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'Social-contextual' approaches to family literacy programmes: policy and practice lessons from Nigeria, Mexico and Nepal

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ABSTRACT

Family literacy programmes have been framed as effective strategies to improve the learning and literacy of children and adults, particularly among disadvantaged families. However, a number of these programmes have been critiqued as being framed within a deficit discourse, placing the 'problem of illiteracy' within 'non-mainstream' families. Drawing from a comparative analysis of family literacy programmes from Nigeria, Mexico and Nepal, this paper aims to increase understanding of the dynamics of an alternative, social-contextual approach to family literacy. It identifies the importance of starting with families' skills, knowledge and everyday realities to shape family literacy programming (instead of the other way round); shifting the aim from community participation to community ownership; and offering programmes that are flexible to accommodate other demands of family life. These could be useful first steps for policymakers and practitioners who are committed to developing a more situated approach to designing and implementing family literacy programmes.

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Introduction

Family literacy programmes have long promoted the use of the home as a valuable context for the literacy learning of both children and adults. Common across many of these programmes is their focus on so-called disadvantaged and vulnerable families. They seek to address barriers to learning in households where parents, who are dominantly seen as children's first teachers, are non-literate (Hanemann et al. 2017; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning [UIL] 2017). Within this view, some family literacy programmes have been critiqued as putting forward a 'deficit' discourse (Anderson et al. 2010; Reyes and Torres 2007; Saracho 2017; Whitehouse and Colvin 2001) whereby they 'diagnose' families as having 'symptoms' such as illiteracy, lack of education and poor resources that prevent family members from supporting children's schooling.

Since Auerbach's (1989, 1995) powerful critique of what she described as interventionist approaches, there have been efforts to implement family literacy programmes that take into account the pre-existing skills, knowledge and everyday realities of multicultural,

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multilingual families (Friedrich, Anderson and Morrison 2014; Hanemann 2015). This alternative approach has been referred to as a social-contextual or 'situated' approach. These programmes see family life as part of (rather than a distraction from or a barrier to) family learning.

Drawing from analyses of family literacy programmes in Nigeria, Mexico and Nepal, this article explores this alternative approach in more depth, looking at how policy makers and practitioners can go beyond a deficit perspective by drawing on local and indigenous inter-generational practices. What role does social context play in designing and implementing family literacy programmes across different communities? This paper goes beyond the analysis of the reading and writing components of these programmes to investigate what a social-contextual approach to family literacy looks like in practice and what challenges may be faced in its design and implementation.

This paper provides a review of existing analysis of family literacy programmes and sets out a social-contextual framework for family literacy. It connects closely with the conceptual starting point of this Special Issue, taking forward theoretical ideas around family literacy and indigenous learning into the policy/practice context. I use this social-contextual framework as a lens to comparatively analyse published case studies of family literacy programmes in Nigeria, Mexico, and Nepal. These case studies were developed by researchers, literacy providers and UNESCO staff as part of the LitBase (Effective Literacy and Numeracy Practices Database), an open-access observatory of best practices on literacy, curated by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL). I have chosen these three case studies, because they offer contrasting strategies to developing family literacy programmes: embedding family literacy within an economic empowerment programme (Nigeria); developing tutoring networks and building 'literate' communities (Mexico); and a two-way intergenerational learning approach to family literacy (Nepal).

I begin this article by exploring the deficit approaches in family literacy that researchers argue are typical of earlier models but still frame many approaches today. I present an alternative theoretical stance: a social-contextual approach to family literacy programming. I then explain the sampling of the data and the approach used in conducting the comparative analysis. A brief introduction to the case studies follows before presenting the key themes of the analysis. I conclude by highlighting research findings that policymakers and practitioners could draw from to develop a more dynamic and situated approach to designing and implementing family literacy programmes.

Deficit discourse in family literacy programmes: exploring assumed problems and solutions

Many family literacy programmes see the family as a critical site where literacy learning happens and therefore, must be harnessed to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of both children and adults (UIL 2017). In some earlier models of family literacy programmes, parents are seen as their children's first teachers. Some programmes assume that family learning is about performing 'school like activities' at home (Anderson et al. 2010; Auerbach 1989; Perkins 2010). More contemporary perspectives on family literacy programming argue the need to include what families 'do' with literacy and building on literacy's uses and significance in their family life (Anderson et al. 2010; Lynch and Prins 2021).

Whatever the iteration, a dominant pattern is that many of these programmes target so-called vulnerable and disadvantaged families. These ‘non-mainstream’ families (c.f. Reyes and Torres 2014) are thought to be riddled with economic, social, and educational problems that need fixing (Anderson et al. 2010). In this deficit view, the ‘problem’ is located within families – maybe because parents lack the literacy or language skills, resources or time to support their children (Auerbach 1989; Reyes and Torres 2007). The belief that illiteracy breeds illiteracy remains. Family learning, then, has been framed as a *treatment* for social and economic inequalities (Saracho 2017). What is more, the social-contextual demands on family life are thought to be ‘obstacles that must be overcome so that learning can take place’ (Auerbach 1989, 166) and therefore must be restructured to accommodate children’s school needs. Such expectations create an ‘invisible’ workload for mothers (Rizk 2019). For Anderson et al. (2010, 46–49), family literacy programmes tend to ‘unfairly place responsibility for children’s literacy development on women’ while ‘ignoring [sic] the literacy needs and desires of women’.

According to Whitehouse and Colvin (2001, 212), there is an ‘unstated belief that transforming culturally diverse families to mirror mainstream families will produce educational and economic success for their children.’ This points to the tensions that could exist when family literacy programmes become vehicles for certain family practices from one culture to be imposed as ‘standard practice’ on another. A common example is the promotion of shared book reading as the ‘gold standard’ of family learning (c.f. Anderson et al. 2010; Carrington and Luke 2003; Pelligrini, 1991). However, parents reading a storybook to their children has been observed by Anderson et al (2010, 37) as ‘not a universal phenomenon; it is a particular social/cultural practice, particularly associated with Caucasian, middle class families’. Promoting such a practice as the ‘right’ way of doing family literacy – despite it being a highly Eurocentric and Western practice – has been seen to eclipse other context-specific, indigenous family practices (Janes and Kermani, 2001; Land 2008).

The literature on family literacy reveals certain assumptions surrounding family literacy programming which can be summarised as: (1) daily demands of family life, especially those of mothers or women members, are often seen as barriers to supporting children’s schooling (2) the problem of ‘illiteracy’ is located in disadvantaged and marginalised communities and efforts must be made to ‘fix’ them (3) top-down approaches to curriculum development and teaching tend to promote a ‘right’ way of doing family literacy that, at times, does not reflect the realities of the participants. Against the backdrop of renewed interest in the power of family literacy programmes, grand narratives about the assumed ‘problems’ and ‘solutions’ within families and literacy learning, need to be unpacked.

Conceptual framework: a social-contextual perspective on family literacy programming

Conceptually, this paper draws on what Auerbach (1989) terms the social-contextual view of family literacy programming. The main goal of such an approach is to ‘increase the social significance of literacy in family life by incorporating community cultural forms and social issues into the content of literacy activities’ (Auerbach 1989, 177). A useful reframing of the ‘deficit’ discourse, this encourages policy makers and

researchers to look into the diversity of family structures, capacities, languages and literacies and see these as strengths rather than problems that need solving.

The social-contextual perspective builds on a view of literacy referred to as literacy as social practice (LSP) or 'situated literacies' (Barton and Hamilton 1998; Street, 1984). LSP challenges view of literacy as singular and skills-based (e.g. reading and writing) and recognises multiple literacies even in 'non-school' contexts (Prinsloo and Breier 1996). Unlike in earlier models of family literacy, the home is seen not as an extension of 'school-like' activities but as a learning space in itself. Barton and Hamilton (1998) and other LSP researchers propose that it might be more accurate to speak in terms of literacies (as in plural) associated with various domains of life such as religion, livelihoods, health, digital spaces, as opposed to a singular characterisation. When analysing the family literacy programmes in this paper, I use this perspective to analyse the relationship of learning and literacy practices with aspects of family life that are beyond schooling, including their indigenous practices and traditions. Along these lines, daily family tasks are not immediately labelled as 'barriers' to school-like learning. Activities within families, such as cooking, watching television, surfing the internet, praying, could be seen as resources for literacy learning (rather than as barriers or distractions to learning).

Moreover, such reframing highlights that family literacy programme development could be a two-way street: families' realities could very well shape curriculum, and teaching-learning approaches. Several ethnographic studies (including papers in this Special Issue) have revealed a wealth of learning and literacy practices within families that do not necessarily mirror structured and formal approaches (McTavish 2009; Reyes and Torres 2007). These activities are not only shared between parents and children but also among siblings, cousins, grandparents and the wider community. In reviewing the case studies in this paper, I found that such a perspective was useful in understanding the various actors involved (and the extent of their involvement) in literacy and learning activities. I also began questioning the role of the 'teacher' or the 'knowledgeable expert' that is often attached to facilitators, literacy educators and parents.

A social-contextual view also signals the varied forms of learning that could be integrated into family literacy programmes. Rogers (2014) proposes framing formal, non-formal and informal ways of learning as a continuum, co-existing in a single space (e.g. the home) in various ways with learning outcomes not always defined and measurable (Rogers 2014). His continuum of formal-non-formal-informal learning offers a framework with which to analyse the different forms of learning at home.

Freed of the notion of one 'right way' of doing family literacy (c.f. Land 2008), a social-contextual framework helped me to analyse the programmes documented by UIL as situated within a social context, focusing on the uses of literacy in everyday life. This view allowed me to unpack the design, curriculum, and teaching-learning approaches not from the standpoint of *outcomes* but more on the *processes* involved and promoted. Street (1993, 7) noted that literacies are 'inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society and recognise the variety of cultural practices associated with reading and writing in different contexts'. I take this notion of literacy as tightly connected with a community's or family's cultural practices and beliefs.

In summary, the social-contextual view helped guide my analysis in the following ways: (1) community and family life and relationships can be considered as resources

rather than barriers to developing family literacy programmes (2) seeing the home as a domain for wide-ranging literacy practices and not only an extension of school-like activities (3) understanding that culture and context play an important role in engaging in family literacy programmes.

Methods

UIL Litbase case studies and their limitations

This paper draws from a comparative analysis of case studies of family literacy programmes in Nepal, Mexico and Nigeria, which were developed and curated by UIL as part of its LitBase (see <https://uil.unesco.org/literacy/effective-practices-database-litbase>). The case study documents analysed in this paper are the Family Literacy Programme¹ (FLP) in Nepal; the Mother and Child Education Programme² (MCEP) in Nigeria and the Aprendizajes en Familia³ (Family Literacy Programme, or AeF) in Mexico.

UIL selects LitBase case studies according to outreach, accessibility and relevance (for highly vulnerable groups), quality of outputs, clearly demonstrated innovative approaches and methods, impact on learners, their families and communities, proven sustainability, and evaluative data from independent sources.⁴ The UIL case studies were designed to illustrate best practice examples and are often written by service providers (as opposed to academic researchers). They are intended to be useful in generating practice-based insights that might be of relevance to current designers of family literacy programmes. In addition, and for the purpose of this paper, I set out to analyse these case studies comparatively and critically using the theoretical lenses outlined above to generate new insights from the available data.

UIL developed each case study by compiling, editing and translating secondary programme information and developing these in consultation with programme organisers. For the case studies analysed in this paper, I incorporated an analysis of evaluation and impact documents, related policies, and websites (a source list was included by UIL at the end of every case study document). As many of these links are no longer available, and documents cannot be found online, I reached out to the former coordinator/author of the selected case studies. They shared some original sources, mostly grey literature, which I used to supplement the analysis in this paper. Where available, I drew from other relevant sources, including websites, research reports and journal articles.

UIL Case Study documents are generally similar in structure/content and the case studies consulted for this paper are around 4–8 pages long. The documents begin with a programme overview followed by the context and background of the country. A brief description of the programme and its aims follow. The case studies analysed in this paper contains explanations of programme implementation, teaching-learning approaches and methodologies (including teaching/facilitator training). Programme impacts are also outlined where in some cases, these are characterised as *expected* impacts. In differing details, case studies also explain monitoring and evaluation, challenges and lessons learned (including direct quotes from participants and implementors).

While the UIL case studies are informative, it should be noted that they have not been updated with the most recent data on these projects (the Mexican, Nigerian and Nepali

Case Studies were last updated by UIL in 2014, 2013 and 2015 respectively). Given that the case studies were developed several years ago, this paper should not be taken as a commentary on current practice within the programmes. However, my methodological rationale is that the comparative analysis of these cases through a social practice lens can generate new insights into how family literacy policy and programmes might build on local and indigenous literacy practices. In addition, the case studies were written at various points during the projects' implementation – at the early stage for Mexico, the pilot phase for Nepal and the implementation phase for Nigeria. Therefore, insights include the various stages of programme development.

Method of case study selection for this paper

The selection of case studies relevant to this paper occurred in two stages. First, I used the UIL database filtering system to come up with an initial list. I selected 'family learning' which yielded only six results. To expand this, I proceeded to do a word search using a variety of related keywords such as 'family literacy', 'parent-to-child', 'families'. The list grew to 21.

I then developed the following criteria based on some of the features of a social-contextual approach to family literacy programming as well as some practical considerations:

- Explicit engagement of adults as learners and not only as facilitators/supporters of children's learning – i.e. adult learning/literacy component
- Utilisation of a participatory approach or attempt to engage families in various stages of the programme
- Inclusion of various forms of teaching-learning approaches
- Available data and information including perspectives from the participants
- The projects are based in Global South communities and represent as much geographical spread as possible

Based on the purposive sampling criteria above, I found that the case studies in Nigeria, Mexico and Nepal could best satisfy these parameters. These case studies are representative of what Mitchell (1984) describes as 'telling' (rather than 'typical') case studies because of the significant differences in their structures, teaching-learning approaches, and curriculum development methods (see Table 1 for a comparison). By analysing them comparatively, Mitchell (1984) suggests that 'telling' case studies can allow increased understanding and theorisation of a certain phenomenon or practice.

Data analysis

I analysed my data through a thematic analysis approach (Patton 2014) which allowed me to see patterns of shared meaning. I read through the three case study documents and conducted manual, open coding. I highlighted chunks of texts in the data and attached short labels such as 'community-based approach', 'family-centred', 'parent participation' and 'children as students'. To pare down the list of codes, and to begin creating a stronger link with the research aims, I used some of the ideas from the conceptual framework (see section above) to do secondary coding and organise my codes into themes. For example, codes such as 'non-

Table 1. A comparison of key features of the case studies.

Features	FLP (Nepal)	MCEP (Nigeria)	AeF (Mexico)
Implementors	Co-implemented and co-financed by State and Non-State Actors (NSAs)	Led by an NSA in cooperation with other NSAs and state actors	Led by a regional NSA in cooperation with other state and NSAs
Engagement of families in programme development	Participatory approaches in designing programmes and material development	Participatory approaches in curriculum design and evaluation	Participatory approaches in teaching and learning, building on informal networks of support
Focus	Basic literacy for children and adults (parents)	Basic literacy for children and adults as well as livelihood and employment skills	Basic literacy for children and adults
Structure ^a	Provide broad services directly to parents (mothers) and children, either together or separately	Provide broad services directly to parents (mothers) and children, either together or separately	Programmes that focus directly on the development of children's reading and writing skills by engaging parents (mothers and/or fathers) as 'instruments' and indirect receptors of change
Teaching-Learning methods	Two-way, intergenerational learning; home visits; classes in community learning centres (CLCs); developing materials through consultation	Home visits; literacy classes complemented by one-on-one mentoring; dialogues, feedback and consultative meetings	Tutoring networks at the community level; developing literate communities through school libraries
Language of Instruction	Nepali	English and various African languages of the local area	English and indigenous languages

^aBased on the typology developed by Hanemann (2015).

school-like literacy activity', 'community-based approach' and 'livelihood-related' were grouped together. Then, informed by a social-contextual perspective on the importance of context in family literacy participation and in conjunction with reviewing other relevant literature and sources, I was able to develop themes emerging from these codes. For example, I found that these programmes tended to develop activities that are embedded in or relevant to the everyday lives, concerns and situations of these families. This approach was in line with Merriam and Tisdell's (2016, 88) ideas about the use of theoretical frameworks as lenses to understand and organise findings to 'reflect the constructs, concepts, language, models and theories that structured the study in the first place'.

I wrote this article during ongoing thinking and conversations with colleagues as part of the Family Literacy, Indigenous Learning and Sustainable Development project.⁵ Through ethnographic research on family literacy practices in communities, this project seeks to draw policymakers' attention to the ways in which adults and children learn in everyday life, including their indigenous practices. Participating in this project exposed me to how some family literacy programmes in the Global South patterned on projects in the Global North, could, at times, neglect the wealth of learning practices that families already engage with. This motivated me to look into existing programmes that employ a more contextually grounded approach to family literacy.

Introducing the programmes

According to the case studies, the programmes in Nigeria, Nepal and Mexico were developed to solve the ‘literacy crisis’ in these countries exacerbated by issues like poor school access, low adult literacy rates and unstable state funding.

The Family Literacy Programme (FLP) in Nepal was launched as a pilot in 2013. It was run and funded by the Non-Formal Education Centre as part of UNESCO’s Capacity Development for Education for All programme. It was implemented by a number of state and non-state actors led by the UNESCO Kathmandu Office, partnering with groups such as Shikharapur Community Learning Centres and the Non-Formal Education Centre (NFEC) of the Nepali Ministry of Education. The programme had two key strands. First, parents (particularly women) were intended to be capacitated to support their children’s schooling and children were, in turn, encouraged to support their parents’ literacy learning as well. Second, it employed participatory approaches, recognising the prior learning and indigenous knowledge of its participants (even though often considered ‘illiterate’) and embedding them in the curriculum, teaching approach and materials design.

The focus of the case study in Nigeria is the Mother and Child Education Programme (MCEP) implemented by the Ecumenical Foundation Africa with state and non-state partners such as the River State Government and UNESCO. The MCEP was not a stand-alone education programme. It was part of a wider, more holistic project that promotes better educational access and economic opportunities leading to women empowerment. Women participated in skills training for livelihoods to improve their families’ living standards. To do this, intergenerational learning (family-based) and bilingualism (English and mother tongue) were promoted as key strategies.

In Mexico, the *Aprendizajes en Familia* (Family Literacy Programme, or AeF) was set up by the Regional Cooperation Centre for Adult Education in Latin America and the Caribbean, funded by Mexico’s Federal government. At the heart of the programme was the development of tutoring networks that support children and adult learning and developing literacy-rich schools through materials development and setting up libraries. One of the programme’s aims is to increase family participation in children’s schooling and recognise the family as the primary source of education for children.

On [Table 1](#), I have analysed broad similarities and differences between the case studies. There are four key similarities. First, all programmes implemented a participatory approach whereby community members and families are involved in different capacities during various stages of design and implementation (see next subsection). Second, diverse teaching and learning methods were implemented. Third, state and non-state actors came together to co-implement the programmes. Fourth, there was a strong commitment towards the use of indigenous and local languages. I identified two broad differences. First, the explicit learning outcomes were towards basic literacy, except for the programme in Nigeria that had the twin goal of economic participation with literacy as springboard. Second, the programmes in Nigeria and Nepal explicitly targeted adults (especially women) as learners, while in Mexico, parents were often seen as vehicles to improve children’s literacy, although benefits to parents were also recognised. These differences and similarities offered an opportunity for cross-case analysis, the findings of which will be discussed in the next sections.

Beyond families: wider community participation as integral to family literacy programmes

While the programmes were presented as ‘family’ literacy interventions, it was clear in the analysis that they also engaged with local communities actors in the programme design and implementation. My analysis points to how this strong engagement could be seen at the governance and funding level and at the community engagement level. The programmes had created strong alliances between state and non-state actors in education based on co-funding, co-implementation and co-designing. The community engagement approach also went beyond the instrumental kind where communities – often those considered ‘marginalised’ – are treated as catchment areas to recruit target learners. Instead, the programmes were designed in a way that traditional leaders and community members – for example, through community councils – had a say in programme design, curriculum planning, materials development and evaluation.

The MCEP (Nigeria) is also called a ‘civic approach’ to family learning (c.f. Saminu 2022) because the organisers saw it as people-oriented – transferring some degree of power and voice to the participants organised as community learning groups. The leaders of these groups, alongside traditional leaders and community development committees, assisted in developing the curriculum that was later verified by educational institutions. The case study authors noted that ‘strong community participation and cooperation is necessary to effectively harness local resources. At the beginning of the [MCEP] project, what is important is the will and power of the people . . .’. It is important to note that up until 2005 (when the project ‘officially’ received funding), activities were self-sponsored and depended entirely on the professionals’ sacrifices and commitment. For me, it appeared that this spirit of volunteerism remained an important ingredient when it was formalised as a project.

In Nepal’s FLP, people’s participation can be seen as integrated into the organisational structure of the initiative, especially during implementation. The key organisation that ran this programme, the Shikharapur Community Learning Centres (SCLC), is a community-owned institution that ‘provides educational and lifelong learning opportunities to communities.’ As this was just one of the centre’s wide-ranging portfolio of programmes over a number of years, the FLP benefitted from the centre’s network, reputation and embeddedness in the communities. Interestingly, the case study authors in Nepal noted that through the family literacy programme, ‘the capacities of the Non-Formal Education Centre, the community learning centres and other literacy providers to deliver an effective literacy service have also been improved’. Therefore, the partnerships within the programme implementation did not only potentially lead to better experiences for families but also for other development actors. Despite this, the programme faced significant challenges, as noted in subsequent research: limited availability of reading materials and working around children’s school schedules (Acharya and Devkota 2021). Several years later, Acharya and Devkota (2021) found that the programme had not been institutionalised into educational policies in Nepal, in part because of these challenges and because the change of government following the 2017 elections relegated non-formal and adult education from being a national priority.

This intended direct involvement of communities echoes the Tutoring Networks component of the AeF programme in Mexico. These networks were composed of local volunteers who shared a particular skill or knowledge to/with those who would like to learn. According to the case study, ‘the network offers people the chance to teach and be taught informally, strengthening their ability to learn autonomously and enabling the lessons to be tailored to the interests of both the learning and the tutor’.

Engaging community members in informal networks (such as the example in Mexico) meant that programmes needed to support these groups, especially if they were expected to implement new approaches (e.g. self-directed and collaborative learning) as compared to traditional teaching styles (e.g. memorisation). The case study of AeF had identified that ‘the introduction of tutoring networks provoked reservations on the part of some teachers as they considered themselves to have had little experience of the workings and benefit of the model’. An analysis of the pilot programme in 11 schools in Mexico found concerns around the quality of tutorials. It was observed that some teachers and students sometimes found it challenging to switch from rote-style learning and memorisation (Schoenemann and Aguilar 2012). Still, overall, the evaluation of the programme found that most teachers found the tutorials to be a powerful tool in engaging a variety of individuals (Valor 2012 as cited in Schoenemann and Aguilar 2012). This points to how capacity-building and buy-in of the community could be central to self-reliance and sustainability.

Contrary to the more dominant understanding of the family as the sole learning unit, I noted that these programmes were able to tap into wide-ranging community-based resources to enhance the delivery and effectiveness of their initiatives. These programmes illustrate how people’s participation and their buy-in were seen as important contributions to the implementation and the sustainability of the projects. It signals that families alone, though vital, may not be the sole source or vehicle for learning, but must be supported by local leaders – a testament to the adage, it takes a village to raise a child (or in this case, to support a family learning together). This is in line with a situated framework of literacy reviewed earlier (Street 1984) whereby knowledge and skills are seen not solely as an individual’s resource but a community’s.

These programmes built on community knowledge in formal and informal ways. This distributed responsibility, I would argue, has developed a whole community approach to family literacy, engaging local leadership from individuals and institutions that had already established their authorities in these communities. In these examples, the boundaries between family and community were blurred. Moreover, the introduction of new approaches was not always smooth, as in the experience of Mexico, and required a shift in mindset and practices which could be faced by disagreements or pushbacks. In addition, political factors played a role (such as in the case of Nepal) in the failure to take up these programmes in educational policies.

Designing literacy programmes relevant to and embedded in the lives of the learners and families

Returning to the ‘social-contextual’ approach to family literacy, a commonality across the programmes was their attempt to make the activities relevant to the realities of the families’ lives. Such efforts were partly facilitated by the intended participatory approach

to engaging families, learners and communities in various aspects of the programmes. In this subsection, I will delve into some of the processes and strategies of such an approach.

A common thread that I noted across the programmes was the programme organisers' belief that activities should matter to the learners and therefore they should have a say in how the programmes were designed. A central aim of the FLP (Nepal) is 'to offer access to innovative literacy methods which are addressing the individual learning preferences of the participants.' The high regard given to participants' priorities was also visible in AeF's (Mexico) programme aim, although theirs was broader to include various aspects of the society as well. Their programme aimed 'to establish a flexible model of family and community-based learning founded on the specific and complex reality of how three educational areas interplay: the family environment, school education and community involvement'. For MCEP (Nigeria), the interrelationship between economic empowerment and education was more explicit. One of its aims was to 'equip women groups with the functional and livelihood skills necessary for improving their families' living standards and access to markets'.

Similarly, the content of the learning materials in the Nepal programme were developed through a series of 'awareness sessions' with local villagers and teachers on topics such as climate change, health, and children's and women's rights. While less apparent as compared to Nepal and Nigeria, the programme in Mexico had also indicated the aim of improving the use of natural resources within participating communities and providing pathways for better employment. These examples show that the programmes, especially in Nepal and Nigeria, explicitly referred to outcomes beyond education that link up to other social sectors such as health and livelihoods.

Family-centred curriculum, method, and materials

So how did these programmes ensure that their aims to increase participation were realised? It should be noted that the impact analysed in the UIL case studies was limited to interview and documentary evidence rather than observational data. The overarching approach seemed to be by way of consultations and dialogues. In FLP (Nepal), the case study authors described how facilitators usually met with students, villagers, local teachers and leaders to develop the course content. In these meetings, learners could express their needs and interests directly to the individuals who were writing the course. It struck me that the course themes were so varied: from learning about local traditions, festivals and agriculture to topics such as climate change. A similar approach was taken when the team were developing learning materials. In the pilot phase, the materials development team visited the classes, interviewed learners, facilitators and organisers, to develop literacy materials that were useful and practical. Therefore, the case study authors noted that the range of themes depicted in these materials were beyond literacy but also included practical topics such as income-generating skills, public speaking, and gardening.

In MCEP (Nigeria), the topics were reflective of the learners' everyday realities with an economic empowerment slant. They included topics in health (HIV/AIDS, nutrition, and sanitation), income generation or livelihood development. They also had a rural employment promotion theme that had direct links with international partners and credit and loan schemes that could finance participants'

small businesses. Apart from being a literacy programme, MCEP was also packaged as an economic empowerment initiative. In a recent paper, Saminu (2022) observed that the literacy component of the MCEP programme was not an end in itself but serves as the fulcrum for all available opportunities for women to empower themselves.

In Mexico (AeF), the activities were also not only limited to writing and reading but also through organised Zumba classes (a dance fitness programme), cooking and origami (the art of folding paper). The case study states that 'by allowing students to diverge slightly from the curriculum in order to focus on topics of their own interests during the learning process, the programme supports the development of skills for autonomous learning'. My analysis of this is that the entry point of AeF was not necessarily on reading and writing, but on families' interests to facilitate more engaged and independent learning. This approach could also be seen in initiatives conducted in Nepal and Nigeria – in the sense that they all seem to promote literacy learning that is *meaningful* to the participants. Apart from enhancing self-directed learning, they also set out to increase the motivation of learners to participate in these activities.

Taking stock of families' everyday realities and indigenous practices

The case studies show how the programmes aimed to embed indigenous practices and languages. The Nepal case study illustrated that their approach not only took into account the *needs* and *interests* of the participants but also built on their pre-existing knowledge, including indigenous practices. In its pilot stages, the programme recognised the rich knowledge that women have in terms of household management, child raising, cooking and family traditions as important elements in designing their family literacy approaches. The intention was to incorporate them in the programme activities and materials.

The family literacy programme in Nepal made use of 'non-school-like' literacy materials such as popular folk songs and religious texts. During the pilot phase, families visited local temples to discuss aspects of their religion and faith. I argue that this shows that the family literacy programmes were seen by the service providers not only as opportunities for women to read and write but also to share their knowledge about local traditions, rituals, customs and festivals with their children. In Mexico, the use of indigenous languages was emphasised as an important element of the programme. During its pilot phase, seven of the nine programme locations were in rural areas, the majority of them in indigenous communities speaking indigenous languages such as Tzotzil and Náhuatl.

As explained earlier in the article, family literacy programmes – like other adult literacy initiatives – tend to be strictly time-bound. The case studies also have this time-bound component, especially as they are project funded, whether in terms of the length of training programmes or intervention cycle. However, the programmes in this paper seem to have offered some flexibility, in recognition of the demands in the participants' lives.

In Nigeria, MCEP's core curriculum is stated as to be accomplished in a year. However, the programme had the flexibility to extend this, to allow for the participants to attend to their livelihoods as well. This was particularly important for mothers who carry the bulk of the child-caring role (including in supporting

their education). The MCEP programme also created Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Centres where children could spend the day while their mothers were learning. This was crucial as mother participants could then balance livelihoods and learning activities (Saminu 2022). The programme in Nepal also showed that in engaging communities in programme development, implementers and trainers needed to respect its practices and routines. To this end, the project faced challenges in scheduling (c.f. Acharya and Devkota 2021). Many parents worked and their children were often at school during the day. Therefore, the activities were designed to fit into this schedule, often done early in the morning or later in the afternoon and/or during the weekends.

The importance of such needs assessment, prior to even starting any intervention, is vital, as one of the ‘lessons learned’ in MCEP states:

It is almost impossible to succeed with any project in rural Africa without a complete understanding of the social, political, economic, environmental, cultural and spiritual (SPEECS) aspects of rural life . . . Once one attains this indigenous knowledge and becomes part of the community life, everything falls into place like jig saw puzzle. The local people will take the project more seriously and become effective partners.

For me, the quote underlines the importance of taking a people-centred approach to family literacy programming which begins with a serious understanding of the various aspects of rural life – which was the centre piece of the puzzle. This includes understanding local communities’ indigenous practices prior to (or instead of) suggesting standards developed elsewhere.

In this section, I have discussed how these programmes had the flexibility to move away from the more ‘formal’ and ‘traditional’ literacy lessons, to accommodate the needs of the communities. The case study documents seem to suggest that these efforts yielded favourable results – increased engagement of learners, motivated teachers, effective materials and overall positive experiences of families and groups. However, it is important to note that all these programmes were still conducted within the bounds of organisational and funder requirements. The curriculum still needed to be aligned with the national curriculum. In addition, the discussion in this subsection highlights that these approaches to family literacy programmes see family learning as accomplishing topics beyond the educational aims.

Intergenerational learning perspectives within family literacy programme’s teaching and learning approaches

At the heart of these family literacy programmes is intergenerational learning (c.f. Hanemann 2015), although there still remains a strong emphasis on the learning of children. However, the case study documents point to how the programmes recognise that adults, especially mothers, are learning in the process as well. In addition, wider community members and development actors such as NGO and government staff, learned to improve their work and literacy teachers (particularly in Nepal) learned more about the families they were working with.

Amongst the three case studies, it is the Nepali programme that provided insights into how two-way intergenerational learning could be facilitated in the context of a family

learning programme. Facilitators at the community learning centres engaged women with reading and writing activities and during their sessions, children were encouraged to support their mothers in their learning processes. Children were taught by their teachers how to support their parents' reading and writing by showing them examples of how to teach in a simple and clear manner. Following Rogers' (2014) notion of a continuum, this seems to be an attempt to formalise informal intergenerational learning and interaction. Running for about six hours each week, the literacy lessons for children and mothers became opportunities for women to continue developing their reading and writing skills with their children and share their knowledge of local traditions, rituals, systems and festivals. The case study writers observed that helping to foster a sense of cultural identity among the participants has been an unintended outcome of the project.

According to interviews and feedback from the participants during the pilot phase of the project, 'this methodology empowers both women and children and contributes to the creation of a lifelong learning environment at a community level'. Some of the women participants stated that the programme allowed them to better support their children at school. A participant said, 'I am much more confident in what I do and in what I need to do for my daughter'. Furthermore, the case study notes that this approach strengthened the relationship not only between mothers and children but also between teachers and families.

By contrast, the AeF (Mexico) and the MCEP (Nigeria) placed strong emphasis on the learning of the children and how vital it was to involve parents and communities in enhancing children's literacy. Underlying this approach, intergenerational learning seemed to be framed as one-way (i.e. parents supporting their children's education). Interestingly, a parent in Mexico expressed their desire to improve their own skills as well as supporting their children's educational achievements: 'I learn with my daughter more than what I learnt in the same age . . . ' and 'If I learn, I'll be able to help my son more'. While MCEP places a prime focus on the importance of adult learning among mothers, it was not clear from the case studies if they encouraged children to support their parents' education as well. It seemed to suggest that adults' literacy needed to be supported so that women can participate in employment, business and labour, with less emphasis on the impact of such learning on the mother's support for her children. A close reading of the case study revealed that the programme seemed to see adult learning as instrumental to their (chiefly economic) empowerment which in turn, could help them offer better support to their children.

A cross-cutting theme among the case studies was the emphasis on self-sustaining, community organised learning. What I see as an underlying learning strategy was to capacitate and support the organisation of small community groups (certainly, the family could be one unit) so they were able to set up their own learning, according to their own time. In some cases, such as the Tutoring Network in AeF (Mexico) and Community-based Learning Groups (Nigeria), they continued to work under the auspices of national and local education bodies, in-line with national curriculum and module. However, the group network strategy seemed to chiefly rely on peer-to-peer, intergenerational and self-directed learning. It is notable that across the three case studies, there were combined elements of non-formal and informal learning. The Tutoring Network Group in AeF offered much flexibility in terms of what was being taught, who was teaching and for how long. But the AeF, as an overarching family literacy project, was conducted under the

wider, formal framework of the government. The more informal children-mother learning spaces in the Family Literacy Programme in Nepal co-existed with more non-formal classes in community learning centres.

Taking a critical perspective on these case studies, many challenges could be seen to remain in continued engagement of community members in sustained learning and facilitation. In Nepal, for instance, the case study authors identified challenges such as providing ample salary for facilitators, difficulty in consistent field support and, as Acharya and Devkota (2021) also noted, a lack of teaching and learning materials. This may have had impact on the programme not being taken up in policy alongside changing national and international policy priorities

The three programmes continued to place high regard on the school as the ‘standard’ learning environment. Literacy classes both for adults and children in the three programmes were often conducted within schools and community learning centres which, I argue, meant that informal learning became formalised and structured. The programmes see learning at home as complementary and supportive of learning in schools and other community learning centres. The emphasis on schools was perhaps most notable in the AeF’s strategy of building a ‘literate community’. The term ‘literate community’ seems to be used synonymously with setting up a library in schools that parents and children could use when they are at school.

This is not to say that learning activities are only organised in school settings. In MCEP (Nigeria), literacy classes were further supported by strategies such as home visits, one-on-one mentoring, dialogues, feedback and consultative meetings to enhance the learning experiences. During the pilot phase of the family learning programme in Nepal, field trips were organised to a local water resource, temple and monasteries and model community organisations.

Concluding notes

These programmes provide concrete examples on what a situated or social-contextual approach to family literacy programming could look like in practice. It is clear from the examples that such an approach is not limited to the stage of programme design but also in other activities as well, such as materials and curriculum development. To conclude, I will analyse some of the policy and practice lessons and limitations that could be gleaned from the analysis above.

First, the case studies highlight the importance of understanding local and indigenous practices already existing in these communities and embedding these in family literacy programming. Part of this practice is not only a focus on needs (i.e. as in ‘needs assessment’) but also on the pre-existing skills, values, motivations and aspirations of the participants. This might allow policymakers and practitioners to “*add to and build on*” the knowledge, skills and resources families bring to these programmes (Rodríguez-Brown 2004, 220). I argue that the case studies demonstrate that in drawing from indigenous practices, the results are not only limited to a curriculum and pedagogy that is relevant to families’ realities, but also to increasing their motivations to participate. For policymakers and practitioners, this means a more in-depth analysis of the rich practices and traditions within homes that deal with oral and written texts (Gadsden 2008). This includes practices that may not always be seen

as typically 'educational' or 'school-like', such as indigenous and religious practices, rituals, livelihoods and other daily tasks like cooking, note-taking and watching television.

Second, the case studies illustrate the importance of wider community participation in designing family literacy programmes. This relates to the earlier discussion about the importance of recognising that in many contexts, the family is not only limited to the parents and their children. There is value in family literacy programmes (including those reviewed in this paper) that were designed in a way that includes the participation of the wider community, although many still see the school as the central place where family learning activities could happen. The case studies reviewed here move this discussion further by emphasising community ownership as well. This signals the ways in which communities can take leadership in implementing programmes (with support from programme staff and facilitators) and later, take over when the project ceases.

Third, the case studies show that it is important to offer some flexibility in the implementation of the curriculum and the activities associated with it. Doing so would mean moulding activities to fit the general routine and daily activities of the families, instead of the other way round. While this is a difficult task, some examples from the case studies could be useful, such as creating more self-sustaining and self-organising groups like tutor networks or literacy groups. However, the sustainability of these projects is challenged by a lack of, or limited funding needed to develop and update materials, conduct the consultations and ensuring that community-based volunteers are supported for their work.

Fourth, the case studies offer lessons on the challenges faced in introducing a relatively new approach to family literacy programming. The programmes had to ensure that they received buy-in from facilitators, community members and learners, some of whom (such as in the case of Mexico), expressed that they felt they had little experience on the new approaches. Human, financial and material resourcing as well as wider political priorities were also significant challenges across all the case studies which seem to have impacted the programme life-cycles.

Analysis of these case studies reveal the importance of taking stock and building on families' learning practices and knowledges in shaping how these programmes are designed and implemented. The complicated and demanding lives of vulnerable and disadvantaged families are not always a barrier but could also be important resources to facilitate relevant learning. Reflecting on the changing approaches to literacy projects in the 90s, Street (2001, 1). suggests that 'before launching into literacy programmes and interventions, it is necessary to understand the literacy practices that target groups and communities are already engaged with'.

Notes

1. <https://uil.unesco.org/case-study/effective-practices-database-litbase-0/family-literacy-programme-nepal>.
2. <https://uil.unesco.org/case-study/effective-practices-database-litbase-0/mother-and-child-education-programme-mcep-nigeria>.
3. <https://uil.unesco.org/case-study/effective-practices-database-litbase-0/aprendizajes-familia-family-literacy-programme>.

4. <https://uil.unesco.org/literacy/effective-practices-database-litbase>.
5. More information about the project, including a synthesis report of ethnographic findings (from fieldworks in Nepal, Malawi, Ethiopia and the Philippines) could be accessed here: <https://www.uea.ac.uk/groups-and-centres/global-research-translation-award-project/family-literacy>.

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