Somali 'influencers' in and beyond a school community: Using funds of knowledge to influence family and children's reading engagement

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Abstract

Identifying approaches to enable traditionally 'hard to reach' children and families engage with book choice, book sharing and reading, has been an area for research and development for some years. Ensuring families have access to books is an essential pre-requisite. This case study investigated an innovative approach, more typically used in health research, to engaging families in a large, diverse primary school (n= 328) where a proportion of its typically 'harder to reach' families were within its Somali community. The research design involved community researchers identifying members of the school and wider community who were considered to be 'influential', drawing from religious organisations, community and parent groups as well as community elders. This group of 'influencers' (n=13) shared their experiences of learning to read and understanding of the barriers for families in engaging with schools and reading. 'Messages' were collaboratively designed and shared over six weeks through the 'influencers'' channels of communication. During these six weeks, the school opened its library after school for families. Data was gathered to identify the number of families that visited the library (n=69), the books borrowed (n=144) and then analysed to identify if any of the 'harder to reach' families had made use of the library. Twenty-six of these families were considered to be 'harder to reach'. Further data indicated that it was possible that at least eight of these families had engaged with the

library as a result of the 'influencers'. This suggests the use of 'influencers' may present a promising area for further research.

Key words

early reading; reading; family literacy; Somali; school libraries

Link to article

https://educationstudies.org.uk/?p=19019

Introduction

Learning to read is one of the most important skills a child will learn (Castles *et al.*, 2018). Reading impacts on all aspects of a child's school life and reaches beyond this into adult life (Breadmore *et al.,* 2019). Reading has been the focus of successive English government education policies, initiatives and statutory assessment regimes (Moss, 2020). Most recently, the publication of *Opportunity for All* (Department for Education, 2022) had a focus on the importance of reading standards and the need to hold schools to account for the assessed reading attainment of children. The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Servicesand Skills (Ofsted) in their inspection regime, alongside school league tables of assessment outcomes in reading, further emphasise not only the focus on standards in reading but also a school's accountability for its reading outcomes. The foundations for reading are laid down before the start of formal education: the home literacy environment impacts on early attitudes to reading and future reading attainment (Fletcher and Reese, 2005). When positive attitudes are developed at an early stage and a child is engaged with reading, future attainment can be secured, often despite other challenges the child may face in relation to socio-economic disadvantage (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2014).   Evidence suggests fewer parents in socio-economically deprived communities are engaging with their children in book-related talk and sharing (Shahaeiana *et al.*, 2018; Hoff, 2003). Coupled with this, threats to English public libraries, children's centres and reduced funding for library outreach (Robertson and McMenemy, 2018) mean that families do not always have ease of access to children's books and so opportunities to engage and share books informally within the family. This article focuses on research exploring these dual potential barriers to becoming a

reader: access to books (particularly for families in socio-economically disadvantaged communities) and the engagement with reading by communities and families (and so the engagement of their children), and adds the further dimension of locating the research in the Somali community in a large inner-city primary school. The socio-cognitive model of learning to read, identifying reading 'as an individual cognitive-linguistic accomplishment' that is necessarily socially situated and 'socially constituted' (Pretorius and Lephalala, 2011:3) provides the theoretical framing for the research. This foundation led to a case study design: the case being a large primary school in a diverse and vibrant community in a city in the west of England. The research aimed to explore the 'socially constituted' aspect of reading, and so identify, and then work with individuals within the local Somali community who were considered to be 'influential'. These 'influencers' provided insight into the local community as readers through focus groups and then became the vehicle for messaging about both the practical arrangements for book borrowing from the extended hours of the school library, and messaging about the cultural, social and educational significance of engaging children in reading. The main aim of the research was to identify whether this approach, using local 'influencers', could impact on the engagement with reading of, 'hard to reach' groups within the school i.e. families who did not regularly come into school for specific reading-focused activities; parents evenings and reading information evenings. The research team included the lead researcher, two community researchers and the school's community worker and deputy head teacher.

Review of the literature

Family, schools, reading and literacy identities

Since the Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading (Rose, 2006) the English curriculum has been dominated by a view of reading as a purely cognitive skill, through the promotion of *The Simple View of Reading* (Gough and Tunmer, 1984) and the focus on phonics (Carter, 2020). What counts as reading and how reading is developed is largely viewed through this narrow lens (Hall, 2006) despite seminal studies that locate reading as a social and cultural construct (Brice-Heath, 1983; Street, 1984) and more recently the work of Levy (2011) and Levy and Hall (2021). Schools play a foundational role in the framing of reading for the child – not just in relation to learning to read but also in the construction of what it means to be 'a reader'

(Cremin *et al.*, 2014). Scherer (2016) identifies the fundamental significance of the child's identity: this influences both *how* the child learns to read and *whether* the child learns to read. Scherer (2016) argues that the way reading is constructed in the school system, means that groups of children (including children from ethnic backgrounds that do not match the one dominant in a school) often do not reach the same standard of reading as those in the dominant group, feeling the uncomfortableness of not quite 'matching' this one view of 'schooled' reading. Whilst Levy and Hall (2021) recognise that children who are unable to apply the cognitive skills of reading are significantly disadvantaged through life, they suggest that it is, therefore, even more important to draw on the social and cultural knowledge and practices of the child and their community and to consider what is impacting on the child's developing identity as a reader. This holistic approach enables a greater chance of higher outcomes for all in reading. Ellis and Smith (2017) show the complex interrelationships between the cognitive, the personal social-identity and the cultural and social capital of the reader in their 'Three Domains' model of reading. Reading as a socially situated practice, therefore, necessitates the consideration of the role of home and family context and how this impacts on the child. Various studies have documented the impact of the family on children's language and literacy development and, in particular, in relation to early shared reading (Shahaeian *et al.*, 2018; Mol *et al.*, 2008). Preece and Levy (2020) identified that many approaches to engaging with families ignored the literacy practices that already existed in the home, and that these need to be harnessed and valued if children are to reap the benefits of shared-book reading and talk. In addition, Preece and Levy (2020: 40) make clear that it is not just about understanding the literacy practices of the home and community, but also recognising what 'reading does for families', including notions of bonding, closeness, engagement and enjoyment. If the importance of engagement with the child's wider family and community is recognised then it is also essential to understand why some families are reluctant to share their home practices with schools, and why some families chose not to engage with the reading activities promoted in schools – families often labelled as 'hard to reach' by schools.

What is meant by 'hard to reach' families

Bonevski *et al.* (2014), in the United States, identify a range of terms used by researchers when referring to groups or individuals that do not readily or easily engage with state institutions. These include: 'hard to reach', 'vulnerable', 'disadvantaged groups' and 'excluded groups'. In medical research these groups are considered to be 'hidden groups' (Lambert and Wiebel, 1990) as they are often not represented in research resulting in outcomes that can be unreliable and potentially skewed. Hannon *et al.* (2020) use the term 'disadvantaged families' when considering the issues with recruitment of families to emergent literacy research. Whilst they acknowledge that there is no single definition of 'disadvantaged families' they characterise them as families from 'lower socio-economic levels in society' (p. 311) who are likely to experience multiple disadvantage in relation to income, health, housing and educational outcomes. Gonzales-Duarte *et al.* (2019:1), when considering the ethical implications of research with such groups, suggest the fundamental basis for disadvantage as ''unequal power relationships that hinder basic rights'' that translate into these multiple disadvantages and so further prevent the access to the means of future development and improvements. Hannon *et al.* (2020: 311) make clear that, whilst children from these 'harder to reach' groups tend to have lower achievement levels in reading than their more advantaged peers, this may be a result of a school's inability to engage with these groups, to recognise and value ''cultural strengths'' or perhaps to recognise that these groups cannot always be engaged by the same means as the more advantaged family groups. Moll *et al.* (1992) demonstrated that literacy was culturally and socially constructed and what was often being identified by schools was not a literacy deficit but merely a mis-match between the literacies of the home and community and the literacy of school. This research focuses on a sub-set of 'hard to reach' families within the wider Somali community of the case study primary school.

The Somali community and reading

The Somali community is often highly engaged with education, has high expectations for their children but also often face multiple barriers in terms of socio-economic disadvantage, housing disadvantage and sometimes the fear of the loss of community identity and language (Demie *et al.*, 2007; Stokes *et al.,* 2015). Masny and Ghahremani-Ghajar (2010) detail how, after Somalia's independence in 1972 from

British colonialism, Somali (spoken and written) was introduced as the official language (up until this point, English had been the official language and Somali had been an exclusively oral language). UNICEF (2003) reported the rapid increase in literacy in the new written language, but this was halted in 1977 by war and Ikar (2018) details how by 1993 there was little formal education taking place during this period, although literacies continued to be taught through the family and religious networks, with oral traditions and the Arabic from the Qur'an as significant. Somali families who were refugees from the civil war were dispersed to many countries around the world. In England, Abikar (2021) identified the multiple barriers to education faced by Somali families including racism, trauma, lack of information about the English school systems, schools lack of knowledge about the Somali culture and the challenges that come for parents who have a different language to the one used in school. Matthiesen (2017) cautioned against viewing these multiple barriers as a deficit to be countered and suggested that greater effort needed to be made by schools to recognise the benefits of dual language and of the cultural capital that comes with the Somali heritage. This research project aimed, in a very small way, to overcome barriers and to use the cultural capital of the community to seek new routes to support families in the development of literacy for their children.

Influencers

The term 'influencer' is perhaps most strongly associated with the world of marketing. Briggs *et al.* (2012) define influencers as 'Individuals who have significant contact with, and influence on, [the subject in question].' Marketing seeks to identify those individuals or groups who are able to distribute product or service messages based on the range, scope and nature of their networks or spheres of influence. More recently, the term 'influencer' has become more strongly associated with social media. 'Social media influencers are prominent social media users who [accumulate] a dedicated following by crafting an authentic online persona' (Tafesse and Wood, 2021:1). Social influence theory identifies three aspects of social influence: compliance (those being influenced do so to gain approval or to avoid disapproval); identification (those being influenced wanting to identify with, or emulate the influencer) and internalisation (the values and message resonate and so are internalised) (Kelman, 2006). The follower

is more likely to take on new behaviours recommended by the influencer if they see the influencer as a trusted and credible person to their followers.

Health focused research has also used ideas of social influence theory. Many studies with a focus on engaging the 'hard to reach' communities with health-based research have focused on the use of peer-to-peer support, engaging local community groups and working with community members as co-researchers (**Musa Ismail** *et al.***, 2014; Rockcliffe** *et al.***, 2018; Redwood** *et al.***, 2012). These studies outline** the value of engaging with those with a lived experience of the barriers to participation and with a respect and standing in the community. The barriers to participation identified by Lingwood *et al.* (2020) were: awareness of a programme; family confidence in participation; feeling judged and timing and location of a project. These are all aspects that an 'influencer' could address and ensure that the intervention was able to 'fit with families' wishes or circumstances' (Hannon *et al.,* 2020:315). It is these studies that prompted the design and purpose of this research. It was hypothesised **that the 'hard to reach' families in this study were** engaging and listening to, on and offline, friends, family, neighbours, community groups and religious communities. It was posited that if these 'influencers' could be identified then these were the individuals and groups most likely to have success in sharing the key messages about family engagement with book sharing and reading.

Methods

The research was proceeded by an Erasmus Plus project, *Open the Door for Reading* (2019) which focused on approaches practitioners could use to engage 'harder to reach families' with early shared reading. As part of the project, a number of 'mini libraries' were established. The aim of these libraries was to provide access to books in a more informal setting. The school in this research case study had an established library, but one that was not accessible to families, only to children during school hours. The school had identified that some of the findings from the *Open the Door for Reading* project had potential application in their setting: making the library more accessible beyond school hours; developing a more informal bookborrowing approach and encouraging the whole family to engage with book choice, borrowing and sharing. The school had identified a small number of families (n=30) that did not typically engage with the school around reading, despite a wide range of projects and approaches that

had been effective for much of the rest of the school community. The research aimed to identify those who were influential in the community and so use their influence, as outlined in the literature review, to impact on this particular group of families.

The case study design used a 'team research' approach (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984) that involved a lead researcher and two Somali community researchers, both graduates of the *Stepping Up* initiative *Horumar Somali Careers Programme* (where their community research skills were developed). This team worked with the school's community worker and deputy head as co-researchers. Each researcher brought a different insight and knowledge to the field of study and research design. The case study school was a larger than average, inner-city primary school with children (n=328) from a wide range of heritages and with numbers of children with English as an additional language (EAL), children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and those considered to be disadvantaged, well above the English national average.

The research question was: Can the use of community 'influencers' enable families identified as 'hard to reach' to engage with and access books from the school library alongside their children?

The research design followed a number of phases and at each phase the research team used the learning and outcomes from the previous phase to design the next. In Phase 1 the community researchers identified, through local knowledge, community connections and parent informal discussions, those in the community (both the school and wider local community) who were considered to be people of influence or 'influencers'. This group was drawn from religious organisations, community groups, educators beyond the school, parents and community elders.

Focus groups (n=2) were then facilitated by the community researchers in phase 2 of the research. The aim of the focus groups was to build a real-world picture of how the community understood its own strengths and barriers in relation to education and reading, with the purpose of using this to develop effective messaging and communication with the 'hard to reach' groups within the school. The community researchers decided to hold these focus groups in gender groupings. The group of male influencers (n=7) included: elders from the community; religious leaders; school governors and parents and the female group (n=6) comprised of elders from the

community; a teacher (from a different school to the case study school); a community group leader and parents from the case-study school. The male group was conducted largely in Somali with the transcripts being translated into English for analysis and the women's group was conducted largely in English; this reflected the wishes of both groups of participants. The focus group schedule encouraged discussion of 'influencers'' own literacy and reading background and views and values about perceived and real barriers to reading.

Phase 3 followed the transcription of the focus groups and at this stage pseudonyms were given to the participants and to the school, to ensure anonymity. The six-step approach to thematic analysis (TA) was used to analyse the transcripts, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Braun and Clarke (2020) provided a clarification of the approach and outlined the reflexive TA approach that guided the analysis in this study. The reflexive approach values the 'subjective skills the researcher brings to the process' with coding being 'open and organic…with themes [as the] final "outcome" of coding and iterative theme development' (Braun and Clarke, 2020:7). Coding first enabled the capturing of key observations and these were then grouped or 'drawn together' (p13) in the themes that were developed. As Braun and Clarke (2020) make clear, this was a subjective, qualitative process operating within the broader theoretical frameworks in which the research was rooted: reading as a socio-cognitive construct and reading as a socio-cultural practice. The analysis also drew on the Three Domains model of the reader (Ellis and Smith, 2017).

Phase 4 used the findings from Phase 3 to develop multiple short messages that were agreed and then shared by the 'influencers' using their preferred methods of communication e.g. WhatsApp groups; social media platforms and more traditional routes such as newsletters and face-to-face contact in both Somali and English. The messages linked directly to the themes from the focus groups and the messages were sent out two or three times a week by influencers. During the six-week school term the library was opened for families and in the week before the opening of the library. Additional messages were created for the usual school communication systems including the use of the school newsletter and in-person communication on the school gate at the end of the school day.

In Phase 5 of the research, the school identified two after-school sessions a week when the school library would be opened to families across one school term. Parent volunteers were recruited to staff the library during these times as well as, on a rotation basis, the research team, to chat informally with families choosing books with their children. In this final Phase, data was gathered of those who visited the library and borrowed books. The analysis then focused on identifying which families came to the library and if any were considered to be 'hard to reach'. Where possible, the families were then approached, one to one after school or by phone for an informal onversation to include, what prompted them to come to the library and how they had heard about the library opening in order to identify if any families had been 'influenced' by the 'influencers'' groups' messages.

It should be noted that the first part of this research took place during the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions and so the initial research meetings were held online, as were the focus groups with the 'influencers'. Possible ethical risks associated with research online, research with disadvantaged communities as well as ethical risks when working as a cross-sector research team were considered. The school and participant names in the article have been anonymised. Ethical approval was given by the Ethics Committee of the University of tne West of England.

Findings and discussion (Phases 1, 2 and 3 – the influencer groups)

The findings from the 'influencer' focus groups are presented in the themes identified by the thematic analysis process.

The complexity of identity

Across both focus groups the issue of identity was raised: identity as a Somali, be it a first- or second-generation heritage Somali; identity in relation to the adopted country of England as well as religious and family identities. The Quran was mentioned a number of times and in particular the first words of Allah to "*read, read, read*". The influencers recognised that all of these identities then impacted on how a child might then view their identity as a reader. Influencers expressed this positively in that it was something that could complement and enrich a child's identity as they grew up as a citizen of the United Kingdom. However, there was a concern raised that many children were no longer able to speak their home language and Sada suggested that

'*language forms your identity, that's part of who you are, so its important parents thinks about the language they are communicating with our children.*' Abdullahi and Wei (2021) highlight this same issue in their research about intergenerational language differences impacting on the Somali community. They highlighted concerns that when children did hear their home language it was not always 'correct' and this was mirrored by Yusuuf.

> *Yusuuf: If we look at the younger generation 90% can't speak fluently in Somali and only speak English, and then 90% of the elder generation would use English and Somali in their sentences. This is an issue.*

Barwell (2005) identifies this as the language generation gap between those in the Somali community born in England and those born in Somalia. Magan talked about a Somali poet who talked about the *"state of Somali youths' education and how bad it was at that time*" The poet had said,

> *What do you expect when they're not rich in their mother tongue,*
> *they should be rich in their native language.*

Maintaining the home language was seen as a way to support children's language development, thinking and so reading. There was concern that this was being eroded.

> *Degmo: With us Somali parents, it's when we don't speak the English language that well that we start speaking English to our children and not speak Somali and that's where the gaps start when they're young – where you don't have one language that you speak really well – this doesn't help with reading.*

There was a strong desire to maintain Somali traditions and practices as well as to share these so they could be understood and embraced by the school community.

This complexity of identities was sometimes expressed as contradictions in identity. Little (2017) characterises this as Somali young people pulling in the opposite direction to their parent. However, the focus group participants shared this more as 'difference' rather than inter-family tension. They identified significant differences of experience of reading and learning to read within families – with the greatest differences regularly being between parents and their children. This was clearly shown in relation to the

idea of the purposes for reading. When parents grew up in Somalia many said that there was not a reading for pleasure tradition – even if, as adults they now did read for pleasure.

> *Sada: It is a completely different. When I was in my childhood I didn't have any choices because all you have to read is your lessons, if you don't read it, you fail the exam.*

Libraries and books in school were not a feature of life in Somali for the current generation of parents and grandparents, and so it was a challenge for some families to shift from a more functional view of reading that was about reading to pass exams.

However, it was clear that the notion of reading from a book narrows the idea of what counted as literacy, and this was explored in the second theme around oral traditions.

The oral tradition – being literate is more than reading a text

Abdullahi and Wei (2021) cite Andrzejewski, (1977) when stating how oral poetry and story-telling had been the main approach to handing down culture and history in the Somali community. It was clear that, whilst reading may not have been a tradition for the focus group participants, oral story telling was. It was these oral stories that the 'influencers' saw as part of their heritage that they wished to pass on to children.

> *Ceebla: Songs and poems and traditional stories are really important, they form their identity, that's part of who they are so it's really important parents think about the language that they communicate this in.*

> *Hira: Because our tradition as Africans is oral. I remember my grandmother telling us stories about, you know, with moral endings and things and so they stayed with me.*

It was felt that this was one way to engage some of the community with school and reading: parents needed to know that oral story telling was valued by school and recognised as a contribution to the development of children as readers.

> *Sada: Parents may not know how the education system works but they all want the best of their children. They need to know that reading or discussing a picture book in their home language is valuable. Even a five minute discussion with a picture book, it's valuable.*

The influencers had memories of parents and grandparents telling them stories with quite a few 'stories in common' across the focus groups. Those mentioned included fables, stories with morals, traditional tales, rhymes and tongue-twisters, sayings and proverb-based stories. Stories were often traditionally told at bedtime, even though they were sometimes quite frightening!

> *Degmo: My mum, she used to tell us stories, lots of stories, very scary stories really she used to tell us about Dhegdheer, which still gives me nightmares to this day and dad would tell us Dina and Daul stories.*

It was evident that there was much synergy with the traditional bedtime story often promoted by teachers in school but both teachers and parents needed to realise that these oral bedtime stories were as valued and valuable as the written text.

> *Magan: I remember how our mothers would teach us rhymes and tongue twisters so our tongues would get used to words and help us with our pronunciation and vocabulary since there were no book.*

What was particularly interesting was the discussion between participants about their own versions and favourite ways of telling the same story. Sugaal concluded that,

> *They almost lose something if they are then written down.*

Some influencers shared how the oral tradition was further embedded in Somalia by listening to the radio with the only written story texts encountered in the school text book. It was felt that there was a danger that this oral tradition could be lost if it was not promoted and that this learning of stories by heart was seen as a feature of home life in Somali and so part of the Somali literacy identity.

Exploring difference and avoiding a deficit model

Many of the influencers stated that reading was not a part of the Somali culture for many families. Books were not typical gifts in many families (reflecting the wider population in many cases). Reading, in many families was seen as an important tool in education rather than a leisure activity or an enjoyable family activity.

> *Ceebla: Normally lessons were taught by the teacher so it was really like memorising it because at the end of the day, you know, every year we used to have an exam and you were taught to pass the exam*

This difference, it was felt, led some schools to view Somali families as 'lacking'. Even if a family had a rich oral tradition or knew stories and rhymes in their home language the focus group participants felt that these did not have the same status as reading an English storybook. There was therefore concern raised across both focus groups that if parents did not have confidence in reading an English storybook then neither the oral story nor the English storybook is shared and this would then be detrimental for the child's identity as a reader and their progress as readers. Research clearly demonstrates (Mol *et al.*, 2008) the impact of oral story telling on vocabulary development and the use of more complex sentence structures and knowledge of the home language. Influencers felt that families needed to know the value and power of what they had to offer. Some schools do not promote this or if they do, parents do not hear this as the message coming from school. It was suggested that there can be a mismatch between what teachers were asking parents to do and parents understanding of what was being asked – the language of reading for pleasure used by teachers is not always part of the home culture or language.

> *Suubban: You know when the teachers are saying to the parents you know this child needs to read for pleasure it's not something that they will get automatically because it is not something that they are used to.*

It was felt that there was little attempt to bridge these gaps in understanding of both sides and that it was possible to build bridges through an understanding of what the home culture could offer in relation to a wider understanding of literacy and a better understanding of the skills and knowledge that complement word reading. One way it was felt that this could be supported was by schools having more dual language books and in themselves they represented a bridge for the parent and child and family and school. Ikar (2018) reported that Somali parents perceived school as one key factor in their child's home language and cultural loss and, whilst this was not the case with the 'influencers' in this research, it was clear that without this building of bridges there could be a feeling by families of a loss of control and influence. This was the third theme identified.

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Power, control and influence – the need for a redistribution of messaging about what is valued

Influencers felt that without greater control of some of the messages around how to support reading that knowledge of how home literacy practices can support a child's development would be lost. The home language is often lost as parents are not always told how valuable it is for children to maintain it.

> *Degmo: My one message to parents would be to just speak your home language if you speak it well.*

It was felt that school communication about reading would be received more effectively if it came from the community themselves including messaging about the value of supporting children and how to do this. Messages about the value of reading in education; that reading helps develop language skills; that reading enables children to grow into responsible adults who can enjoy life as well as work hard, were all suggested messages they felt the community would be receptive to when emanating from their own community. It was recognised that reading is becoming even more important when so many messages come to children and young adults through social media.

Some influencers identified that families can feel 'judged' by a school and that it was important for teachers to have an understanding of each family, their history and circumstances and to use this as a way to show appropriate help and support.

> *Barre: parents are not actually in a position to read with their children, not because they don't want it, maybe because they haven't had the opportunity themselves.*

> *Magan: It is very easy to judge other people when you think they should know this or this parent has been in this country for X number of years here, they should know …there may have had trauma in life and you are just struggling, you know every single day…you've got other proprieties. Let's try to understand.*

Difference? Perhaps just the same family challenges

Influencers reported the same issues that many parents identify when discussing finding time to share books with their children.

> *Sada: Parents work hard to support their families but this can result in less time for the family to talk and engage with each other. It is this type of every day communication that is valuable in terms of connecting with each other.*

Managing reading when there was so much else on offer for children such as phones, tablets and TV was also discussed and how getting the balance right was often a challenge for Somali families (and in fact, all families). The focus group felt that more help was needed on strategies to manage these competing demands particularly when one influencer said:

> *Suubban: All those things are more immediately accessible to children than the initial hard work of learning to read*

Messages

Phase 4 of the research used the analysis in Phase 3 to design a series of messages that could be shared with families before the after-school openings of the school library for children and their families and twice-weekly messages for during the term (six weeks) when the library was open after school. The messages were designed by the lead researcher using the outcomes of the focus groups and these were then shared for revision and editing with the community researchers and 'influencers'. Examples of the messages are shown below. These messages were shared by influencers using their usual networks: WhatsApp groups; word of mouth and community groups. Messages were also designed for the school to share using newsletters and 'on the gate' conversations with parents.

Example of the messages sent out by the community influencers in the half term week before the opening of the library

> *During half term, tell your children some of the stories your parents told you when you were a child. Oral story telling is just as important as reading a book to your child. Perhaps you remember your parent or grandparent telling you the scary story of Dhegdheer! When you return to school remember that Sunny*

Primary is opening its Hub Library to families after school every Tuesday and Friday next term.

Example of the messages sent out by the community influencers during the term the library was open for families

The first words of the Quran tell us to 'Read, read, read'. Help your child to fulfil this message by supporting their reading and choosing a book from the Sunny Primary Library.

Exploring and sharing your culture with your children is a great way to keep you and your children connected to their heritage but also help them grow in confidence. Can you remember the songs and rhymes you were taught when you were a child? Share them with your child and then perhaps see if you can find books in the Sunny Primary Hub Library that tell the stories of your childhood.

Have you noticed recently how much time we all spend on our phones? This week could you perhaps decide that there will be no phones on Tuesday after school? Or Friday after school? In this time you and your child could visit the Sunny Primary Hub Library 3.15 to 3.30 when it is open for families to look at books, talk about what is offered in the library and to borrow a book if you want.

Findings and discussion (Part 2 – book borrowing)

The library opening saw 69 children (328 children in the school) borrowing a total of 144 books alongside a parent, guardian or family member during the six-week, twice-weekly opening of the Hub Library after school. Of these children, 43 were with parents that did not usually come to after-school activities with their child. Thirty-one of the children were of Somali heritage (from 26 families) and so these families were followed-up by the school's community development co-ordinator through a quick telephone call. Fourteen parents responded to this providing information about how they heard about the library being open after school. Parents usually mentioned more

than one method of communication that had promoted them to come, and this is a useful finding for future school communications.

Someone on the school gate told them	5
Phone text message	8
A friend of the family at the school	3
Another parent in the child's class	2
School newsletter	2
Parents were told by their children	1

Figure 1 – Means of communication

In terms of the 'influencer' messages, using this additional data, it is possible therefore, that eight of the 'harder to reach' families were 'influenced' to come along to the hub library. A further twelve families did not respond to the school's community development co-ordinators calls and so it is possible that more than eight families had been 'influenced'. This more formal phone call approach from the school could have been seen as a threat or that as it was a call in English, it was not understood.

Hendry *et al.* (2021) noted that in health education it was not always possible to assess the benefits of the influencer group, but that they did provide an authenticity to any message being given and this appears consistent with this study and this is consistent with this research. Campbell *et al.'s* (2007) health-based influencer research found that the interest and motivation of the influencers was evident, and what was therefore required to extend impact was training and substantive knowledge of the area under question. This is a useful consideration for any further studies.

Conclusion and implications for practice

This research was, by no means conclusive in relation to the role of influencers in enabling 'hard to reach' families engage with and access books from the school library alongside their children. However, the research has some implications for practice. It indicates that schools need to continue to seek ways to identify and hear the voices of their community in relation to the real and perceived barriers to reading. Schools can benefit from knowing and utilizing the wider community funds of knowledge in relation

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to education more widely, book-sharing and reading in particular. The simple approach of opening a school library after school hours and communicating this using a variety of methods – including the community 'influencer' – appears to be beneficial in engaging 'harder to reach' families. Whilst the impact of the community 'influencer' is not clear, the research does demonstrate the value of knowing not just the parent community within a school but also understanding the wider community in which the parents and families live, work and engage.

Future research is needed to identify potential benefits of sustaining and supporting influencers to use their community networks to give messages about the value of book sharing. A particular focus on exploring the 'hard to reach families' in specific cultural and social networks would further develop and explore this area of family engagement with reading.

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