitioners to consider the ways in which their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic may influence their relationships and practices in the future. Across the two studies, common themes emerged around the challenges and opportunities of working in the digital realm and a desire for a blended approach to continue post pandemic. However, what also emerged was a strong sense of continuation in terms of purpose, principles and partnership.

Challenges and Opportunities of Digital Innovation

The last two years have seen an explosion of literature, particularly from Health and Social Care and Education around the ways in which different professional groups, traditionally offering in-person support, have adapted to remote working during lock-down. The adaptations have generated new vocabulary as reported by Lee and Lee (2021) "*untact* (i.e., no contact), *ontact* (i.e., contact through online media), *intact* (i.e., interactive contact: no face-to-face communication), and *digitact* (i.e., digital contact or digital face-to-face)." (2021, p. 1). The projects reported on in this chapter both fall into the 'digitact' category. As in other fields (e.g., Bowers et al., 2021), CLD staff responded with great creativity and flexibility to the challenges presented by remote working. However, the literature warns of possible long-term damage to traditional and established ways of working (Lee & Lee, 2021), the challenges of building trusting relationships (Bowers et al., 2021; Liberati, et al., 2021), exacerbation of feelings of isolation and disempowerment (Burke & Larmar, 2021), and the loss of 'hands-on' learning (Day et al., 2021)

Intersecting Inequalities and the Digital Divide

Perhaps the biggest concern in previous research and one which was also a theme in both studies, is the intersectionality of disadvantages which were compounded by the COVID–19 pandemic (Liberati et al., 2021). In seeking to understand the complexity of digital inequalities and how these apply to family learning practice, Lynch and Prins (2021) draw on Van Dijk and Hacker's (2003) analysis of how inequalities across different kinds of access impact on digital literacy. The four dimensions of access which Van Dijk (1999) argued are important to consider are: 'mental' (including anxiety and motivation), 'material' (both devices and networks), 'skills', and 'usage'. While material access is often seen as the primary issue to be resolved, Van Dijk (1999) predicted as early as 1999 that a growing usage gap between those sections of the population who use advanced technology in all aspects of daily life and

those who use it almost exclusively for entertainment-based applications, would further exacerbate the digital divide. This was evident in both our studies. Van Dijk and Hacker (2003) caution that because this 'usage' gap is viewed as a matter of personal choice it risks being ignored in policy responses. It is important therefore to recognize that digital inequalities cannot be addressed through provision of devices and network access alone, but that the 'usage gap' must also be overcome.

The impact of pre-existing digital inequalities on adult education programs is not confined to Scotland. For example, Housel (2021) reported that many students in in the US 'had to rely on mobile phones with limited data plans that obstructed their abilities to engage in distance learning productively' (p.1). Findings from the UK and Canada (James & Thériault, 2020) and the US (Babb et al., 2021) show that the pandemic requirements to socially distance and shift from in-person classes to online learning, meant that learners received less social and emotional support from friends, extended family members, peers, and staff leading to an increase in mental ill-health. Both our studies have been able to illuminate the practices that help to alleviate some of these issues in the context of our findings in Scotland. Of particular importance were the myriad ways in which adults were engaged in education. CLD practitioners continued to reach the most vulnerable groups through adjusting the curriculum, caring for the whole person, and recognizing their strengths. However, there is no doubt that the pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities in education, health, and income especially in the UK and US (Bambra et al, 2020; Milana et al., 2021).

In Study One all 4 levels of access issues were found. Of these, mental access, the impact of the user's lack of interest or 'computer anxiety' (Van Dijk, 1999) was generally overcome as families were motivated to engage online as this was the only option available to them. Similar to Lewis et al's (2020) findings, those groups which had met in person before the lock-down appeared to find the move online easier, with participants keen to continue with the program having already established relationships with others in the group. Recruiting participants to an entirely online group after lock-down started required more persuasion and encouragement, suggesting some 'mental access' issues remained. Even in those households where devices and network were available, it was clear that for many of the adults using digital approaches for anything other than communication and entertainment was very new.

The solution to this in study one was to use *Microsoft Teams* as the platform for the sessions as that could be accessed through their child's online school account. The parents were then utilizing devices which had been provided and set up by the child's school, and their child was on hand to guide them through how to use it, getting around some of the skills access issues. While this resolved the short-term problem and allowed the groups to continue it is important to note the varying data demands that different platforms make, with much lower-demand alternatives to *Teams* available. Indeed, due to the high data-demand of *Teams* some material access issues persisted.

Similar issues were identified in Study Two which found that low income and educational and digital inequalities all interacted to multiply disadvantages during the pandemic, but practitioners took concrete action to respond to and mitigate these difficulties. They kept learner-centered solutions to the forefront and created imaginative responses by developing resources and providing one-to-one support that enabled learners to participate in ways they were comfortable with. Practitioners also secured computing equipment for those that needed it and provided learning in safe outdoor spaces for beginning learners that could not manage online learning. The activities that were negotiated with learners were also changed and included adjustments to the pace of learning in ways that gave learners a space to think as well as using activities such as cooking or digital skills that promoted confidence building.

Isolation

Research in Higher Education (a sector in which online learning has been a growth area for some considerable time), has been divided over the impact of the digital environment on learners' and teachers' sense of engagement and belonging. It has been described by some as 'isolating' (Bowers and Kumar, 2015), with Schaeffer and Konetes (2010) noting social isolation was the main source of dissatisfaction for online students. Kaufmann and Vallade (2019) warn that presenting learners with interactive group activities is not necessarily enough to combat feelings of loneliness and isolation. In contrast, others have suggested that novel approaches to designing online learning spaces can promote a sense of community and engagement, (e.g., Hod, Yaari and Eberle, 2019). Underpinning the approaches that are said to support learner engagement are principles which will be familiar to family learning practitioners: a focus on relationships and rapport building (Glazier, 2015).

While in other sectors the move to remote working proved problematic and led to difficulties in establishing relationships (Liberati et al., 2021), our results showed this did not seem to be as much of an issue for family learning. We found that in Study One, where most of the groups had started in person, the shared experience of home schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic brought the group together and there was solidarity in the knowledge that everyone was doing the best they could in difficult times. These online sessions became something of a lifeline for families who were already marginalized as they meant that participants didn't have to leave the house, to arrange travel, often with other children in tow, and arrangements could be changed at the last minute if things didn't go well, for example if a child didn't want to engage. For the kinship carers group, which was set up during the lockdown, families could only take part because it was offered online. Similarly, in Study Two the use of online learning meant that those living in rural areas could become involved in groups, and these groups were viable because sufficient numbers of participants could come together. An added advantage of parents engaging from their own home is that it seemed to give them more confidence to contribute; it may be that the familiar environment reduced some anxiety.

Also significant in relation to isolation was the way in which online working enabled practitioners to feel more connected and engaged with their colleagues. Practitioners in both studies were engaged in multiple online professional groups, both formal and informal, sharing their experiences and learning from others. The unprecedented nature of the challenges being faced meant that professionals felt more able to share their anxieties, to ask for help, and to share what they had learned with colleagues. At this time *Education Scotland* (the Scottish Government agency responsible for supporting quality and improvement in education), paused their face to face continuing professional development sessions and launched a series of virtual events, branded as 'Education Scotland Wee Blethers'. These were held on various platforms at both national and local levels and meant that innovations in practice and learning from experience could be shared across the whole country.

What Remained the Same? Principles and Partnership

Amidst the chaos and uncertainty in the early stages of the pandemic as practitioners got to grips with digital technology and new ways of working, there were some things, such as the aims and outcomes of their work, the importance of partnerships, and the underlying principles of their work which remained constant. The centrality of an assets-based approach was not lost in the move to digital working. The

CLD practitioners continued to focus on the learning of all generations, drawing on the experiences and resources which the families brought with them, encouraging activity, interaction, and reflection.

Research shows that family learning programs (FLPs) have many positive outcomes that include improved academic outcomes for children; parents gaining knowledge and skills to manage children's behavior; parents understanding the value of what they already do with their children (Swain & Cara, 2019). For parents that do not have English as their first language, participating in FLPs can help them to develop their language and literacy abilities and pursue their own educational and personal goals, which in turn motivates them to learn and persist (Lynch & Prins, 2021). Overall, when parents feel welcomed by the school, and teachers sense that parents are working with them, the bond between the school and home contexts is strengthened. This then enables parents and teachers to work towards common goals of improving pupil attitudes, motivations, behaviors, and attainment (Auerbach 2010).

Willemse and colleagues' (2018) research showed that when groups of parents are brought together, they can contact others who are different in outlook, interests, education, and social circles. Such programs operate as a supportive social space that facilitate social networks, friendship, and personal development. Other studies have found that, from the parents' perspective, the key issue is to have the support of someone flexible that is able to understand their home as well as school problems, and someone who cares about what happened (e.g., Milbourne, 2005). Both our studies show that these positive outcomes persisted and the need for CLD staff to take on a mediating role between home and school was even more important during the pandemic. Parents were thrown in to the deep end of home-schooling their children, often without a full understanding of the approach to learning and teaching used in the school. This caused anxiety and concern that they might not do things 'the proper way'. The Help Your Child to Learn program, devised by CLD staff to provide video instruction, gave them the confidence to support their child's learning at home and to see their everyday family activities as learning opportunities which connected with school-based learning. Similarly in Study Two practitioners told how important it was to get parents online and that in some cases this took individualized support. Once parents and families were connected, they were then able to access a much wider range of resources and support. This 'sign-posting' and bridging role has always been an important part of family learning, which has traditionally sought to help families make connections in their wider community.

An important aspect of the CLD role is working in partnership with schools and other agencies, although, as previous research has shown, the nature of these partnerships can vary widely. The importance of finding allies that Tett and Macleod (2020) identified as crucial for successful working can also be seen in these studies. One Deputy Headteacher of a school in Study One was enthusiastic about the opportunities the program offered the families of pupils in her school. She was also delighted that the program reduced pressure on her class teachers to prepare learning materials. As a result, she attended the CPD sessions to share her positive experiences with staff in other schools, encouraging them to engage with family learning. While the pandemic highlighted the need for partnership working, it also created the context in which this could develop. In both studies we found that practitioners carved out collegial spaces and created new networks. These new connections were borne out of necessity but are likely to remain as they were mutually beneficial. For example, in Study One the kinship carers' group was recruited through social care workers who were very happy to be able to offer something to this often-neglected group (Zuchowski, et al., 2019). Similarly, in Study Two new partnerships were developed during the pandemic with adult health and social care staff through identifying common goals that enabled staff to overcome some financial difficulties. These collaborative relationships continued especially when they were linked to all the partners' plans. In addition, the online CPD sessions which

covered the whole of Scotland connected practitioners working at opposite ends of the country who otherwise would have been unlikely to ever meet and so encouraged collaboration.

As well as expanding networks, changes were also evident in the way in which decisions were made. While in other sectors the pressure to make rapid decisions 'meant very little time to consult, leading to decision-making becoming more vertical' (Day et al., 2021: p), in the case of CLD work there was a devolution of decision-making to those who were 'on the ground'. This presented workers with the space to be creative and flexible and, in contrast to Day et al.'s (2021) finding, this did not seem to be at the expense of more horizontal working.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From our two studies the legacy of the pandemic for CLD work which aims to support families and bridge the gap between home and school seems likely to be largely positive. There has been a greater appreciation of the skills of CLD from other professions especially in both recognizing the differences between home and school learning and in developing strategies that can bridge the two areas. We have also seen a reassertion of the value base and way of working as fundamental to engaging with learners. In terms of implications for practice, professional development is key especially when opportunities for analysis and reflection are provided. Our studies show the importance of having clear values and of working in partnership to develop programs especially when the aim is to create more equitable and inclusive provision. The studies also show that enabling practitioners to share their ideas and scrutinize their teaching practices in an atmosphere of positive collaboration leads to the development of more effective programs. In the light of these findings, we recommend that these professional development forums are established.

Practitioners have been on a steep learning curve as they moved their practice from 'contact' to 'digitact', and with this has come an acknowledgement of the value of online learning provided that the infrastructure is there to support it. New and sustainable networks have been established that at least have the potential to start to break down the silo that family learning work often resides within (Zhang & Perkins 2022). While for some families (including kinship carers, families with limited access to transport, and those living in rural areas) the fact that activities were all online enabled them to engage in ways that would not have been possible for them in person. However, despite these positive developments there remains a concern that much would be lost if 'digitact' became the default mode of learning for these groups. In-person provision allows for a sharing of experiences and learning together that can be a challenge to replicate online, especially with those not familiar with the medium. A common feature of family learning work is hands-on activities in groups, and this experience of being involved in the creation of something alongside other people is important (Macleod and Tett, 2019). Our studies have revealed the impact of digital inequalities on participants in family literacy programs. The implication is that while digital provision should continue to be an important element of the CLD worker's toolbox, it may be that hybrid approaches - with some meetings in person - would be most beneficial. Where some or all a family learning program or event is moved online the four access issues identified by Van Dijk, (1999) should be considered.

Currently funding for family learning and literacy programs in the UK as well as the US and Canada has diminished, and this means that practitioners are often forced to cobble together funding from diverse sources. It is important for policy makers to provide realistic levels of funding that reflect family

literacy's importance in helping adults, children and families to address inequalities in access to education that would enable them to flourish. Linked to this is the need for research that is able to demonstrate the myriad benefits that participation in family literacy practices can engender. Our studies have demonstrated some of the more intangible benefits such as growth in self-confidence as well as the link to increased attainment but, as Reder (2020) has demonstrated, intergenerational effects of improving parents' basic skills will not be evident unless longer-term outcomes are examined. Especially important will be longitudinal studies that demonstrate change over time.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Community Learning and Development: A field of professional practice which covers community-based adult learning, youth work, community development and family learning.

Digital Divide: inequality in terms of motivation, access, skills, and usage of digital technology, associated with poverty and other inequalities.

Family Learning Practice: An area of work within Community Learning and Development which includes family literacy and focuses on intergenerational learning. Family learning practitioners often work closely with schools to negotiate the design and delivery of programs.

Family Literacy: Literacy that occurs in the home and community, inclusive of non-school based literacy practices such as spoken and oral literacies, religious literacies, and community practices using language, communication, reading, writing, understanding, and expression.

Social Capital: Is a social science concept focused on the value of social networks that bond similar people and bridge between diverse people. This network of relationships establishes norms of reciprocity in a particular society that have the potential to secure benefits and invent solutions to problems.

ENDNOTE

[1]   https://www.ed.ac.uk/education/professional-learning/resources/read-write-count-collaborative

[2]   https://www.scottishbooktrust.com/reading-and-stories/read-write-count/read-write-count-bag-gifting