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Literacy lessons learnt from parents in a community programme

Authors:
Dawn Cozett[1]
Janet Condy[1]

Affiliations:
[1]Faculty of Education and Social Sciences, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Dawn Cozett,
dawn.cozett@westerncape.gov.za

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The purpose of this study was to find out how parents can contribute to the early reading development of children in a Grade R class. The research was conducted in a low-income area in the Cape Flats. To gain a deeper understanding of the parents' cultural values and aspirations when interacting with the Home-School Partnership Programme (HSPP) literacy programme, I elected to frame my study within the work of Paulo Freire, who argued that the purpose of education, at the time of his writing, was to make oppressed people passive. Qualitative data were gathered in a case study research design, utilising focus group interviews and semi-structured questionnaire tools, as well as footage from a local broadcasting studio. The findings show that the parents, who were previously unable to assist their children with literacy skills at home, were keen to change and to be active partners in their children's early literacy learning. This research is a descriptive example of how the home, the school and the community can collaborate in a meaningful and sustained way, especially in poverty-stricken areas where unemployment is rife.

Introduction

UNESCO's (2014) *Teaching and Learning* report states that despite remarkable improvements in access to education over the past decade, the disadvantaged are the most likely to be unaffected by this advancement. This may be as a result of insufficient numbers of trained teachers, overstretched infrastructure and inadequate materials. Similarly, in South Africa, Van der Berg's (2014) study on Grade R concludes that although there has been a noticeable increase in the provision of Grade R places in public and independent schools there has been little impact on the poorest schools in South Africa. There has, however, been a greater impact on higher socio-economic schools. Paradoxically, Van der Berg's study shows that instead of reducing inequalities, the increased access to Grade R classes has extended the advantage of more affluent schools. The educationally stronger provinces, as well as the more expensive schools, are producing better performing Grade R schools. As in the UNESCO (2014) report, Van der Berg found that the poor quality of Grade R education may be due to an unsupportive framework, unavailability of good teachers and a lack of parental support.

Poverty is generally regarded as the most likely factor associated with children's early reading performance (Au 2004). Because I know that the average income of the families in the community is low, I concluded that the parents may never have had the opportunity to join a project in which they would learn to assist their children in reading acquisition. This view was confirmed upon inquiry. I then decided to introduce the parents of the Grade R class where I am a teacher to the *Home-School Partnership Programme* (HSPP). This is a literacy programme aimed at improving reading of young parents who have grown up in disadvantaged areas and have indicated that they may not be competent readers. The HSPP is utilised across different languages and cultures for parents of children between four and seven years of age (Comrie 2009). The research question is: What literacy lessons have parents in a community programme learnt?

The study was motivated by my concern for the 2010 and 2011 Grade R classes at the school where I teach. There were too many learners who were not even able to meet the basic criteria of the Grade R Baseline Assessment Plan. Two-thirds of the class were underachieving. Some of the possible reasons included not attending a preschool before grade R, malnutrition and lack of stimulus at home.

A Freirian framework for 21st century early grade learning

Freire (1970) argues that 'classes' have different ideological cultural values and aspirations. I come from a middle-class suburb some distance from the school where I taught, so I was unfamiliar

with the community where the children in the school lived. So, for me to gain a deeper understanding of my learners' parents' cultural values and aspirations when interacting with the HSPP literacy programme, I elected to frame my study within the work of Paulo Freire (Freire 1970). I realised at the outset that for the parents and their children, I, as participatory researcher, would also be seen as 'the other'. Freire's work explores, among other things, what it means to connect and live with the 'other'.

For Freire, class remains an important factor for understanding oppression. He believed the purpose of education in the mid and later 20th century was to make oppressed people passive. He regards poor people as *oppressed*. He argues that children of poverty who go to school are not taught to *question*, but to accept. This minimises the oppressed's creative power. Freire (1996:29) suggests that education becomes a tool of oppression when it is overly prescribed: 'every prescription represents the imposition of one individual's choice upon another, transforming the consciousness of the person prescribed to, into that which conforms to the prescriber's consciousness'.

Because Freire considers literacy to be much more than just the ability to read, and regards literacy as the ability to read 'the word and the world', literacy is a social term to him. The term 'social literacy' thus could, arguably, enable parents to recognise their role as teachers of a broader kind of literacy in their families and communities. Shor (1999) furthers this discussion by suggesting that literacy is a social action which uses language inside a larger culture. Critical pedagogy theorist Giroux (2011:5) agrees with Freire (1996:57) that students should read texts as objects of interrogation rather than 'slavishly' reading a text through a culture of pedagogical conformity that does not encourage questioning. Critical literacy, also explored by Janks (2014), is understood as 'learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one's experiences as historically constructed within specific power relations' (Shor 1999). Giroux (2011:154), in arguing for a reappraisal of Paolo Freire, says that Freiran pedagogy affords students the opportunity to read, write and learn by engaging in a culture of *questioning*, which demands more than being competent rote learners.

The *banking concept*[1] of education, which is an image Freire used consistently as a metaphor for education, Freire (1996:53) regards learning as an act of 'depositing': pupils are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Gilbert (2012:119) explains this metaphor as an act of 'funnelling' knowledge into pupils' heads. Freire takes a strong view when he says that this act of 'banking' (Freire 1996:55) disguises the efforts of the humanist to turn women and men into 'automatons'. *Automaton conformity prevents self-directed learning, critical thinking and autonomy in action.* It encourages disconnected knowledge. In terms of the 'banking system' or rote learning, the narrative educator talks and the learner listens. The learner listens, memorises and repeats without any real insight or understanding of what they learnt. The learner is treated as a 'tabula rasa' or an 'empty vessel' that needs to be filled. The educator chooses the content and context of the study and learners adapt to it. Learners are passive and accept the world as teachers (as 'oppressors') portray it to them. The learner is in the world, but not with the world. The learner is not making meaning of the knowledge that he is filled with. 'Banking' serves the interest of the oppressor (educator), who does not care to have the world revealed or transformed. This approach stifles growth and development (Freire 1996:58). In Freire's later work, when he authored *Pedagogy of Hope*, offers an adapted view of his earlier work, when the political environment in his native Brazil and in other countries of the South American continent had changed and when he had started to attend to teacher education with direct interventions in Sao Paolo.

1.In the post 2008 meltdown of major banks, this image conveys a double irony.

From Freire to culturally responsive teaching

This literature review begins with a brief discussion on what it means to teach in a culturally responsive manner. As this research is based on the outcomes of the HSPP, a brief discussion of what the programme includes will be provided. Discussions on supporting literacy learning at home, language learning and emergent reading and writing will conclude this section.

Au (2004:404) states that often teachers end up working in classrooms with students from backgrounds that are culturally different from their own. These teachers want to teach values, cultures and behaviours that reflect those of their learners. The purpose of culturally responsive teaching is to promote academic achievement, not just to build self-esteem or cultural identity, although these may be positive outcomes of this approach. It is important for learners from diverse backgrounds to acquire academic skills, as they need to be able to compete in the larger society. People are judged on how well they can speak, read and write in English. In culturally relevant teaching, teachers are mindful of teaching students in a manner that respects their values and home cultures (Au 2004).

In this study the parents of the Grade R learners valued the principal of ubuntu, which 'recognises the African philosophy of humanism, linking the individual to the collective. … It is a way of life, ways of treating others and ways of behaving' (Sotuku & Duku 2014:29). The HSPP values these principles by nurturing relationships between parents and learners, parents and teachers and parents and the school. The programme specifically sets out to develop the parent's self-esteem, self-confidence, as well as thinking and reasoning skills. They are motivated to create caring and reliable relationships with their children (O'Carroll 2014).

The Home-School Partnership Programme

O'Carroll (2014), director of WordWorks, states that the HSPP is a volunteer programme including parents, grandparents and caregivers to support learning in the home environment. The programme (Appendix 1) is conducted in high poverty

areas, where high levels of unemployment, drug abuse and gang violence are prevalent.

The HSPP strives to achieve three outcomes: to foster a culture of learning among families, to assist parents of young children with after-hours learning activities and to nurture constructive relationships between schools and families. The seven-week, user-friendly and fun course aims to equip participants with critical literacy skills and practical ideas and builds confidence necessary to support their children's learning at home. Participants are shown skills of how to: talk with babies and children, share stories and books, sing songs and play games with sounds, facilitate pretend play, point out print, provide opportunities for drawing and support early writing in English, Afrikaans, isiZulu and isiXhosa (O'Carroll n.d.).

Supporting literacy learning at home

Parental relationships that support literacy in the home environment form the necessary grounding for early childhood development. In many instances, parents and caregivers are not aware of the impact that these literacy activities have on their children's learning. The role of the family and the family environment itself has an effect on young children's emergent literacy development. Caregivers and teachers, together with families, help to create a basis for emergent literacy by providing literacy-related activities. For many years in South Africa, as Hickman and O'Carroll (2013) state, there has been a misconception that learning to read and write begins when children start formal learning. The brain of an infant is impressionable; it is able to absorb and learn different skills, including language learning during the early years. Zeece and Wallace (2009) emphasise that literacy development starts at birth.

Swick (2008) accentuates the importance of high-quality parent-child relationships. Through consistent and loving interactions with their parents, children experience a sense of goodness. Parents therefore need to form a bond with their children to construct a sense of security and love. This is significant when influencing children's growth and learning. Mui and Anderson (2008) continue this argument by stating that homes and families are influential sites for literacy learning.

Family members, other than fathers and mothers, according to Mui and Anderson (2008), can support the learning of young children at home. According to Comrie (2009), parents are encouraged to involve older brothers and sisters or other family members in reading and telling stories to young children. This interaction supports the older siblings' reading and sense of responsibility. Mui and Anderson state that, at times, literacy learning occurs in the context of playing 'school'. Older children feel it their responsibility to help prepare their younger siblings for school entry or the next grade. Immediate family members and extended families need to support younger children to develop basic literacy skills. Mui and Anderson state that the value of older children assisting their younger siblings is that they benefit too. They explain:

> The older children learn various ways to present information to the younger children, teaching them important literacy knowledge while at the same time likely enhancing and reinforcing their own literacy. (Mui & Anderson 2008:242)

Mui and Anderson (2008) explain that due to the increasing role that grandparents and significant other adults play in the lives of young children (children not always being raised by their biological parents), the important role of such persons should be acknowledged. The guidance and support that parents and caregivers offer to young children is considered critical. Zeece and Wallace (2009) agree that young children's literacy and language abilities depend on support provided.

Not all parents are comfortable and confident enough to assist their children in an overt role. Therefore, suitable support programmes should be made available so that parents do not feel pressured to perform in the company of others. Otto (2008) and De Coulon, Meschi and Vignoles (2011) make compelling arguments about the harmful effects that parents with poor literacy skills have on their young children's literacy development. It may not only have an impact on their children's schooling, but it may also affect employment and family income. Other factors mentioned by Otto are that parents may face unemployment, having to work away from home or hold unstable jobs with low wages. The amount of time spent together could be affected by these factors. In a South African context, where many Grade R learners come from low–income families, it is important to recognise the factors that contribute to and prevent successful literacy achievement.

According to Grisham-Brown (2008), children's growth and the way they learn are influenced by those who care for, and educate, them. To give children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds a better chance of learning to read and write successfully, as stated by O'Carroll (cited in Comrie 2009), foundations for learning must be laid before the start of formal schooling. Teaching children to read and write should therefore be an ongoing process. Imitation is a powerful form of social and cognitive education. Children's peers, older children and senior members of the community, such as parents or teachers, can all use this instinct to initiate a way of leading or directing children.

Language learning for literacy

At the time the data were collected for this research project, the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS 2002) was being used. Hence, I will refer to this document. In the Grade R curriculum (RNCS 2002:13) oral language is the foundation and the primary means of communication. Language inspires imagination and creativity; it eventually provides and promotes many of the goals of science, technology and environmental education. It develops the critical tools necessary for becoming responsible citizens. The RNCS (2002:13) requires that learners entering Grade R and

Grade 1 have a high proficiency in their home language. These learners should have developed their home language through a variety of interactions with others in the context of care, nurture and play. The focus should be on: listening for information and enjoyment, communicating confidently and effectively in a wide range of situations, reading picture books and learning songs and rhymes, drawing pictures and the ability to use vocabulary appropriately. The learners will be able to understand concepts such as identity, number, size and colour (RNCS 2002:16).

Emergent reading and writing

Zeece and Wallace (2009:36) state that literacy development begins at birth and is highly connected with success at school. Girard *et al*. (2013) posit that emergent literacy is the skill and knowledge that precede formal reading. Emergent literacy supports the development of decoding and reading comprehension. Children interact with their environment by means of their five senses from birth. Their sensory-motor experiences of touch, smell, taste, sight and hearing enable them to explore their environment.

When young children become aware of environmental print such as product labels, clothing, road signs and advertisements, they realise that print makes meaning. Comrie (2009:9) describes this experience as children making a big 'jump' from noticing real concrete objects to those same objects being represented by words on paper. Young children, as described by Neumann, Hood and Neumann (2008) can be asked to trace letters in words with their fingers while the word is being sounded out. Goldstein (2011) offers insight into early word-play; songs and rhymes for example set the stage for teaching phonological awareness. Learning the concept that letters correspond to sounds and not to their names provides the foundation for reading.

Chohan (2011) explains that pre-writing skills are best learned when children are allowed to organise and convey their thoughts. Cabel, Tortorelli and Gerde (2013) expound that young children who are exposed to pre-writing experiences are provided with a rich foundation for literacy learning. A foundation for literacy learning includes an understanding of writing on a page from left to right, drawings and sound awareness. Children's writing, therefore, can provide information about their understanding of print and sound. The writing is often no more than directionless scribbles. Children notice written text in their environment and the scribbles become horizontal and move from left to right on a page.

Furthermore, Cabel *et al*. (2013) state that children's drawings are their writing and that this process helps young children to figure out how writing works in an informal manner. Children often represent salient sounds or the sounds that are the most prominent because of the way they feel in the child's mouth. When a child has the ability to identify salient sounds in words and match them to a letter, it indicates that that child has begun to sound out the words she wrote phonetically, for example by labelling a picture of a tiger with a 'T'.

This section began by discussing Freire's theory of the oppressed and what it means to have different ideological cultural values and aspirations. Throughout the literature review attention was given to literacy development in the home by discussing what it means to teach in a culturally responsive manner; some aspects of the HSPP were described, the importance of supporting literacy learning at home was highlighted, how this project linked to the RNCS policy document was discussed and finally there was a brief discussion on emergent reading and writing skills.

Inquiry and methods

A case study methodology was used to conduct an in-depth investigation into the ways in which parents of my Grade R learners were empowered by attending a seven-week literacy intervention programme. Case studies, as stated by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2008:253) can 'establish cause and effect, they observe effects in real contexts, recognising that context is a powerful determinant of both causes and effects'. The context of this research project was unique and hence my study reports on the 'complex dynamic and unfolding interactions' of the literacy gains.

I opted for a convenient sample of parents, as this group was easily accessible (Cohen *et al*. 2008). It was convenient for me to approach the Grade R parents as I saw them in the morning when they brought their Grade R children to school and in the afternoon when they collected their children after school.

The school selected for this study is located in a low-income area in Hout Bay near to a small fishing village and surrounded by two mountains. Many parents from this community insist that their children be taught in English even though their home language is Afrikaans. The school falls within Quintile 1, which is regarded as a no-fees school; however, Grade R learners pay an annual fee of R350. They are fed daily by the Provincial Feeding Scheme, which is a Department of Basic Education (DoBE) initiative that supports the learning programme at the school and in the Western Cape (South Africa 1996, 2001, 2006, 2014).

The sample consisted of five parents who had children in my Grade R class in 2010. During February and March 2010, these five parents attended a seven-week HSPP, which I conducted in English. The following year, during May 2011, I found another five parents to be interviewed. These parents attended the same HSPP in 2010 but were interviewed to add more depth to the findings. The first sample group did not display sufficient responses to the required study and it therefore lacked depth (Creswell 2009).

I asked open-ended questions in a series of focus group interviews, which were crucial to this research programme (Creswell 2009). In 2010, I conducted interviews after each week of the seven-week HSPP. During February and March 2011, e.tv videoed the HSPP over a period of four weeks and I transcribed and reproduced a video clip from that filming. On the final evening of the HSPP, I invited the parents to complete a semi-structured questionnaire.

During the time of inductive data analysis, I used eight different coloured pens to code the text of the interviews, semi-structured questionnaires and the video recording. The codes were: personal development was coded in red, early childhood development was coded green, building collegiality in the community was coded yellow, developing skills was coded purple, time management was coded silver, strengthening relationships was coded blue, positive self-esteem was coded orange and finally future hope was coded turquoise. When categorising these themes, some codes were discarded (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit 2007). Eventually, the codes were categorised into five more frequently occurring themes according to the theories of Freire, Au and the literature review.

Triangulation, as explained by Cohen *et al*. (2008), refers to different methods of data collection producing substantially the same results. To guarantee triangulation, I compared the transcriptions of the interviews, questionnaires and the video recording, which generated considerably similar findings. The more the data collection methods displayed similarity with each other, the more confident I became and this strengthened my research study (Yin 2008).

Participation was completely voluntary. Parents who participated in the HSPP were assured of confidentiality and anonymity (Henning *et al*. 2007). I have used initials (LB, GG, AG) when discussing the results. Permission to conduct this research project was obtained from the WCED and my university (Cohen *et al*. 2008). A letter of permission was received from the principal of my school where the study was conducted. In addition to this, I was granted permission to use the video clip, which was aired on e.tv as part of the South African Heroes campaign.

Findings: Parent advancement for child development

In an attempt to answer the research question: 'What literacy lessons have parents in a community programme learnt?', five themes began to emerge on a regular and consistent basis. They are: personal development, understanding of early childhood development, building collegiality in the community, developing skills and time management. In the examples of the findings the exact words that the parents used are shown. For the sake of authenticity, the grammatical structure of their sentences has not been changed.

Personal development

In this study, the HSPP encouraged the participants to develop on a personal level. The participants were able to recognise the important role they play in their young children's development. They also realised that their actions had an effect on their family and the community (De Coulon *et al*. 2011; Grisham-Brown 2008; Mui & Anderson 2008; Swick 2008). The participants were enabled to make decisions for themselves and their families.

The HSPP had brought families together in that they were reading together: older siblings also wanted to be part of the reading time. Comrie (2009) encouraged the involvement of older brothers and sisters in reading and telling stories to younger siblings. Fathers had taken on the responsibility of assisting their children at home with storytelling and going to the library (Au 2004; Mui & Anderson 2008). Some of the interviewees had this to say:

> 'I am no longer the same. At first I would say 'not now' but now I want to do things.' (FM)
>
> 'It brings your family together.' (LB)
>
> 'It makes you a better parent.' (SD)
>
> 'If I can't take him to the library, then my husband takes him.' (JA)
>
> 'Last year my wife was telling stories, but then she say no and you know it's not only for your wife to tell the stories so I took that part from my wife. And so now I'm the one who tell the stories to the child and she enjoy the stories.' (LB)
>
> 'Having fun with my children. … You see, it's more fun and exciting and uhh because books in the shops are very expensive, so it's best to make books at home.' (LW)
>
> 'I am proud to be a mother.' (JA)

Participants indicated what they enjoyed doing during the programme and how this improved their relationships with their children (Mui & Anderson 2008). Most of the participants indicated that they needed programmes such as the HSPP to assist their children before they went to school. This helped build a better relationship with their child. They mentioned that the programme was empowering and interesting (Freire 1996). One response was as follows: 'The connection that I used to have with my child was not so good at first but now we understand each other'.

It seemed that parents felt good about the change that was happening in their families. Parents realised that the programme gave them ideas to assist their children with learning in a fun way (Freire 1996). While many parents felt that they were being equipped to assist their young children, some indicated that they needed a programme to focus on helping older children and children who were experiencing difficulties with their school work. LB had the following to say:

> 'I think, how many years I waste because I just send my eldest daughter to school and uhh I come back and I just leave her by the teacher. But now with this education programme has made a big difference in my life. I know that I must work with my child every day and I mustn't stop working with my child because it's an on-going thing. You know, if I can do this programme every year.'

The parents discovered that they could play an important role not only in their children's development, but also with their own personal development (Zeece & Wallace 2009). It seemed that they realised how much they needed an intervention programme such as the HSPP to assist them to make a difference in their own lives as well as in the lives of their young children.

Understanding of early childhood development

Piaget (cited in Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana 2007:53) believes that ECD's focus is on children learning through play, exploring their environment and 'trying things out'. It is at this stage of development that the 'power of play' develops a natural curiosity in children (RNCS 2002). It is thought that children learn more efficiently and gain more knowledge when given the opportunity for play-based activities such as dramatic play, art and social games. This theory is based on children's natural curiosity and tendencies to 'make believe'.

One of the interview questions was: 'Are you still playing language games with your child?' Two parents responded:

> 'During bath time and … while he is dressing himself, there is a lot of activity … like when he's pronouncing words wrong, we'll teach him how to pronounce it right in actually a playful way but we are still teaching him.' (JA)

> 'I like to play language games with my child. … I can see the improvement. … Last year she was struggling a bit with her English and uhh you can see through the games and more.' (LB)

Two parents indicated in the semi-structured questionnaires that communication between them and their children improved since they were doing the different activities at home. Some could see the value of learning through play and how it brought about calmness in the home (Girard *et al*. 2013):

> 'The programme draws you closer to your child … and I don't shout at her so much like before.' (LB)

> 'The programme helped me to spend time with my child.' (LW)

One mother mentioned that she realised she should not rush or put pressure on her child. She came to know that it will take time for him to understand and grasp certain letters of the alphabet:

> 'My child wants to write his name so I try to make the 'K' for him and he's just making it a different way but at least you can see it's a 'K'. … He says: 'Mommy I know I can do it', I say: 'Yes I know you can do it, don't worry it takes time.' (FM)

Many parents said that they had a better understanding of how young children learnt. It made them more confident about assisting their children at home (Au 2004). Some participants felt empowered and understood early childhood education. Others were hopeful about the future for the first time. Parents had a more optimistic outlook for their children's educational future (Au 2004; De Coulon *et al.* 2011; Freire 1996).

Building collegiality in the community

During the seven-week HSPP we encouraged the parents to think about ways they taught their young children and what effect it had on their own development. The most significant response was that 'the parents and teachers developed trust amongst each other'. This encouraged good relationships between myself and the participants. We discovered that we could learn from one another.

There were two participants who mentioned in the semi-structured questionnaires that they enjoyed being part of the group. One wrote concerning the importance of sharing the vision and mission that you have for your children: 'Meeting with other parents, sharing our vision and mission in life for our kids'.

The other parent wrote about being surrounded by many people and the teachers and learning in a short space of time: 'I enjoyed being surrounded by lots of people and the teachers and things I learned in a short period of time'.

Sharing during the sessions gave parents a chance to discuss and support each other. During the interviews, parents were asked whether they shared the information they had gained over the seven-weeks with other participants:

> 'Yes, with all my friends and my neighbours coming to me.' (JA)

> 'I can't stop telling them what a privilege it is to be in an education programme like this.' (LB)

> 'I will say to the parents it's nice to do this and then it opens up your mind.' (JW)

One parent shared during an interview session that prior to the HSPP she would normally just walk past people. Ever since the HSPP, she now greeted and had conversations with people that she met at the HSPP:

> 'We normally didn't greet, we just passed each other. … But now it's exciting, we say 'hi'. We communicate about what happened in the class and outside.' (FL)

O'Carroll (cited in Comrie 2009) states that the HSPP promotes informal learning and is applicable across languages and cultures. In the evaluation forms, some parents made recommendations that, in future, the programme should be introduced to parents of other cultures and the wider community. Some referred to the informal settlement that is situated near the school. Four participants mentioned 'involve the community of IY [*Imizamo Yethu – an informal settlement in the Hout Bay area*]'.

Eight participants felt strongly and stated 'open it to the broader community'. These parents felt that there is hope for those who had not yet had a chance to be introduced to the HSPP. Two parents recommended that, through the HSPP, South African youth can benefit: 'SA youth rainbow nation', 'build a strong nation'.

One of the interviewees mentioned that more parents should be attending programmes such as the HSPP:

> 'If more parents can attend these classes, it will make a big difference.' (LB)

Parents were enthusiastic to collaborate as a community; they gradually but observably learnt to encourage others to participate in the HSPP programme (Swick 2008). They were eager to share their experiences with others in the community

and extend this programme to the local informal settlement. This supports Mui and Anderson's (2008) idea that homes and families are influential sites for literacy learning. These parents developed ambitions beyond their own private concerns and began to widen the scope of their concern to the altruistic desire for others to succeed as well; they wanted to see children of other parents in the local community succeed. This broadening of interest was demonstrable from the findings and one of the most significant results of the intervention as a whole.

Developing skills

The banking concept, according to Freire (1996:54) 'minimises creativity'. Freire refers to students accepting the passive role imposed on them and that they do not develop as critical conscious beings. In this study, the HSPP allowed the parents an opportunity to ask critical questions. Parents started asking advice on how to teach literacy skills to their young children at home. Reading stories to their children, drawing a picture or spending time interacting with their children taught parents by practice what to do.

Many of the parents, had been previously oppressed, and did not know how to implement these literacy suggestions because they themselves had never been read to as children (Freire 1996). Many of them lacked the skills of telling a story with excitement, encouraging drawing or spending time interacting with their children. These parents neither knew how to spend time with their children nor how to turn that time into an informal learning experience (Au 2004). During an interview, one of the parents became excited when she explained the manner in which she was reading to her children and the questions that she asked them:

> 'Would keep the book in front of them while we lay in bed and I read to them. While I read, I asked them what they think would happen next. … It was so exciting.' (LB)

As the programme developed, the parents began to experience a sense of achievement when they made little books. Once they folded and cut their pages, they were excited to make more books at home with their children. This activity was followed by a discussion on the importance of making your own books and what children could learn from this experience. At the end of this session, participants were given homework which was to make their own books. The following week they had to show their books to the whole group. This increased their sense of independence and usefulness (Cabel *et al*. 2013). Two parents mentioned that making your own books was economical:

> 'Because books in the shop are very expensive, it's best to make books at home. … I also like to make books.' (LB)

> 'It's good, then you carry the books with you wherever you go, … you can read in the taxi or in the car.' (JW)

The making of books became a fun activity for parents and their children (Chohan 2011). One of the parents, however, mentioned in the semi-structured questionnaire that she struggled with the cutting and folding of the little books. It seemed that it turned out that this became a fun activity:

> 'The best part is when you struggle to cut and to fold it [*the page*] and then we have a laugh, that's the best part.' (MS)

Instead of watching television aimlessly or being exposed to violent acts in the community, parents and children were having fun through learning language (Au 2004). They were able to laugh together and at themselves. Parents became hopeful since they became aware of the importance of listening to their children. They had been taught the skill of making their own books and realised why language development was significant in their children's growth. Parents learned how to make their own puzzles. There was a comment from one parent who seemed hopeful and eager to exercise what he had learned through the programme:

> 'You showed us how to make puzzles and hum that makes me excited.' (LB)

It seemed that once the parents understood the importance of language learning and what their children were able to learn through having books and puzzles available, they were more than eager to further their skills in these areas. It became evident that this project disrupted Freire's (1996:54) notion of 'minimising creativity'.

Time management

Throughout the seven-week HSPP, the parents were encouraged to adjust their schedules in order to make time for their children. The situation of family life changes continuously. At first, most of the parents did not seem to understand the importance of time-management or of making time for this course. However, later in the programme, they began to see the significance of planning their time.

During the interviews, two of the parents indicated that they did not always have time to do what they were taught during the programme. The one parent did, however, mention that she did Maths and that she read with her child:

> 'Now that I have the little one, I do not have much time to make little books.' (JW)

> 'Because there's not always time for that [*playing language games*], but we do the maths and the reading.' (GB)

One of the fathers who was interviewed stated he realised that he had to change the ways he spent his time at home. His role was to assist his wife with their child:

> 'Daddy's must be there to help his wife with the child. He mustn't just sit with the newspaper or in front of the TV [*television*]. Help the wife, help the child and so you can make a better life with your child.' (LB)

In two of the final semi-structured questionnaires, parents commented that one of the things that they enjoyed about the programme was how they spent time with their children. It seemed that the HSPP assisted parents to use their time more effectively (Au 2004). The two phrases that substantiate this point are: 'how to help my child … and spend time' and 'know [*now*], I'm spending more time with my kids'.

Other parents, in their semi-structured questionnaires, mentioned their ideas of how they used their time to assist their children with learning language. Parents showed that they understood that there were different ways for their children to learn. They commented by writing the following statements: 'because my daughter is a slow leaner, I can help her a lot with her schoolwork through play', 'to teach my children things that I never done, like routine', 'the games, reading books and how to teach my children to read and write' and 'by listening and hearing'.

Many of the parents who attended the programme realised that they might have made a good choice in registering to participate in the seven-week HSPP. These parents committed themselves to the seven weeks. This organising of their time was beneficial to them and their families. One of the participants was a grandmother who sacrificed her time to attend the seven-week programme. She mentioned in the e.tv interview that she did it for the sake of her grandchildren, so that she could assist them at home. This woman realised the important role that she played as a grandparent and the difference that she could make towards her grandchildren's future lives.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine how the parents of Grade R learners were empowered to assist their children at home with learning literacy. The HSPP is undoubtedly and demonstrably a successful intervention strategy for a critical situation in South African education with regard to literacy (Au 2004). It is an attainable and realistic programme. As stated in the South African Constitution (1996), every child has the right to be taught, to be literate.

The reality of restructuring an entire educational organisation after the disruption and crippling after effects of apartheid has proved to be far greater than expected (Freire 1996). The implementation of a fair and egalitarian educational option for all has been arduous and expensive. Inevitably, despite the best, often heroic, efforts of dedicated educators, many communities have not benefitted directly or materially in accordance with the ideals of the new constitution (Au 2004). The DoBE envisages the provision of quality education for all children in an education and training system that respects and responds effectively to the diverse learning needs of every child.

The findings in this research project indicate that the home, school and community cannot work in isolation. Today, universal education includes adults as well as children (UNESCO 2014). A learning family refers to parents creating a home that is rich in learning resources by using inexpensive or reusable material. A learning street describes good use of vocabulary, print rich signs and notices. A learning community is a community with neighbours sharing books and grandparents telling their stories to the children at school or at home. Forming this kind of partnership increases children's self-esteem, motivation, academic skills and independence so that they can achieve success and develop their full potential.

Conclusion

Despite UNESCO (2014) report and Van der Berg's (2014) Grade R, study both of which found that the poor quality of Grade R education may be due to the lack of parental support, the findings of the HSPP research project provided evidence that the programme increased parents' self-esteem, motivation and literacy skills. They were more able to participate in literacy skills and debates with their children in the home environment. They became mindful of the necessity that their children needed better opportunities that reflect their own culture and values to speak, read and write in English so they could compete in the larger more competitive society.

The parents involved in this study were early school leavers. They had been taught not to question but to accept and this limited their creative powers. After the programme, they were passionate about bringing change into their families, helping their children avoid the failure that they had experienced. The HSPP showed the parents that they could be liberated by asking questions and being critical in an anxiety-free environment. They learnt to plan their lives, read to their children with expression, made books, puzzles, played games, sang, danced and explored while listening and speaking. The HSPP, though small, is one way of ameliorating some of the inherited damage from the past and bringing about change in a practical, practicable and affordable manner. They now have a sense of direction and want or desire a better life.

A few recommendations are suggested. The DoBE must continue to recognise the importance of the principles and practices of social and environmental justice and incorporate such principles and practices into curricular development. Schools can offer programmes, such as the HSPP, which empower and teach parents to become more aware of what they are able to offer their children and participate in informal literacy activities at home. Especially in Quintile 1 schools, it is recommended that school management bodies create opportunities to develop partnerships with parents. The focus of these partnerships would be to extend the parents', and ultimately the children's, early literacy and numeracy experiences in a creative and fun-filled manner. Schools, teachers and families could work collaboratively and be guided by the needs of the child to develop successful and resourceful learning experiences. As far as the research design is concerned, and in terms of depth, it is recommended that the sample size be increased for a deeper understanding of the process. In preparation for interviews, it would be better to provide the participants with a printed copy of the interview questions before the time, to allow them to prepare themselves. This would help with language differences.

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Authors' contributions

D.C. and J.C. contributed equally to the writing of this article.

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Appendix 1

The HSPP seven-week literacy programme includes focusing on:

- Parents as their children's first teacher.
- Language learning and how young children learn best.
- Drawing and have-a-go writing.
- Strategies to support early reading and writing, including listening games.
- Developing children's big and small muscles and knowledge of body in space.
- Early maths using the world as our classroom.
- Summing up the programme, certificates and celebrations.