

# All these little umbrellas under one giant canopy

## Executive Summary

**In April 2003 Kate Pahl of the University of Sheffield, was commissioned to undertake an evaluation of family learning in Read On – Write Away! with particular reference to the Family Literacy, Language and Numeracy programme and its links to other wider community provision in ROWA! This followed on from a number of evaluations of ROWA! activity, in particular the Greenhill study by Paul Davis of Lancaster University and from research carried out for the NRDC into community-focused basics skills provision (Davies 2003; Hannon, Phal, Bird Taylor and Birch 2003).**

**Kate Pahl was asked to concentrate particularly on the adults' experiences with family learning. She was asked to look at the following:**

- **Whether a community-focused approach to basic skills provides a good way of placing family learning within a wider, more strategic whole.**
- **The role of innovative programmes in bringing in adults with little or no experience of adult education into learning.**
- **How the programmes affect positively adult-child interaction, giving parents the confidence and competence to help their children and develop their learning.**

## Findings

1. There was evidence that a community-focused approach to basic skills provided a good context for wider family learning. From the interview evidence from ward-based local co-ordinators ROWA! Family Literacy, Language and Numeracy was being delivered in response to a wider community-focused strategy. This then determined how the provision was developed. The structure of ROWA!, with ward-based local co-ordinators, and a Family Literacy, Language and Numeracy team, means that this synergy is a strength which can be built upon.
2. Innovative course, such as Toddler Talk and the Backpack project which have a focus on creativity and oracy and supported home/school links, were particularly helpful in supporting parents with little or no experience of formal learning. They responded to these courses as being unthreatening spaces where they could share literacy, numeracy and speaking and listening activities with their children. Parents explicitly talked about what they brought to courses, such as books made at home. Children's texts made at home were brought into the class as a result of the Backpack project. The evaluation found that these courses fostered student's confidence as new learners.

3. All the courses observed developed parent's confidence and competence to help their children and enabled them to develop their own skills, using the raft of progression opportunities that ROWA! Family Literacy, Language and Numeracy has to offer. The phrase 'competence and confidence' came from a head teacher, who observed that ROWA! Family Literacy Language and Numeracy developed the students' confidence and competence to help their children with basic skills.
4. There was some evidence that school-based training offered progression routes. Observations found that progression was facilitated through the different courses. For example, students on a Keeping up with the Kids Numeracy course were thinking of developing their skills in the school as classroom assistants and could access ROWA! school-based training to give them the skills to do that.
5. Evidence showed that the year-long offer of Family Literacy, Language and Numeracy provision in schools was valuable for students' progression. This was borne out by evidence from a Family Numeracy course, where students had been on a number of Family Learning courses at school and were now ready to move on to Adult and Community Education. The students on the Keeping up with the Kids Numeracy course, conversely, were just beginning the year, and were asking for another course the next term.

# **Section 1**

## **1.1 What is Family Learning?**

In this report, Family Learning is seen as any shared activity between adults, usually parents and children, which improves their skills and supports the children's learning in the area of literacy, language, numeracy and ICT. The report pays particular attention to learning in community contexts and to the experience of adult learners.

## **1.2 What is Read On – Write Away!?**

Read On – Write Away! was set up in 1997 as a cradle-to-grave strategic literacy initiative, constituted as an independent Partnership. Read On –Write Away! will henceforth be referred to in this point as **ROWA!**

### **The Aims of ROWA!**

- To promote a culture celebrating literacy in all its form
- To make significant improvements in the levels of literacy, especially of those most disadvantaged by their literacy skills
- To contribute to the economic development of Derbyshire and the city of Derby by improving the skills for the present and future workforce.

ROWA! has a reputation as an example of best practice in partnership working, the ability to respond to community need and maintains a coherent position with national initiatives. It retains a commitment to working in partnership with anyone involved in or interested in literacy from 0-99 years.

## **1.3 The setting**

Read On-Write Away! is based in Derbyshire, which is a large diverse county, containing rural and urban areas. Several wards are in the top 100 wards of socio-economic deprivation, particularly in the ex-mining areas and in the city of Derby. The rural areas, many within the Peak District National Park, suffer from considerable deprivation as well as being areas of considerable wealth.

## **1.4 The context**

ROWA! is a large, multi-agency partnership with an emphasis on community focused literacy; it works both strategically, through various bodies in the county, and practically, to develop and deliver innovative ways of engaging people in literacy and learning. The work is delivered through four teams – *social inclusion team*, concentrating on excluded and disadvantaged young people, such as young offenders and those in care; the *school based training team*, developing and delivering training for those working in schools; the ward based team, which works with and in local communities; and the *family learning team*. The four teams work collaboratively, with the focus on the role of the community and on developing the skills within the community to empower individuals and to engage people in learning. Although the family learning programme concentrates on working with families on literacy, all the

other teams are, by the very nature of ROWA!, engaged with families in , for example, family centres, rural communities and volunteer programmes in schools. This evaluation concentrates on the work of the family learning team; previous evaluations have looked at the work of other teams.

### **1.5 The ROWA! family learning strategy**

Read On-Write Away! develops and delivers family learning which targets families and communities where there is likely to be a high proportion of adults and children with basic skill needs and concentrates on the area of literacy, numeracy and ICT (the 'basic skills).

The County Council policy on family learning, produced by ROWA! states:

Family learning (basic skills) will concentrate on learning that brings together different family members to work on a common theme for some, if not the whole, of a planned programme. The word "family" is used broadly to define inter-generational learning, encompassing, where necessary, siblings, carers, guardians and other surrogates, including interested adults from the community. In short, the focus will be on planned activity, in which adults and children come together, to work and learn collaboratively towards identifiable planned outcomes of learning, often as a preliminary to the joint activity. They also work in separate, but parallel, groups.  
(Family Learning (Basic Skills) – a policy for Derbyshire 2002)

### **1.6 The scope of ROWA! Family Learning**

Family Learning has been running in the county, managed by ROWA! since its inception in 1997. family learning programmes have run in 32.4% of the Derbyshire schools (118 out of 364 nursery and primary schools) and 12.7% of secondary schools (6 out of 47) since 2001. (Over 90% of schools in Derbyshire have been involved in some form of community literacy activity through other ROWA! programmes).

All Derbyshire nursery and primary schools are sent information about ROWA! Family Learning courses which are available. Data for 2003-4 shows that over 1075 adults and 340 children will have taken part in planned family learning activity within the year.

There are various ways in which the Family Learning team has developed the scope of the provision; this includes

- seeking additional funding to develop specific programmes either geographically, such as an European Social Fund (ESF) funded mobile programme in rural villages, or generically such as the Learning and Skills Council funded work with Sure Start projects across the county;
- developing the role of the *family learning ambassador*, which involves an hour-long visit to a school's head teacher to discuss what ROWA! Family Learning can offer the school;

- seeking ways to offer schools and parents more than a ‘one off’ programme, in order that schools can begin to embed activity and parents and children can be offered a more meaningful offer with opportunities for progressions;
- working with the Advisory Service with schools who may be causing concern or have struggled to engage parents; currently this programme is called ‘Building a Reading Community’;
- holding regular family learning capacity building/raising awareness events to encourage others to consider this way of working, including headteachers/teachers, school governors, those from other agencies such as Sure Start, adult education staff and volunteers;
- considering ways in which provision can be developed with community and voluntary groups such as playgroups and foster carers.

### **1.7 What is covered in this evaluation?**

This evaluation covers the processes and delivery of Family Learning provision, with particular reference to the experiences of the adult learner. By processes we can mean the way in which the Family Learning Programmes are conceptualised, structured and run. It draws on interviews with learners, teachers, head teachers, librarians, community development workers, managers and senior managers connected to the provision. It also includes case studies of learners, together with a background of interviews with providers and community development workers.

Family Learning in Read On-Write Away! can be divided into two strands:

1. Activity where the emphasis is on developing the basic skills of the parents and the children, through separate sessions, and on improving the ability of the parents to support their children’s development. This includes the *family literacy and numeracy* courses, which are run jointly with Derbyshire Adult and Community Education (ACE), and are what could be termed a the ‘standard’ provision, developed by the Basic Skills Agency from 1994 onwards. These have successfully rolled out in all the LEAs in England, and are delivered in schools, over 12-20 weeks, focusing on parents who need support with their basic skills, and their children.
2. activity which has the specific aim of enabling adults to support their children through gaining knowledge about the primary curriculum, particularly literacy, numeracy and ICT; this includes the Keeping Up With Kids initiatives, drawing on the national initiatives developed by the Basic Skills Agency. Courses specifically developed for ROWA! include Keeping Up with the Kids- Literacy, and Keeping Up With the Kids – Numeracy. A recent addition Keeping Up With the Kids – ICT has been piloted in secondary schools. The latest addition to the programme, in response to parents needs, is Step Ahead of the Kids for adults who may wish to develop their own ICT skills beyond that of the curriculum developed for their children. Other programmes look at creativity, speaking and listening, including Toddler Talk and the Backpack project.

See Appendix 1 for list of Family Learning courses

The two strands frequently overlap, as when parents move from a Keeping Up With the Kids course to one where they can address their own literacy or numeracy needs, or when schools choose to take on a range of provision over a year. Within these stands, creativity and innovation are at the heart of the ROWA! Family Learning offer, and to this end, innovative activity is constantly being developed. This includes:

- Family Learning workshops, which are one off sessions designed as tasters to encourage parents to sign up to a longer courses; these are often publicised as ‘coffee morning’ or come and find out how to help your child’.
- Family Learning residential weekends, which have been run over the past 2 years; most recently these have been developed with Sure Start projects across the county.
- Toddler Talk for parents of Nursery and Reception aged children. This short programme aims, through three intensive workshops, to improve parents’ ability to develop their children’s speaking and listening skills.
- The Backpack Project, which encourages creativity-related activity in the home through use of art and creative materials, underpinned by literacy language and number skills.

However, Family Learning provision in ROWA! extends beyond the more ‘formal’ provision; initiatives include the *Writing Boxes* within schools, *Storysacks*, *Books for Babies* and library-based Family Learning events. School-based training opportunities include Better Reading Partnership and Talking Partners. Storytelling and Songwriting workshops are included within the overall ROWA! strategy. Family Learning is supported by the ROWA! buses, which include crèches and ICT suites.

See Appendix 2 for a map of ROWA! Family Learning and its relation to the whole of ROWA!

What is clear from the evaluation is that the definition of Family Learning in ROWA! is not just schools-based. It is a holistic definition, developed in response to ward-based community development work, and always concerned to change and adapt according to the changing needs of communities. It is community-focused, with an emphasis on innovation and having a culture of support and empowerment for parents.

*Historically family learning within ROWA! has been focused around schools we wanted to change that focus and broaden family learning to include anybody and everybody so we are looking at working with parents and children, we are looking at working with parents of secondary school children on into hopefully working with parents and teenagers but not with schools but community groups and voluntary groups as well. (Senior Manager, ROWA!)*

This community-focused approach was considered by the evaluator to be a key ingredient of ROWA! Family Learning. While it was sometimes invisible, it underpinned the school-based work, and the provision was developed in relation to interviews with ward-based local co-ordinators, in order to capture the way in which the community-focused work developed wider family learning. One of the courses observed was developed directly from a ward-based local co-ordinator’s recommendations.

## **1.8 Skills for Families**

In the summer of 2003 the Basic Skills Agency and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) announced a new, one year pilot project called *Skills for Families*. 12 LEAs were chosen to take part in the project including ROWA! in partnership with Derbyshire LEA. Additional funding was accompanied by additional, stretching targets. These included developing ways of encouraging adults to access the new national assessments and the development of four new ways of engaging families in activity. In Derbyshire these were:

- Workplace family learning
- Keeping UP with the Kids ICT at key stage 3
- The development of residential courses with Sure Start
- Keeping up with the Kids ICT plus the national assessment in literacy or numeracy.

**This evaluation was started before the Skills for Families project started, and is not primarily concerned with it although it obviously impacts on much of it.**

## **1.9 Who are the stakeholders in the evaluation?**

- Adult learners in family learning programmes and their children.
- Staff within ROWA! particularly, the family learning co-ordinator's team.
- The Derbyshire Adult Education Service, the main partner in the family learning strategy.
- The Board and Partners of Read On-Write Away!

Whilst these were the main stakeholders, the following were identified as also having an interest in the evaluation.

- The Voluntary and Community sector, who may be interested in developing family learning in their own contexts.
- Policy makers with an interest in family learning, including the Learning and Skills Council (LSC).
- Researchers who may be interested in aspects of community and family learning.
- Other providers who may be interested in developing this area of work.

## **Section 2 The process of evaluation**

**2.1** The evaluation was a small-scale, qualitative study, which generated ideas as it developed. There were certain areas which the evaluation was not able to cover. The evaluator was unable to visit all the Family Learning courses due to time constraints. Quantitative data on student targets and progression was not focused on. Many course mentioned in this evaluation were not running while the evaluation was taking place or were in development.

### **2.2 The experience of doing the evaluation**

The experience of evaluating the provision was akin to that of evaluating a moving train! The provision continually shifted as thinking developed, particularly as both the family learning team and the evaluation had to accommodate the Skills for Families project half way through the period of the evaluation.

Initial thinking about the evaluation identified the following two strands:

- The contextual framework. This would set the scene for evaluation of the provision.
- The experience of the learner. This would be focused on 3-4 case study sites.

As initial discussions were held with ROWA! three further strands were identified:

1. Areas of innovation (Toddler Talk, Backpack Project) and new strategies such as the ambassador visits and the year-long provision.
2. Community-focused approaches to family learning and how family learning sits within a community focused approach.
3. how adults are empowered by Family Learning, and given the competence and confidence to develop their own skills and their children's skills.

This led to an identification of the aims of the evaluation:

### **2.3 Aims of the evaluation:**

The evaluation aimed to find the following:

- **Whether a community-focused approach to basic skills provides a good way of placing family learning within a wider, more strategic whole.**
- **The role of innovative programmes in bringing in adults with little or no experience of adult education into learning.**
- **How the programmes affect positively adult-child interaction, giving parents the confidence and competence to help their children and develop their learning.**

## **2.4 The approach to the evaluation**

The evaluator used a case study approach. A list of the dataset is given in Appendix 3. Data collection methods included the following:

- desk research (collection of documents)
- semi-structured interviews
- field observations.

The evaluator conducted 18 interviews and 6 observations of activity. The activities observed were:

- Toddler Talk
- The Backpack Project
- Keeping Up With The Kids Numeracy
- Family Numeracy
- Step Ahead of the Kids
- Library session with Family Numeracy

These were chosen from the range of provision outlined in Appendix 1. the evaluator was particularly concerned to visit:

- Areas of innovation (e.g. Toddler Talk and the Backpack Project)
- Innovative strategies, such as the year-long offer. This included courses which were at the start of the year-long offer (e.g. Keeping Up with Kids Numeracy) and courses which were being run in schools with a great deal of family learning activity, at the end of a year's worth of provision (e.g. Family Numeracy)
- Community-focused work which had then led to a course (e.g. Toddler Talk) and courses which were being delivered in partnership with Adult and Community Education (e.g. Family Numeracy)

It was on this basis that the selection was made.

## **2.5 Data analysis**

The analysis involved reading through interview transcripts to find key themes, which guided the evaluation, and framed the research questions. As the evaluation progressed, the themes deepened. For example, the way the provision was delivered in relation to the community was considered using interview data and observations. If possible, the themes were triangulated, that is an interview with a provider was checked with an interview with a head teacher, or an interview with a learner was checked through an interview with a tutor, to give the data substance and richness.

This led to the evaluation framework.

The evaluator developed a theory of family learning against which an evaluation framework could be constructed. This enabled the evaluator to look at provision in the context of this framework. The concept of 'best practice' was constructed in relation to current theoretical positions on family learning. Curricula innovation was

also discussed in relation to research on family learning. This enabled the analytic framework for the evaluation to be research led and theoretically grounded.

## **2.6 Theoretical framework**

### **2.6.1 Models of family learning**

The evaluator began drawing on the Basic Skills Agency's model of family learning, as described in policy documents and evaluation documents (Books et al 1996). This was based on a highly structured 20 week course, focused on improving parents and children's literacy skills, based on school premises. The Basic Skill Agency's model has since been critiqued by some as it tends to view parents specifically in relation to improving their basic skills and those of their child, without attention paid to existing literacy practices they might bring to the course (Pitt 2000). The model does not overtly draw on what parents have to offer family learning. It presupposes a 'schooled' model of literacy, that is. The model of literacy taken from the school (Street and Street 1991). By contrast, Heywood (2000) described a programme, developed in Edinburgh, which drew on research into home literacy practices. This approach was articulated here,

*we believe that programmes should accommodate and value home-based and community literacies in ways which genuinely engage with the lived experience of children and their families rather than only supporting school-based literacies. (Tett and St. Clair 1996:363)*

Likewise, Auerbach (1989) developed a model that focused on parental empowerment (Auerbach 1989). In Australia research with families has also led to innovative developments in family learning (Cairney 1994). Underpinning these approaches is a *wealth model* of family learning, which focuses on the funds of knowledge families bring to educational settings. The expression *funds of knowledge* comes from Moll and his colleagues (Moll et al. 1992) and was used to develop programmes which drew on community knowledge in school settings (Moll et al. 1992). Another model of family learning is the ORIM framework developed at the activities at home with their children (Hannon 1998).

This model is echoed within ROWA! with its emphasis on empowering parents. For example, the Backpack project gives parents the opportunity to develop literacy activity with their children. Many parents used Storybook Weaver to create stories for their children. The focus for the evaluation was on how the programmes affect positively adult-child interaction, giving parents the confidence and competence to help their children and develop their learning.

### **2.6.2 Curricula innovation**

The researcher also looked at the evidence around curricula innovation in family learning. Here are some examples, for example, from Haggart's work (Haggart 2000) of innovative approaches to family learning. Another example was Cairney's work in Australia. Which considered how research on family literacy practices could shape the curriculum (Cairney 2002). The researcher also drew on recent work looking at

home/school links can be strengthened. An approach to supporting home learning activities, has recently been supported by a 'shoebox' project whereby children filled a 'shoebox' with items from home, and created stories from this (Johnson and Feiler 2003).

Recent developments in community-focused provision have opened up new ways of working with families and communities which do not adhere to the '20 week family literacy/numeracy course in schools' model (Hannon, Phal, Bird, Taylor and Birch research study in which a number of key ingredients were found to be critical for community-focused provision to flourish (Hannon et al 2003). These ingredients included vision, a focus on development work, and a holistic approach to learning (Hannon et al 2003). The evaluation considered in section 4 how the provision was community-focused in relation to the theory developed in that research report.

### **Section 3: Case Studies**

The following case studies were based on observations of classes, interviews with learners, tutors, and where possible, providers connected to the provision. They aim to give the reader an, 'insider view' of the provision, and to help Family Learning, ROWA! come alive. The researcher focused in particular on the three aims of the evaluation: The role of innovative programmes and strategies, in this case, the Backpack project and Toddler Talk, and the offer of a year's worth of provision, how the programmes affect positively adult-child interaction and finally whether a community-focused approach provides a good context for family learning. In this section, the **experience of learners** is particularly attended to. In the following section, section 4, community-focused provision and its relation to wider family learning is considered.

#### **Case Study 1: Keeping up with Kids Numeracy**

The researcher attended a course in a small infant school in an area of high socio-economic deprivation. The course was aimed at parents who wanted to support their children in maths. There were six students attending that day, and they all said that the course had enormously improved their confidence:

##### **Vignette**

Kate: What do you like about this course?

Student 1: all of it! The different ways of working things out to what we did when we was at school, they come and show you - maths has changed.

Student 2: V is a good teacher!

Student 3: Using your brain again, especially if you are a housewife at home...because you are not using that outside.

Student 4: Confidence. Just to feel confidence... You don't expect everyone else to be on the same level – A (student 5) felt less confident than us and we were all learning the same thing we weren't getting further – from keeping fingers under the table now we can use them.

It was the first course which had been offered in the school, and all six students wanted to continue with the courses – possibly doing Keeping up with the Kids Literacy next term. Two students had only come on the course because they thought it was a 'taster' course – i.e. tasting food, but when they out it what it was, while being nervous, they decided to stay!

##### **Vignette**

One student started the course, and she was so nervous when she started her husband had to be there when she got back, and she shook throughout the class. As the class progressed, her husband just rung her when she got in to make sure she was alright. She said of the course:

*I just come to help myself as well! (laughs) I'm rubbish at maths, I really was I got two children myself and a six and a nine, ... I need it, for myself really, to help children.*

She wanted to train to be a classroom assistant and was thinking of going on to other courses. At the start of the course, she was almost housebound.

Note: the year-long offer was very important for these students, who had just started into a course and needed to move on into other course, to develop for example a role as a classroom assistant within the school. From this data, it is recommended that the year-long offer of provision be sustained, and student feedback built into the process of selecting courses. The course had an important role in supporting parents' confidence and competence to help their children.

### **Case Study 2: Toddler Talk**

The researcher visited an *Early Excellence* on a very isolated and deprived estate near Greater Manchester. This class was recruited through the nursery and had recruited seven students. Five students were interviewed in the coffee break. During the course they had been discussing how to ask more specific questions, through 'what', 'why', 'how' conventions, and then talked about book reading with their child. The students talked of how the course had been 'stretching' the way they interacted with their children. When previously there had not been enough time, they were more aware of needing to listen to their children.

#### **Vignette**

A parent was describing the experience of reading a book for the first time with their child. She described how it must be hard for a child not to understand what the words meant. She said of this,

*You know there's a meaning those flowing words.....*

She was also describing the feeling many adults get when they cannot quite read the word.

All the students agreed the course had enable them to listen to their children, and support them in their speaking and listening skills. They wanted to progress onto a longer course, and to include their children in the course.

Note: This course could have been provided with a follow on – Backpack project course for students to progress on to. This is a model which is currently being tried out – i.e. that Toddler Talk be followed by the Backpack project. From observing this class, this would be a positive model for students.

### **Case Study 3: The Backpack Project**

This project was devised by Carol Taylor (Director of Read On – Write Away!), using a model from the United States. At the World Congress on Reading, Ellen Goldsmith described a series of workshops enabling adults to engage in conversational reading with their children, using books to take home accompanied by art material for their children. It is designed to encourage creativity and to encourage parents to enjoy literacy, numeracy and oracy activities at home with their reception age children.

#### **Vignette**

One child had done a picture of Donnington Race Track. He had gone there with his dad the previous Saturday to watch the racing. He had used the art materials in the Backpack to make the drawing. He was separated from his dad and lived with his grandmother. He drew the race track, with pen, and cut out cars from the Argos catalogue. He was going to give the picture to his dad that evening. He used the drawing to tell the story of his dad on the race track.

The students said that they found it very helpful finding out what their children did at school. One student said that because her child was autistic, she wanted to have activities to do at home with her child, which were fun. Many students said the Backpack itself generated a lot of activity in their homes that evening, often with older siblings. Siblings had fun with the words, and the children played the games together. Students loved hearing their children's voice tape, and mentioned that they would like to be able to keep the tapes at the end of the course.

### **Vignette**

This account was given by a student with an autistic child, Jack, who enjoyed the Backpack activities, with his older sibling, Robert, at home.

Student:

*...all the family's involved – Jack and Robert they both sit doing it together – Jack was doing rude words and that was making Jack laugh (poo and wee) and then doing proper words, it was both doing it and Robert was making Jack laugh, what do you like car, and you can see Jack smiling,*

One of the students commented that many other mothers would like to come but couldn't because there weren't crèche facilities:

Student: *I think a lot of the mothers have got young children and they haven't got anyone to look after them (her baby is with sister in law).*

Note: this course helps support home/school links and foster creativity. From this data, it was a very worthwhile and innovative course for parents or siblings who used the activities to play with their children, at home. Crèche support would help this course recruit even more students.

### **Case Study 4: A Family Numeracy course**

The researcher visited this course on the ROWA! Bus. The course tutor was provided by Adult and Community Education. The school had a long history of involvement with ROWA! and the head teacher was enthusiastic about ROWA!'s role. When interviewed, she said that the courses raised the parents' confidence and competence to help their children. The courses created a really good relationship between parents and school. The parents on this course had been on other ROWA! courses, and some were progressing on to the Adult and Community Education provision to improve their basic skills or take a further qualification.

### **Vignette**

ROWA! helped support the tutor, and has bought students cheap copies of 'Storybook-Weaver', a software package which students were able to use to write stories for their children. A student said,

*I was writing a book at home – but when I joined all the course it just Stopped...I have done a unit for storybook weaver, I have done a Course with it, for Read on Write Away! I got a unit for that...*

The Open College Network accreditation offered by the course enabled this student to develop her confidence and competence in writing books for her child, and she said she now wanted to go into the college to develop these skills.

**Vignette**

An interview with a student concluded that part of the value of Family Learning is listening to your child. Student:

*When you go on courses like this it is easy to just say to your kids when they come up to you, like child-led activities, you don't recognise it, do you, whereas coming up and saying I want to do this, will you help me, it is easy to say, no I'm too busy, but when you're coming on a course like this, something just clicks and you say, ooh he's asking me, so you...learn more about how to deal with your children and this is what this course is all about...*

Note: this course was focused on raising the parents' confidence and competence to help their children and develop their own skills. This was in line with policy document developed by ROWA! and ACE. This policy was seen as positive in the context of data from this course.

#### **Section 4: Community development work**

During the process of doing the evaluation another key factor emerged. This was the role of community development work in fostering and supporting wider family learning. In this section data drawn from interviews with ward-based local co-ordinators, and observations and desk research on community-focused provision within ROWA! were synthesised to form an analysis of how the community-focused local co-ordinators contributed to '*wider family learning*'. This term is used to describe activity which is very informal, and involves the family in its widest sense, often in coffee mornings, chats at the school gate, activity which takes place in other contexts such as the playgroup. The aim is to engage people, in more formal learning where they may address their own or their child's basic skills needs. The key to this way of working was a long process of development work which was often slow and appeared invisible, but was vital before a group came together to do family learning. This accords with the findings of Hannon et al in their recent study on community-focused provision (Hannon et al. 2003).

Ward-based local co-ordinators, part of the *community-focused literacy team*, funded through a number of outside funding streams, work with the family learning team to deliver provision which was strategically developed in the context of the specific needs of individual communities. For example, a local co-ordinator on an isolated estate outside Manchester was able to encourage a Toddler Talk class at an Early Excellence Centre, and to develop provision from there in response to community need. A worker based in a difficult and deprived ward in Derby was able to develop the use of Storysacks with young mums, as a precursor to more formal provisions.

Local co-ordinators worked across the county, supported by the family learning team, to develop informal family learning provision. Community development work was identified as having a number of different methods or stages, as 'ways in' to wider family learning:

- Discussion with local communities

This method would involve the local co-ordinator working with an existing group, to find out what kind of provision they were interested in. here is a local co-ordinator talking through this process:

*..... we get them together, meet up have a coffee morning somewhere, and we say would like you to save your baby's life if it was choking, and we put on a basic first aid course, what to do if my child has a rash..... and its relevant to them so they say oh I'll do that, so you still have that contact with them and you are sustaining that, but its not necessarily a course....and we never loos contact with them. (Local co-ordinator)*

A local co-ordinator can offer a number of different courses to a group. This leads on to the next stage:

- offering a menu of opportunities to a group

At this point, the local co-ordinator works in partnership with the family learning team to deliver a menu of opportunities to particular groups:

The majority are women, and look at what learning they want. They do want to be involved in their families – we have encouraged them to take part in setting up the toddler groups (no toddler group on the estate) – I set that up with our books for babies librarian – and [she] took books on there will be the bags she gives out to babies ..... looking at early years education, pre school, babies and how they can join the library.... (Local co-ordinator)

From there, a group can be developed within a setting. Developing a group can be done in partnership with other agencies, location is very important in whether the group will come or not. Recent research found that people will attend a course if it is a venue they feel comfortable with, rather than a brand new building half a mile down the road (Hannon et al. 2003). Because people's lives are messy and complex, particularly the lives of women and young children, the next stage may take some time.

- developing a group on an estate

the local co-ordinator builds a relationship of trust with the groups she is working with, and finds a suitable venue for the group. Here, the local co-ordinator was developing a mother and toddler group and decided to locate it in a building convenient for them:

*...they trust me, they see me on the estate...you look to each other for support, I just take it that one step further. We are meeting with with a lot of young mums on the estate at that moment - I set a toddler group on the centre - Sure Start have a massive building – the mums were saying we don't want to go there, we will set it up on our estate.... (Local co-ordinator)*

- the local co-ordinator may also develop a group in a school context.

*I get the group. Once it's up and running it's not anything to do with me, it's the pre-work, all the leg work....We target reception and when the children are going up from Nursery – about this time of year – the head invites the new parents into school and it's at that point that I go into those meetings with a free bag, ROWA! bag – inside it is everything that the school wants them to know about school meals, PE, what they will be doing, also I collect stuff from other agencies, the library service, the health visitors, anything health leaflets book marks, anything like that and a new book I'll pop in – I pay for that out of my budget. What happens at that meeting - the parents are sat there and th*

*the kiddies are playing in their new classroom, but i'm in there as well at that meeting then I get to talk to them about family literacy and tell them that come September there will be an opportunity for them to come into school to take part in a family literacy project. (Local co-ordinator)*

This development work is a complex, layered process, as described here,

*'..we build on it layer by layer at their pace if they are ready.'*

The process of supporting groups engaged in wider family learning is slow and complex, and involves all or none of the methods described above. As a local coordinator said,

*...there is much preparation goes on before anybody goes on to do a course, so much groundwork, lots of little things they had done, prior to them setting foot in school.... (local co-ordinator)*

#### **4.1. Partnerships**

Community development work relies upon strong partnerships created with and across communities, both between professionals working with different groups, and with community groups, to strengthen the links made and to enhance trust and communication.

Partnerships can be internal within ROWA!, so that a raft of opportunities can be available to students, as well as external to ROWA!, drawing on wider community groups. Here, an ex-head teacher talks about the way in which ROWA! Family Learning draws on different aspects of its provision in order to link together and foster parental involvement.

*...because I've got a very strong schools background as an ex-head teacher I can see what family learning offers to the parents being complemented for instance, Toddler Talk, for the parents, is complemented by Talking Partners happening in the school so speaking and listening is being addressed. I can see that as the future that while volunteers are being trained to work with specific children as part of the schools curriculum, the parents are (not necessarily the same child) also being given information of the importance of speaking and listening and it all adds to the hidden agenda or the unconscious agenda that's going into the ethos of the school.  
(Ex- head teacher, now working for ROWA! Family Learning)*

The Family Learning co-ordinator for Adult Community Education described ROWA! Family Learning described how,

*...the ROWA! team can bring in different kinds of work, and different ways of presenting basic skills. Read on Write Away! Family Learning have the*

*freedom to work in more innovative ways, and these partnerships achieved the groups – they couldn't take place without them....*

*ROWA! is a good partnership role model, and can bring in different kinds of work, and different ways of presenting basic skills. They enable students to be fed into different sorts of provision. ROWA! as an organisation has the freedom to work in more innovative ways, and I enjoy working in partnership with them. The Family Numeracy group could not take place without ROWA!. (Family Learning co-ordinator, ACE)*

ROWA! Family learning therefore depends on a large amount of invisible work which then sustains the provision, and supports it within schools and within the community.

## **Section 5: Key findings and proposals for action**

### **5.1 Key findings**

how did the evaluation address its key aims? The following findings were noted from the observations and interviews:

- ***Whether a community-focused approach to basic skills provides a good way of placing family learning within a wider more strategic whole.***

There was evidence that a community-focused approach to basic skills provided a good context for wider family learning. From the interview evidence from ward-based local co-ordinators ROWA! Family Learning was being delivered in response to a wider community-focused strategy. This then determined how the provision was developed. The structure of ROWA!, ward-based local co-ordinators, and a Family Learning team, means that this synergy is a strength which can be built upon.

- ***The role of innovative programmes in bringing in adults with little or no experience of adult education into learning.***

Innovative courses, such as the Backpack project, which had a focus on creativity and oracy and supported home/school links, were particularly helpful in supporting parents with little or no experience of formal learning. They responded to these courses as being unthreatening spaces where they could share literacy, numeracy and speaking and listening activities with their children. Parents explicitly talked about what they brought to the courses, such as books made at home. Children's texts made at home were brought into the class as result of the Backpack project. The evaluation found that these courses fostered student's confidence as new learners.

- ***How the programmes affect positively adult-child interaction, giving parents the confidence and competence to help their children and develop their learning.***

All the courses observed developed parents' confidence and competence to help their children and enabled them to develop their own skill, using the raft of progression opportunities that ROWA! Family Learning has to offer. The phrase 'competence and confidence' came from a head teacher, who observed that the ROWA! Family Learning developed the students' confidence and competence to help their children with basic skills.

There was some evidence that school-based training offered progression routes. Observations found that progression was facilitated through the different courses. For example, students on a Keeping up With the Kids Numeracy course were thinking of developing their skills in the school as classroom assistants and could access school-based courses to give them the skills to do that.

Evidence showed that the year-long offer of Family Learning provision in schools was valuable for students' progression. This was borne out by evidence from the Family Numeracy course, where students had been on a number of Family Learning courses at the school and were now ready to move on to Adult and Community Education. The students on the Keeping up with the Kids Numeracy course

conversely, were just beginning the year, and were asking for another course the next term.

## **5.2. Proposals for the ROWA! Family Learning provision**

Using data from the interviews with staff, and observations, the evaluation generated the following proposals for action. These were linked to the theoretical framework outlined in section 2 which focused on models of good practice in community-focused provision and Family Learning. These generated the following proposals:

PROPOSALS FOR ACTION	
Community – focused provision	The importance of linking into ward-based development work. Some time was spent with one of the SRB development workers. It was apparent that the generic way in which she worked was very important in widening the scope and brief of family learning. It is an important feature of the ROWA! offer that this synergy between the ward-based development staff and family learning staff be fostered into order to sustain a community-focused approach. Drawing on the model from Hannon et al (2003) attention should be focused on the delivery of family learning could take place not in schools, an innovation which is already happening due to Skills for Families, and further links developed across the ROWA! team in order to address issues of social inclusion. The provision which included ‘wider family learning’ could be then developed in response to this observation.
Childcare	Crèche provision was limited due to funding constraints, and due to pressure of room space in schools. This was mentioned by many students: on one course, 14 students were interested, but only 4 attended because there was no crèche using her own budgets in order for students to attend. Courses need to have crèche provision attached if at all possible. In an observation, one student said many mothers would like to attend but could not.
Home-based and informal learning	Most of the provision visited was school-based, meaning that a ‘schooled’ version of literacy predominated, as described in the theoretical framework. Examples of ‘home-based’ family learning, such as the Donnington Race track, were incidental. It would be an innovative development for ROWA! Family Learning to develop the Backpack project further as a project to reflect the interests and diversity of homes as outlined above by Tett and St. Clair (1996). Families could place objects in the Backpack to be shown the next week at the course and then developed into literacy, numeracy or speaking and listening focused activities, with content coming from the homes. For example, the Backpack could be a conduit for materials to go back and forward, similar to that described by Johnson and Feiler (2003) in their shoebox project.

### 5.3 Conclusion

in the conclusion, the process of doing the evaluation is considered, together with the changing context for Family Learning in ROWA! and what can be learned from the evaluation.

The evaluation reflects a particular stage within ROWA! Family Learning. This was when two innovative curriculum developments were being piloted, that is, the Backpack Project, and Toddler Talk, and were being developed in the context of a year's worth of provision being offered. This perspective constructed the courses as being follow-on course – from Toddler Talk to Backpack Project, to Keeping up with the Kids.

The evaluation happened when the funding from Skills for Families enable further innovations to be planned. This affected the evaluation in that the focus shifted as the evaluation progressed, as the co-ordinator for Family Learning had a wider, more strategic brief, and began to plan the workplace course, and the other innovative approaches to Family Learning. ROWA! Family Learning was very much supported by the funding from skills for Families, which encouraged the development of innovative programmes and community-focused Family Learning to attract new learners in new locations. The evaluation also took place when SRB-funded ward based co-ordinators were changing their role as new funding streams came on board, while continuing to support and enable family learning. Their contribution supported wider family learning, as described in section 4.

The concept of family learning is complex, incorporating both parents' and children's learning. It was observed that often the best way of attracting new learners was through their children. As one head teacher observed,

*...we need to encourage skills of parents but we can do that by going through the children first, giving parents the confidence that if they do understand school, because ...there are ways of improving their own [skills] and they can do that without anybody knowing and giving them the confidence to know they can build on that by going for something themselves...*

*(Head teacher, Derbyshire LEA)*

Parents with low self-confidence were supported through ROWA! Family Learning to realise their own potential. Innovative courses supported their development and fostered creativity and learning in the home. These courses enabled parents to develop skills which could then be channelled into mainstream education.

In my limited experience as an evaluator, ROWA! Family Learning offers a '**comfort zone**' to parents. It works really hard to take away the 'stress of learning, and staff involved in delivering provision are passionate about the potential of the provision to empower parents. It has the distinctive feature of being community-focused, and delivering innovative on a national scale.

At the core of this report is a shared enthusiasm for the potential of family learning to engage parents, and to motivate them. ROWA! Family Learning aims to raise parents' competence and confidence to help their children's literacy and numeracy skills, and to develop their own learning.

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**Appendix 1**  
**Family Learning Courses**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Description</b>
15 Family Literacy or Numeracy courses	Basic Skills activity for parents & children
30 Keeping up with the Kids courses Literacy and Numeracy	Family Learning activity for parents
10 Literacy and Numeracy workshops	Basic Skills activity for parents & children
10 Backpack Project courses	Family Learning activity for parents and children
5 accredited Stork sacks courses	Family Learning activity for parents
5 accredited Storysacks courses	Basic Skills activity for parents
16 Toddler Talk course	Family Learning activity for parents.
6 Keeping up with the Kids ICT courses.	Family Learning activity for parents.
3 residential courses.	Basic Skills activity for parents and children.
3 Family Learning in the Workplace courses	Family Learning activity for parents.
6 Keeping up with the Kids ICT courses plus national test.	Basic Skills Activity for parents.

**Appendix 3**  
**List of the dataset for the evaluation**

<b>Interviews: dates</b>	<b>Who with</b>
24.06.03	Head teacher working with ROWA! (1 hour)
10.12.03	Head teacher of school with many ROWA! courses (½ hour)
10.06.03	Community development worker for ROWA! (2 hours)
12.12.03	Community development worker for ROWA! (1 hour)
10.06.03	Family Learning managers (2 hours)
10.06.03	Project manager, residential courses and new projects (1 hour)
10.06.03	Strategic manager family learning (½ hour)
24.06.03	Community development worker for ROWA! (2 hours)
25.10.03	Six learners, Family Numeracy
19.11.03	Six learners, Keeping up with the Kids Numeracy.
19.11.03	Three Learners, Toddler Talk
26.10.03	Adult Community Education Officer in charge of Family Learning (½ hour)
19.11.03	Librarian working with ROWA! (½)
08.12.03	Family Learning managers (1 hour)
08.12.03	ICT and family learning development officer (½ hour)
08.12.03	Project manager, residential courses and new projects ( ½ hour)
12.12.03	ROWA! Director (½ hour)

**List of the observations**

Note: Each observation involved:

- 1 tape recorded interview with learners of about ½ an hour.
- 1 interview with the tutor of about 10 mins.
- At least an hour's observation of the group.
- Collection of children's texts and learning material where possible.
- Photographs of the group where possible.

<b>Observations: dates</b>	<b>Who with</b>
25.10.03	Backpack Project in an Infant's school
25.10.03	Family Numeracy on ROWA! bus
19.11.03	Keeping Up with the Kids, Numeracy, Infant's school
19.11.03	Toddler Talk, Early Excellence centre.
19.11.03	Step Ahead of the Kids, ROWA! bus.
19.11.03	Community library session.