

Education, parenting and family: The social geographies of family learning

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This paper explores the relationship between education, parenting and family through the prism and particularities of family learning. Family learning is an example of an educational initiative, primarily aimed at parents and linked to wider policy concerns, which can be explored through a mapping of its social geographies; family learning is played out across and productive of different sites, spaces and identities. Based on qualitative research undertaken in West London, this paper draws on individual and group interviews with mothers participating in family learning classes and interviews with family learning providers. The key argument we extend is that focusing on the social geographies of family learning - of home, school, work, community and nation - allows us to see how educational initiatives extend the state's reach in family life, producing particular normative versions of family and 'good' parenting operating at a range of interconnecting scales. Education remains a cornerstone of family policy in the UK and detailed analyses of specific initiatives at the point of implementation - how they are practiced and received - is vital for better understanding their diverse and varied effects in contemporary society.

Keywords: family; parenting; education; policy; learning; geography

Introduction

Over the past 20 years in the UK, the traditionally private sphere of the family has been repositioned as a thoroughly public space (Fairclough, 2000), ripe for numerous policy interventions. Although policymakers' interest in the relationship between parents and children is not new (Rose, 1989), the New Labour Government (1997–2007) precipitated and legitimised a more direct and far-reaching role for the state in regard to family and parenting (Daly, 2010), with both pushed to the forefront of various policy initiatives. This stemmed, in part, from a 'social investment perspective', which views improvement to children's upbringing and education as a way of reducing future costs through early intervention (Esping-Andersen, 2002). Following the 'third-way approach' (Giddens, 1998), families and communities have increasingly been viewed as crucial in making 'suitable' active citizens.

This has been realised most clearly through certain educational initiatives; for example, explicit classes aimed at 'improving' parenting skills (Vincent & Warren, 1998) and enhancing home-school relations with parents as 'active partners' in

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children's education (Cullingford & Morrison, 1999; McNamara *et al.*, 2000; O'Brien, 2007; Holloway, 2014). Such educational interventions have 'regulated' parents, particularly mothers, to ensure they take 'responsibility' for their families and produce 'responsible' future citizens (Henricson, 2003; Lister, 2006). This politicisation and professionalisation of parenting (Klett-Davis, 2010) has both strong economic and social dimensions, as discussed in the next section, and it is within this policy context that a broad range of programmes termed 'family learning' has emerged.

Family learning has been an important mode of education deployed at local level over the past 20 years and is part of the government's wider community learning provision (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014). Put simply, it refers to formal programmes, often run in schools and nurseries, that aim to engage parents in tackling educational underachievement, encourage family members to learn together, and lead adults and children to pursue further learning (Department for Education and Skills, 2003). According to NIACE (2009: 5), at its heart is the 'welfare and advancement of the child set in the context of learning for the whole family' and it is considered an important first step to encourage parents, particularly mothers, into training and paid work (Wainwright *et al.*, 2011). It comprises two strands: Family Learning Literacy, Language and Numeracy (FLLN) and Wider Family Learning. The former has been linked to New Labour's '*skills for life*' (Department for Education and Employment, 2001a) strategy and the Coalition Government's (2010–2015) '*skills investment strategy*' (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2010), and is targeted at parents and children with basic skills needs. The latter, though containing elements of FLLN, is linked to broader policy concerns including widening participation, community capacity-building, neighbourhood renewal and regeneration. Family learning is thus positioned at the nexus of various policy areas, with a focus beyond education (Wainwright & Marandet, 2013).

This paper looks at this relationship between education, parenting and family through the prism and particularities of family learning. Based on research undertaken in West London, it draws on individual and group interviews with mothers participating in family learning classes and interviews with family learning providers. Family learning is an example of an educational initiative, primarily aimed at parents, and linked to wider policy concerns which we explore through a mapping of its social geographies; family learning is played out across and is productive of different sites, spaces and identities. A focus on social geographies of family learning allows us to see how educational initiatives extend the state's reach into family life, producing particular normative middle-class versions of family and parenting and the effects on those targeted.

We begin by providing context through an appraisal of the (changing) relationship between policy and parenting in recent years, highlighting particular meanings of family inherent in policy discourse and their often gendered and classed prescriptions. We then outline the specificities of family learning and the project from which this research comes, before offering a reading of these programmes with a focus on their wider social geographies. We argue that restructuring in advanced capitalist economies and emergence of the adult-worker model (Lewis & Giullari, 2005) has placed education firmly within the family in two distinct ways. Firstly, the role of families' influence on children's educational attainment has gained increased importance. Secondly, there has been concerted emphasis placed on parents' employment,

particularly mothers, with education a means of facilitating a transition to paid work. Family learning provides a unique vantage point to capture these roles and spatialise understandings of the state's intervention in family life through an explicit geographical reading of connections between these spaces. It also highlights the importance of better understanding of educational initiatives that simultaneously work on and with families, parents and children.

Articulating family: Parenting and policy

Since the mid-1990s, 'family' has moved to the centre of social policy (Daly, 2010), a process that has taken place across Western welfare states. Matzke and Ostner (2010) argue that there has been a paradigm shift in relation to family, with family as institution replaced by family as a group of individuals and potential market participants. Family has been transported to the centre of new 'activating' labour market policies, and linked to workfare and social justice agendas (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2012). However, this has clearly been targeted at mothers as parents and workers, with emphasis on their expected labour market role (Wainwright *et al.*, 2011).

Recent policies have drawn on a tradition of utilitarian approaches to education and care of children (Penn, 2007), viewing childhood as important insofar as it shapes tomorrow's adults. Parenting has thus been recast as a skill set (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2012) against which parents, through their children, are judged. This is most clearly seen in efforts to shape the 'private practice' of parenting as 'object of resource building and education and training' (Daly, 2013: 160), with the UK now having one of the most expansive parenting programmes in the EU.

According to Daly (2010), New Labour's approach to families was forged along six lines: the education, care and well-being of children; financial support for families with children; services for families; parental employment; work/family reconciliation; and family functioning. Though some of these marked a change from past policy concerns, others offered continuation and, taken together, they 'moved family policy away from enhancing the family as a separate sphere and an institution, and towards measures placing family well-being in close connection with other public policy objectives' (Matzke & Ostner, 2010: 389). Family, traditionally a private space void of state interference, is now metaphorically marked as public space (Fairclough, 2000), through this economic and social reframing. While family policies target those considered most deviant in terms of economic and social norms, they also universalise concern for family functioning (Daly, 2010).

Teaching parents to do a 'better' job has gained increased prominence. In the UK, the creation of Sure Start (1998) spearheaded the development of parent-oriented programmes and was followed by the establishment of Children's Centres. Although parenting programmes were initially designed for parents whose child(ren)'s behaviour was perceived as 'inappropriate', they became part of a larger package of 'parenting support', a term which, as Lewis (2011: 107) articulates, 'gives expression to the state's desire to work "in partnership" with parents'. Consequently, the focus on children and their education has been extended to parents and parenting competence (Gambles, 2013). Parenting 'support' has been a key policy intervention and a means of addressing myriad issues, including child poverty, social mobility and antisocial

behaviour (Daly, 2013), as well as parents' own learning and employability. This latter element has been particularly targeted through family learning.

Though the Coalition Government (2010–2015) were, and the Conservative Government (2015–) are, more interested in family structure, with marriage and tax breaks for married couples popular topics, the broad direction of family policy as pursued by New Labour has not changed significantly. The Coalition Government was committed to maintaining 'family-friendly' employment policies, with the introduction of shared parental leave, making childcare affordable and accessible (particularly for poorer parents) and dealing with so-called 'troubled families' (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2014; Jupp, 2016). This commitment to New Labour's general direction is highlighted through continued support for family learning programmes.

Family learning as policy and project

The signalling of family learning as an important educational initiative can be traced back to 2001, with *The learning age* describing it as 'a vital means of improving adult literacy and numeracy', reinforcing that it 'fosters greater involvement between children, their parents and their communities at all levels' (Department for Education and Employment, 2001b: 31). With this pretext, participation is aimed at encouraging parents to partake in their children's learning and develop their parenting skills, while encouraging their own personal economic and social futures.

The role of parenting in engendering a culture of learning has been central to policies such as *'Every child matters'* (Department for Education and Skills, 2003) and *'Every parent matters'* (Department for Education and Skills, 2007), while the inter-generational legacy of educational achievement, marshalled through a discourse of social mobility, continues to be intrinsic to UK government policy (HM Government, 2009, 2011). Successive governments have attempted to combat family poverty and social exclusion through tackling worklessness, with paid work claimed to be the best way to avoid poverty and social exclusion. *'Skills for life'* (Department for Education and Employment, 2001a) and the *'Skills investment strategy'* (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2010) have driven this, arguing costs to the individual and society of poor numeracy and literacy. Parents have been cast as guardians of children's learning, as well as potential economic participants in the global economy, with family learning used to promote both. This has implications for parents' place and role in society, especially for mothers, who are the main participants in family learning. Moreover, though open to all, family learning is a targeted form of policy, deployed in more deprived areas and focusing on families constructed as outside the 'mainstream' (Wainwright & Marandet, 2013). While policy emphasises the need for all parents to have access to support, advice and guidance, in practice prominence is given to those perceived as 'marginalised' (Gillies, 2005).

Recent governments have been committed to protecting family learning programmes in light of public spending cuts. Despite a pledge to reduce the further education budget by 25% over the period of the spending review (up to 2014–2015), the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills Adult Safeguarded Learning (ASL) budget, which funds FLLN and wider family learning, was secured (Department of Business,

Innovation and Skills, 2010; Skills Funding Agency, 2011), with the government keen to be seen embracing activities supporting the development of individuals, families and communities at the local level (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2010).

Despite efforts to include more fathers in family learning, programmes are dominated by women and particularly mothers. Motherhood, long acknowledged as a crucial defining aspect of many women's lives and identities, carries often problematic normative prescriptions (Holloway, 1998). Although the role and place of 'mother' in relation to family are contested (Walby, 1990; Aitken, 1999), a normative maternal discourse still constructs mothers in relation to their children, prescribing them as the main carers (and teachers) of their children. With women expected to (re)enter paid employment after childbirth, society's understanding of a mother's role and place has shifted, extending to an expectation that they should be working for pay as well as caring (Wainwright *et al.*, 2011). Contextualising family learning in this way exposes its nexus location between production and social reproduction, generating problems and contradictions for mothers involved.

This paper is based on a qualitative research project with the broad objective to explore how state policies on (re)employment and (re)training are played out through family learning at the local level in West London. Focusing on the role and place of mothers, it sets out to probe the meanings of motherhood and family in relation to the government's learning, skills and welfare-to-work agendas. In addition to enabling a more thorough analysis of objectives, purpose and potential conflicts of family learning, the project was directed towards the reasons and expectations mothers have for participation, the social and spatial experiences and implications of this, and the extent to which family learning acts as a transformative space through which mothers negotiate and challenge a range of identities.

The project was carried out in three stages. Stage 1 consisted of 16 in-depth interviews with family learning providers, tutors and training advisors. The sample ensured that interviews included both FLLN and wider family learning provision. Stage 2 involved three focus groups with 33 women engaged in family learning in Acton, Kenton and Hounslow West. The locations were chosen on the advice of providers and with the agreement of tutors, and point to the spatial targeting of family learning in areas of high deprivation. The sample was opportunistic and dependent on participant availability and willingness. The women were engaged in a range of courses in wider family learning (including music and movement, arts and crafts, and a course called 'strengthening families and communities') and FLLN classes. Participants ranged in age from early 20s to mid-40s, with only two of the 33 women identifying as White British. Others self-identified as Indian (13), Sri Lankan (2), Black African (8), Black Caribbean (1), Arab (3), Mixed/Other background (2), Other Asian (2). Many participants explained that they were recent immigrants, reflecting the transient West London population and those participating in/targeted for family learning. Stage 3 involved one-to-one and paired-depth follow-up interviews with a sample of 10 focus group participants to enable more personal and detailed discussions. In presenting our qualitative data, we use numbers to identify family learning providers and pseudonyms for mothers with whom we conducted in-depth interviews. Owing to difficulties with identifying individual voices, focus group participants are not separately named.

Social geographies of family learning

The economic and social dimensions of educational policy are clearly articulated through close examination of family learning. Employing a geographic frame, we explore how family learning speaks to wider and interconnected spaces of home, school, work, community and nation, and constructed subjectivities of ‘good’ parent, educator, worker, neighbour and citizen. This focus highlights how identities are infused with policy narratives of responsibility and self-reliance, with education policy reframed as a catalyst, allowing participants to take an ‘active part’ in their economic and social well-being (Raco, 2009).

Parent/home

Family learning classes are closely linked to self-identification with the figure and status of mother and its practise within the ‘home’. Although some participants had been or were still in paid employment, they placed great emphasis on their perceived mothering responsibilities and at-home role. Echoing government focus on the importance of parenting (Daly, 2010), research participants expressed that, in the first instance, what goes on in the form of ‘at-home good parenting’ is considered to have ‘significant positive effect on children’s achievement and adjustment’ (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003: 4; Hartas, 2011).

The identity of a mother is, on closer examination, more an aspiration, a process of wanting to become ‘good’ or ‘better’. This discourse was articulated in a way largely reflecting the growing ‘professionalization of parenting’ (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2014), whereby parenting is redefined as a set of skills to be taught, understood and practised, and a politics of aspiration (Raco, 2009), with citizens viewed as responsible for ‘bettering themselves’ with state support:

When you understand your children, what they’re going through, what they’ve got in their mind . . . what they’re experiencing, it makes me a good mother. (Asha)

Many participants felt that they initially lacked the skills to conform to this ideal, especially those who were first-time parents. This was particularly salient for those whose networks of friends and family had been weakened by migration. One participant, who migrated to the UK in 2000, explained:

Suddenly after being a mother, it’s like . . . we don’t have any time for us and there is no one to support us, mentally or physically. (Focus group, Hounslow)

Family learning had a vital role in reassuring mothers of their ability to be(come) ‘good’ mothers. Classes with a normative aspect, such as FLNN classes or parenting classes, were seen as providing confidence in dealing with issues in the ‘right way’; through clear expectations, these courses helped eliminate doubts some mothers had about parenting and teaching techniques, giving them the tools and knowledge to feel that they were doing ‘a good job’. Even Wider Family Learning classes, which involved joint activities by parents and children, were found useful in setting and understanding norms and through information provision.

Mothers in our study viewed parenting as something that is, or needs to be, learnt, chiming with policy discourses on the professionalisation of parenting rolled out under New Labour (Daly, 2010). This can be critiqued as offering particular middle-class and culturally specific notions of parenting based on the normalisation of a 'warm and authoritative' ethos (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2014), as exemplified here:

I learnt that you have to discipline your children, not by shouting, not by hitting, but being firm. (Bharti)

While participants reported increased confidence in dealing with children's behaviour, classes also encouraged bonding:

I've become a friend of my child . . . when you are teaching something and you are asking her . . . what they like, what they dislike, you can understand that. (Mita)

Family learning marks mothers in 'need' of help, providing resources, information and networks enabling them to conform to state-approved mothering norms and expectations, yet, simultaneously, it is perceived as empowering in the transition to motherhood. How these different readings articulate is a point we return to later.

Educator/school

Schools are central to everyday geographies of parents and have become a 'new' space through which social policy is executed, and families targeted and appraised. Primary schools are sites where families can be identified for early intervention and parenting skills moulded (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2014); indeed, it is often through schools that certain parents are recruited to family learning classes (Wainwright & Marandet, 2013). Here we argue that drawing on mothers' desire and perceived responsibility to help their children with schoolwork, family learning works to entice mothers into school and promote an active model of good parent as educator.

A neoliberal policy agenda has led to a reformulation of education with parents and teachers recast as partners in educating children (McNamara *et al.*, 2000). The home-school relationship has come into focus and a more dynamic and interactive link is now expected, with family learning one way of encouraging this. Here, family learning is articulated around two axes which contribute to blurring boundaries between private and public, home and school. Research participants invariably equated 'good' mothering with being able to help in their children's learning:

Because I think as a parent I do have a certain responsibility to improve my child's education. I don't expect the schools to teach my daughter everything; I think that I have to take some responsibility for it. (Maggie)

Promoting a discourse of good parenting linked to mothers' role as educators, family learning provides a way for schools to draw parents in, with impetus to help children with homework a chief motivation for taking family learning classes:

If I learn then I can teach my child as well and when he goes to school, he might show what he learnt at home. So it's the main thing for a mother that she can teach something to her child. (Shabnam)

These concerns chime with policy interventions focusing on intergenerational social mobility, with parents imagined as crucial in shaping ‘children’s current and future social in/exclusion’ (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2014: 96). As part of its wider social inclusion agenda, recent UK governments have been interested in creating a culture of learning between parents and children (Feinstein *et al.*, 2008; Marandet & Wainwright, 2016). While ‘investing’ in children’s futures, this approach has increasingly regulated parents/mothers to ensure they take responsibility for their families and produce ‘responsible’ future citizens.

While eager to embrace their role of educator, a lack of ability or knowledge to support children’s schooling was frequently voiced:

Every time you go to school, the teacher says ‘help your child’ but they don’t tell you how to help. You come home and you don’t even know where to start. Because even if you try, they [the children] will tell you: ‘that’s not how the teacher does [it]’. (Focus group, Acton)

This was felt acutely by those educated outside the UK, with different teaching methods or language: ‘In India, the education system is completely different to here’ (Madhavi). Furthermore, family learning was an opportunity to understand otherwise unfamiliar educational terminology relating to the school system: ‘we didn’t know what is key stage 1, what is key stage 2? Where does it start, where does it end?’ . . . For primary level I know now’ (Bela). Family learning was seen as key to improving understanding of what goes on in schools, particularly in relation to children’s learning. This knowledge fed into mothers’ confidence to perform an ‘appropriate’ parenting role. This discourse of good mothering and professionalisation of parenting is closely linked to a neoliberal ethos of responsibility and the importance of mothers as educators in developing adequate future citizen-workers. Drawing on a desire to support children now, and in the future, family learning classes promote an active form of parenting in relation to schools.

With family learning classes often run in and recruited through schools, this acts as a means of encouraging parents to become more involved with the education of their children:

Once they’ve finished that course the schools have often told us that parents now actually come into open evenings, will approach the tutor and discuss their child’s learning in school, and will take more of a part. (Provider 2)

Increased confidence garnered through classes encourages mothers to independently contact and go into schools, creating new attachments. This can be viewed as a (self) disciplinary mechanism to encourage an encounter between parents and school. As Raco (2009: 436) explains, since the late 1990s, there has been a shift ‘towards forms of active and engaged citizenship in which policy-making and implementation ostensibly becomes a process of “co-production” between welfare providers and welfare users’. In this regard, family learning supports increased ‘activation’ of parents’ role as educators outside of, but also within, schools. Indeed, for many, classes led to volunteering for jobs including ‘dinner ladies’ and classroom helpers, or small-scale activities such as helping with school fetes. This process was valued by mothers, but is also considered important for schools. This draws on a neoliberal discourse of

individual responsibility, where parenting is identified as key in producing future citizen-workers (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2014). However, as the next section articulates, family learning additionally promotes the extension of this discourse to mothers' employment.

Worker/ paid employment

Reflecting the contemporaneous alignment of social inclusion and economic prosperity, our research found participation in family learning operating as a bridge between home and paid employment, though in a less direct way than other forms of training and adult education. Uptake of classes, initially motivated by a desire to conform to ideals of good parenting by supporting children, also benefited mothers themselves:

When you become a mother, you think you have to take care of your kids and that's your life, but doing these courses, we can become confident that we can do something else also. (Focus group, Hounslow)

Family learning classes were perceived as providing an array of soft skills, making transitions (back) to further learning or the labour market more viable. In West London, with its high proportion of new migrants, this is all the more important as confidence to (re)enter the labour market can be affected by racism (Moon, 2003; Dyer *et al.*, 2011) and feelings of not fitting in:

Maybe my communication skills have improved, I can talk freely. Before I used to be more reserved and I used to feel like: 'what if I say something wrong? What if people don't understand me' because sometimes, because of my accent, I have to repeat, so this gave me an opportunity. In the future if I have to talk in front of people ... because these days the interviews are more difficult as well ... so it will definitely help my communication skills and I'm more confident, I'm not that shy. I would know how to approach someone. That really helped me. (Bharti)

The socialising aspect of family learning was important in breaking everyday domestic routines, prompting considerations of further learning and paid employment.

Delimited space and time away from home was a valued part of courses; offering a break from everyday routines, family learning allowed mothers to perform different identities: 'now, if I'll go to any other course, I'll not only be a mother but a learner also' (Ghazala). A number of mothers also commented on how courses gave them the sense that a return to the labour market was possible:

I think I've benefited a lot myself. It encouraged me to go back again, learn again. 'Cos I want a job, I want to do something. I think it pushed me to do something for me. (Bukaka)

Family learning 'activates' potential to return to the workplace by providing soft skills and a time/space separated from the everyday.

Skills gained also garnered a positive sense of future learning: 'It's good for ourselves too. At least if we want to go for a more advanced course, we'll have good basics. So it's very useful' (Focus group, Acton). Though direct progression to employment is uncommon, some mothers spoke of the importance of returning to

work: ‘when I finish the learning, then I will work’ (Focus group, Acton). As a transitional space between home and work, family learning enables skills and confidence to be honed and strengthened: ‘It did make me realise now that it’s going to be easier if you go to work’ (Asha). Family learning works, in part, to empower mothers, providing a sense of possibilities beyond traditional caring roles.

Normalisation of labour market return, especially once children reach school age, was clearly expressed. This was, to some extent, the result of government policies and societal pressures to conform to the dual adult worker model (Daly, 2010): ‘I do know these days that the government is encouraging parents to go to work’ (Asha). Echoing Vincent *et al.*’s (2010) observations, there is a need to be a ‘good’ mother and a ‘good’ worker: being a ‘good’ mother is being economically active and independent, with stigma—personal and societal—attached to not being in some kind of paid employment. In addition to the moral obligation of being in work promoted by the adult worker model, participants articulated work as a path to social inclusion and out of poverty, conforming to current policy constructions (Dyer *et al.*, 2011). The figure of the ‘good mother’ is also one able to provide financially for her children:

I need to learn something to make money. Because if you don’t do that you need to seek the income support . . . I want to do something. (Kudia)

Learning and paid work were seen as the only alternative to poverty: ‘I believe in my mind . . . if you stay on benefits, you gonna stay poor all your life’ (Asha). Family learning can be seen as providing soft skills and information necessary to promote a form of active citizenship whereby individuals are ‘expected to take on greater responsibility for their own well-being as defined by government programmes’ (Raco, 2009: 438).

These views of family learning must be understood through the context of our research project and local moralities of mothering, shaped by the immediate geographic and economic context. In contrast to those (predominantly white) middle-class mothers in Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson’s (2014) study, where parenting advice was considered intrusive, our research paints a different picture. Importantly, our participants were already engaged in or had completed family learning programmes when they took part in our research. With generally positive experiences, the coercive dimensions of such programmes and inherent policy imperatives were less prominent. As highlighted, the women, many of whom were recent migrants to the UK, cited social isolation on moving to a new country or area and aspirations for them and their children to fit in, as key to engaging in family learning. In addition, the high cost of London living, coupled with the predominance of low-skilled occupations, are all possible explanations for the specific local morality of mothering which made them enthusiastic about family learning and less inclined to overtly question or resist its normative qualities. Our study thus opens up existing assumptions about parenting classes and introduces a new axis along which local moralities of motherhood must be understood, namely narratives of migration. This desire for ‘active’ normative citizenship can be scaled up from home, school and work to operate at and through community and national levels, as our remaining geographic emphasis highlights.

Neighbour/community

Neighbourhoods and communities are constructed, they are based on common ideals of what we expect them to 'be' (Martin, 2003). Yet they are concepts that have salience for how residents draw upon their own socio-spatial experiences and contexts, and are readily employed by policymakers (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2009). Our research is insightful in this regard, showing how aspirations of belonging to a neighbourhood or community can be fostered through policy interventions. For example, families perceived as 'excluded' were often targeted by family learning providers:

For the ones we're trying to target in particular, they're often quite isolated in the home with their children and coming into family learning has enabled them to make friends and branch out a bit and generally feel more confidence about being part of the community. (Provider 10)

Identification of families considered in need of intervention and local belonging, points to more coercive and strategic dimensions of family learning (Wainwright & Marandet, 2013). Nonetheless, this was valued by participants, particularly those who did not have local networks of friends or acquaintances, as was the case for a number of recent immigrants: 'After coming to classes, I made more friends. And I'm not feeling alone. Because all day, mostly, I pass all the time at home' (Shabnam).

Mita explains how family learning helped her child cope with recent migration:

I could see, when we arrived in the UK, my child was feeling really lonely because it was a totally new background for her, totally new school, new friends, everything was new; and when I joined this class, I also socialised with her classmates' mothers and she also came near to these kids, much nearer to those kids who were also coming to family learning classes. So for her, her social relationships improved, and for me also. And we made such good friend. (Mita)

In this sense, family learning plays a particular inclusive role for mother and child. Significant in the multicultural communities in which we conducted research, classes provided opportunities to meet others from various ethnic and religious backgrounds. Again, this was appreciated by recent migrants, for some of whom the ethnic diversity of London was new and unsettling:

Particularly somebody who's just stayed in India all of their life, you can't even imagine, but they haven't even seen any black people for their whole life. It's total shock when you see all these people. (Focus group, Kenton)

Another participant, Colette, who had moved into army barracks, found it difficult to adjust to her new surroundings. As she explained, family learning helped her better understand the communities that surrounded her: 'I could never understand why they [Muslims] didn't like dogs and then I went to coffee mornings [through family learning] and we were speaking and now I know'. Family learning classes fostered a sense of community and mutual understanding: 'This type of course it does help you to, like to know each other, to know different cultures of people' (Asha). The feeling that family learning helped break down cultural and religious barriers was articulated in similar ways in a number of interviews. Echoing the language used

by Asha, Ghazala draws on humanist values and a discourse of sameness to highlight this process:

That family learning courses, of course it give us a base to be there and to know other people around . . . We are also like them. We also belong in the same thing. It's just a different ethnic background, we all have the same problems with the children, we have the same atmosphere of the house. Everything is the same.

Family learning fostered a desire to actively belong to, rather than merely be part of, a local community.

Beyond providing a forum where various community 'members' could meet and form friendships, some classes were actively geared towards providing mothers with tools to establish greater social and community cohesion. This was the case with the Strengthening Families and Communities course, which taught mothers parenting skills but also provided them with tools to deal with family members, neighbours and the wider community. Family learning in general, and this class particularly, articulated family cohesion around wider community inclusion goals:

It is the basic belief of strengthening families as well as communities: it means that how I have to live in a community, how I should live in family, how we can improve the bonds between our families, friends and communities and how we can cope from day to day situations in the house or outside the house. (Ghazala)

The language used here—'have to' and 'should'—again points to family learning's coercive dimensions. This next example also demonstrates this notion of 'knowing how' to behave, in this instance dealing with difference and promoting a respectful community spirit:

The tutor gave us an example: if the neighbour is cooking something really strong, and you can't stand it, you shouldn't go 'they're doing my head in!' or go and knock at the door if the music is loud . . . just try to close your windows. And bear with it because you are living in a community . . . (Bharti)

The sense of being part of a wider community pervades many mothers' experiences of family learning. This mother sums up what, for her, family learning had provided her with:

It teaches you a lot. It teaches you even how to live with your neighbours. How not to be, you know, like strangers . . . gives you confidence and gives you, to help the environment you're living in, the community. (Asha)

Family learning enables 'bridging interactions' (Clarke, 2008) between different groups of people and enables the practice of neighbourhood and community as a shared space. Family learning can be read from an 'aspirational citizenship' perspective as providing tools to help mothers develop self-reliance and an ability and eagerness to 'take on greater responsibilities for themselves and the well-being of their communities' (Raco, 2009: 436). Identity is created by the interactions between heterogeneous elements of the modern city (Pine, 2010). Cities are sites where new forms of citizenship are constructed as multicultural populations come together, and this is in evidence in the perceptions and experiences relayed here, with family learning a mechanism through which to promote community cohesion and 'suitable'

neighbourliness and community citizenship. This notion of citizenship can be further scaled up, as considered in the next section.

Citizen/nation

Education has been repeatedly identified as key to developing ‘active’ and ‘appropriate’ citizenship. A core component of the national curriculum in English schools (Arthur & Cremin, 2012), citizenship’s place in further and adult education has been more peripheral (Hopkins, 2014). However, family learning is an example of ‘other’ types of education, where ideas around citizenship are often implicit rather than explicit, yet clearly linked to the ‘type’ of parent targeted for programmes. As already asserted, many participants involved in our research were recent immigrants to the UK, reflecting the transience of the West London population. As a result, family learning classes were seen as providing a medium through which to access knowledge about what many called ‘the British system’. Information about school, further classes, work opportunities and other public institutions was dispensed through family learning courses, helping many mothers to overcome a sense of disconnection from the country in which they were now residing, opening up opportunities and providing hope about future possibilities:

I wanted to know personally more about the country, more . . . and then it’s like when you start you learn so many things so then it’s like . . . you can learn more. (Bela)

This benefit was not only articulated by recent immigrants. Bukaka, who had lived in the UK for 15 years, felt family learning classes finally helped her make sense of the country and its functioning: ‘It really opened . . . so many things. Like now I know more – about the system, how it does work’. The initial aims of family learning are broadened by participants to make connections that work at the scale of the nation and towards the aspired identity of a full and accepted citizen.

Whilst family learning is critically viewed through a disciplinary lens that motivates norms of identity, it can also be viewed as an empowering process for mothers, making them feel part of a wider society. As a coercive and empowering process, it operates productively to enable new attachments and identities to take shape. It is important not to overlook this sense of empowerment and its emotional and material benefits. This is a persuasive argument that has been forwarded in relation to other social/educational policy initiatives (Vincent & Warren, 1998; Bagley & Ackerley, 2006; Horton & Kraftl, 2009). The aspirational citizenship promoted by family learning can be perceived as a positive element, as expressed here by Shabnam:

Taking classes, it’s changed my life and made me more comfortable [about living in the UK]. I’m also proud of myself (laughs). And I can tell my friends in India, that I’m doing this course and they’re ‘oh, you’re so lucky!’ so it’s good, I’m feeling good being here. (Shabnam)

The importance of family learning in fostering a more ‘welcoming’ society and helping migrant mothers feel part of British society might be more strongly felt in areas which, like West London, are characterised by high immigration rates.

Conclusion

Family learning, as an educational initiative, operates at and through the local level. It is worthy of interest as it sits at the nexus of numerous current policy areas whose focus go beyond education, therefore offering insight into the relationship between state and family. As the state has taken a closer interest in the well-being and practice of family in recent years, family learning is one enterprise used to promote social and economic responsibility among parents.

As we have articulated in this paper through a geographic scaling, family learning works through a set of broader sites and spaces of home, school, work, community and nation, aimed at producing concomitant normative identities of a 'good' mother, educator, worker, neighbour and citizen. Though crude, this framing is useful for understanding more fully the reach and purpose of the state in family life, and the role of education in enabling this. Our research shows how policies targeted at families are difficult to delineate and ascribe to one specific site, place and space. While family learning classes can be seen as focusing on parents (mothers) in relation to their children, they work through and affect a much broader and varied set of geographies, and imagined and socially constructed identities.

Though mothers, and the concept of motherhood, have long been scrutinised by the state and linked to a broader set of geographical scales (e.g. Davin, 1997), neoliberalism has tightly coupled these ideas to the labour market, both normalising and individualising economic participation. As an expansion of the 'economisation' of society, individuals are cast as agents of change, maximising their value through optimal decision-making. In relation to learning and education, the neoliberal state seeks to shape certain citizens' identities in order to 'activate' self-sufficient and 'aspirational', yet highly normative, forms of identity (Raco, 2009; Holloway *et al.*, 2011). Family learning works through a coercive capacity to become a means of instilling ethical self-control and governance (McDowell, 2004), particularly for those mothers who are recent migrants, have low levels of education or are not currently engaged in paid employment. This is in the government's interests, especially in the current period of austerity, as parents, through the family, are being relied on to deliver social and economic policy imperatives (Jupp, 2016), shifting responsibility from the state to subjects. Drawing on the experience of mothers engaged in family learning, we have shown how this normative process can be perceived as empowering by those targeted (Wainwright & Marandet, 2013), a reminder of the complexity of the effect of rollout neoliberalism and its intersection with local moralities of mothering (Holloway, 1998) and linked to the specificities of place and gender, class and migration narratives.

State intervention in, and emphasis on, families looks set to continue, though likely in more targeted ways (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2014; Jupp, 2016) and with ever-increasing and problematic emphasis on economic responsibility, well-being and aspiration across multiple and interconnected social geographies, as highlighted in this paper. Education remains a cornerstone of this, and detailed policy analyses of specific initiatives at the point of implementation—how they are practiced and received—is vital for better understanding their diverse and varied effects in contemporary society.

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