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Supportive power: The role of family learning in developing home learning cultures. In: British Early Childhood Educational Research Association (BECERA) Annual Conference, 10th February 2020, Midlands Arts Centre, Birmingham. (Unpublished)

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# Supportive Power

The role of family learning in developing home learning cultures



The background features a complex geometric pattern of overlapping shapes in shades of purple and teal. A large, solid purple circle is positioned in the upper center, partially overlapping the text. The overall aesthetic is modern and abstract.

Where did I  
start?

The setting is the community room of a primary school in the centre of a large northern city in England.

It is supposed to be suitable for adult learners, but only child-size tables and chairs have been provided, despite requests for appropriate furniture during the course-planning stage.

The experienced Family Learning tutor places her course folder on the only full-size table, pushing away the detritus of breakfast club. She flips through reams of paperwork to show me her lesson plan.

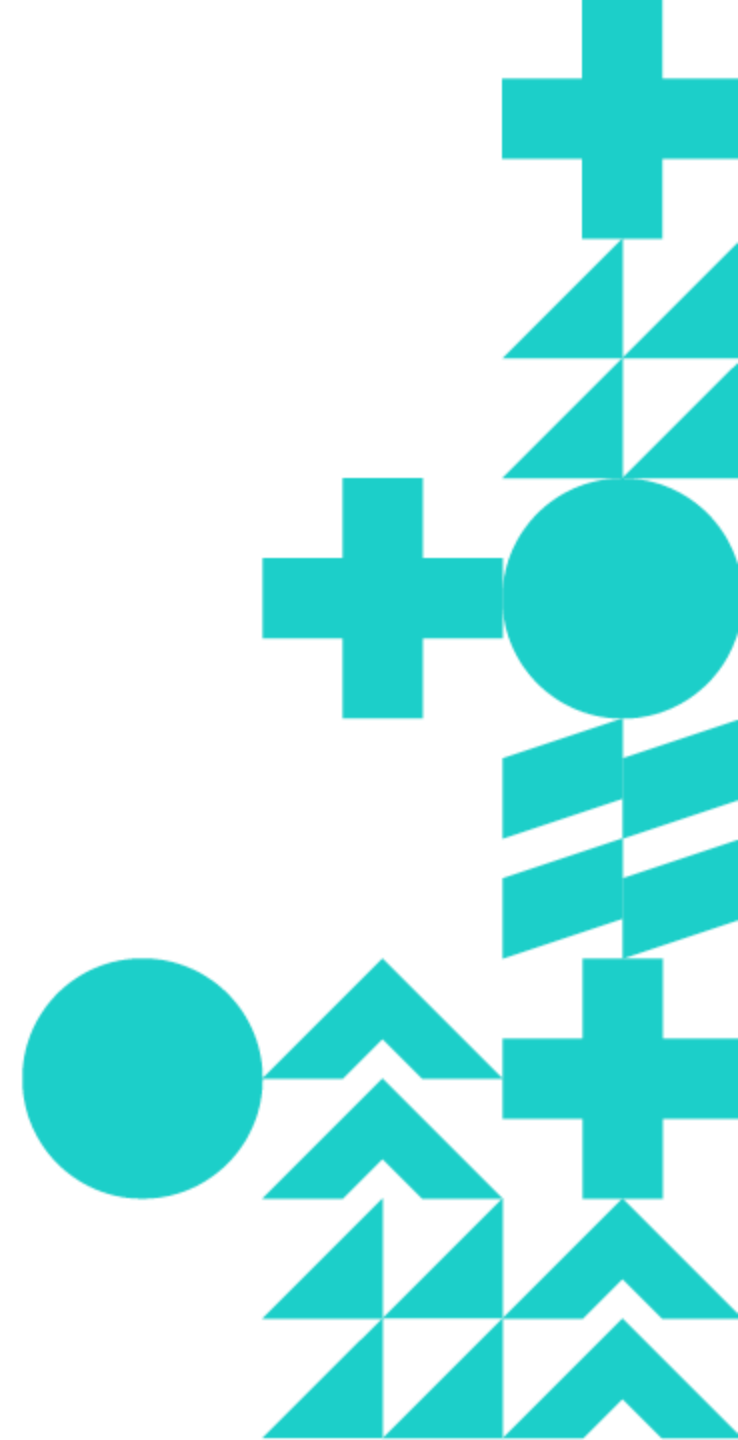


It is a dense document packed with minute-by-minute activity, learning aims and outcomes, health and safety and inclusion information, learning style mapping and a section on how ICT and numeracy will be embedded in the literacy session.

It must have taken hours to complete.

“I don’t use this, it’s too hard to follow whilst your teaching....”

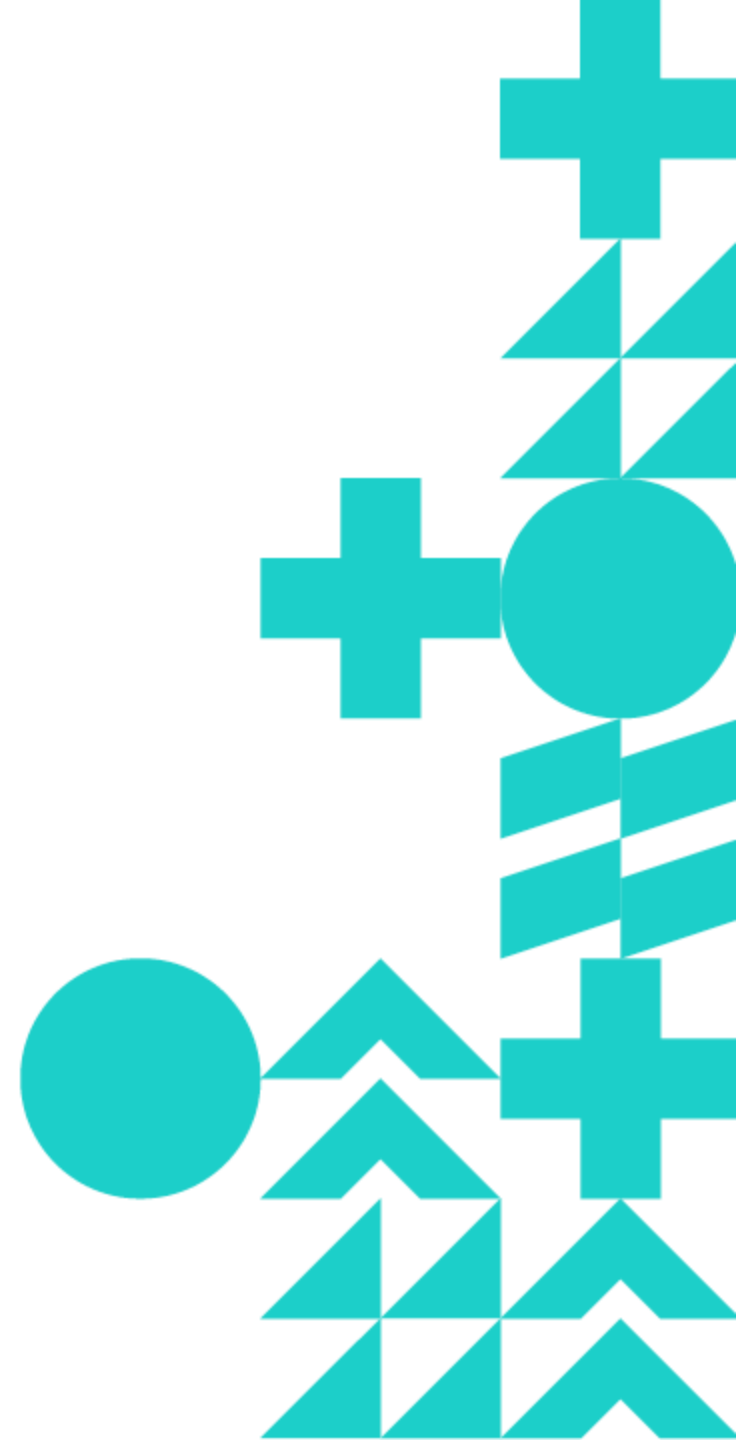
...but you must write one for every class and always bring it in case Ofsted come” she explains.



The parents tentatively file in. They have signed in, donned visitor badges and been escorted to the room by a teaching assistant.

Some parents have brought their below-school-age children and so are turned away at the door.

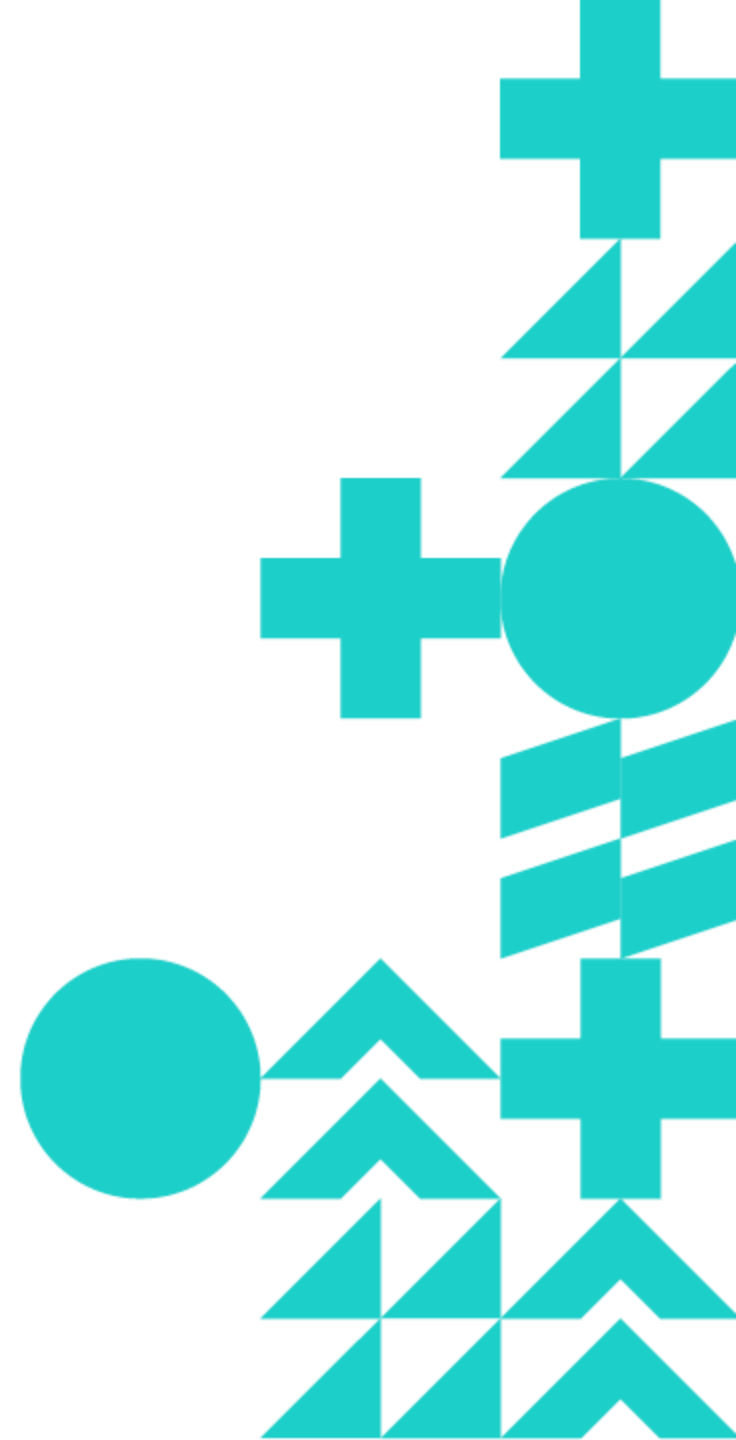
‘Sorry, it’s not suitable’ they are told in clipped tones by the Family Learning tutor.



‘This always happens’ she explains to me in earshot of the class

‘...but never let them in with little ones, you won’t get anything done”

The mothers leave, awkwardly negotiating pushchairs back out of the school. They seem variously irritated, disappointed or confused.



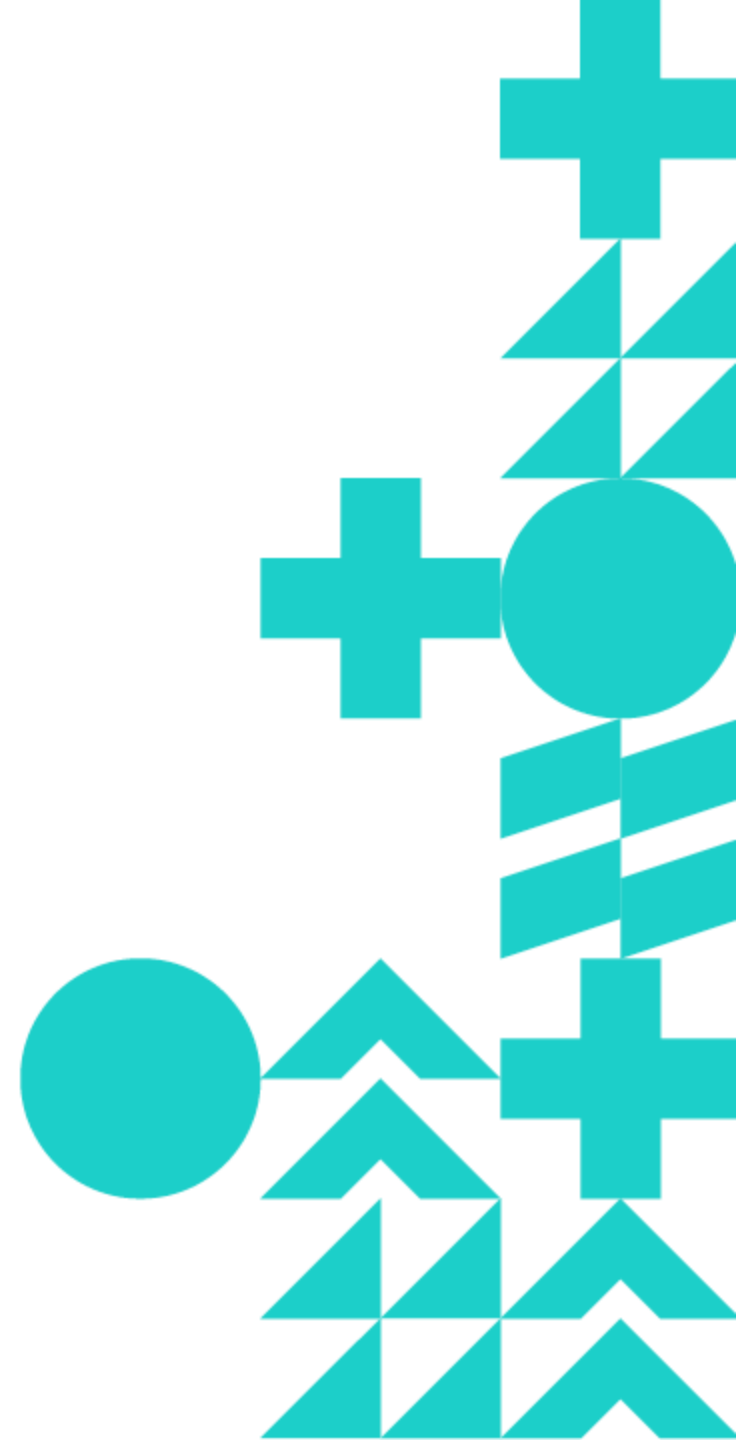
The remaining parents balance on the tiny seats.

The tutor distributes pens and an A3-size enrolment form that is covered in tiny text.

‘OK, before we can start we all need to fill in this form, it’s council policy’.

She moves around the room ensuring the long document is completed in full.

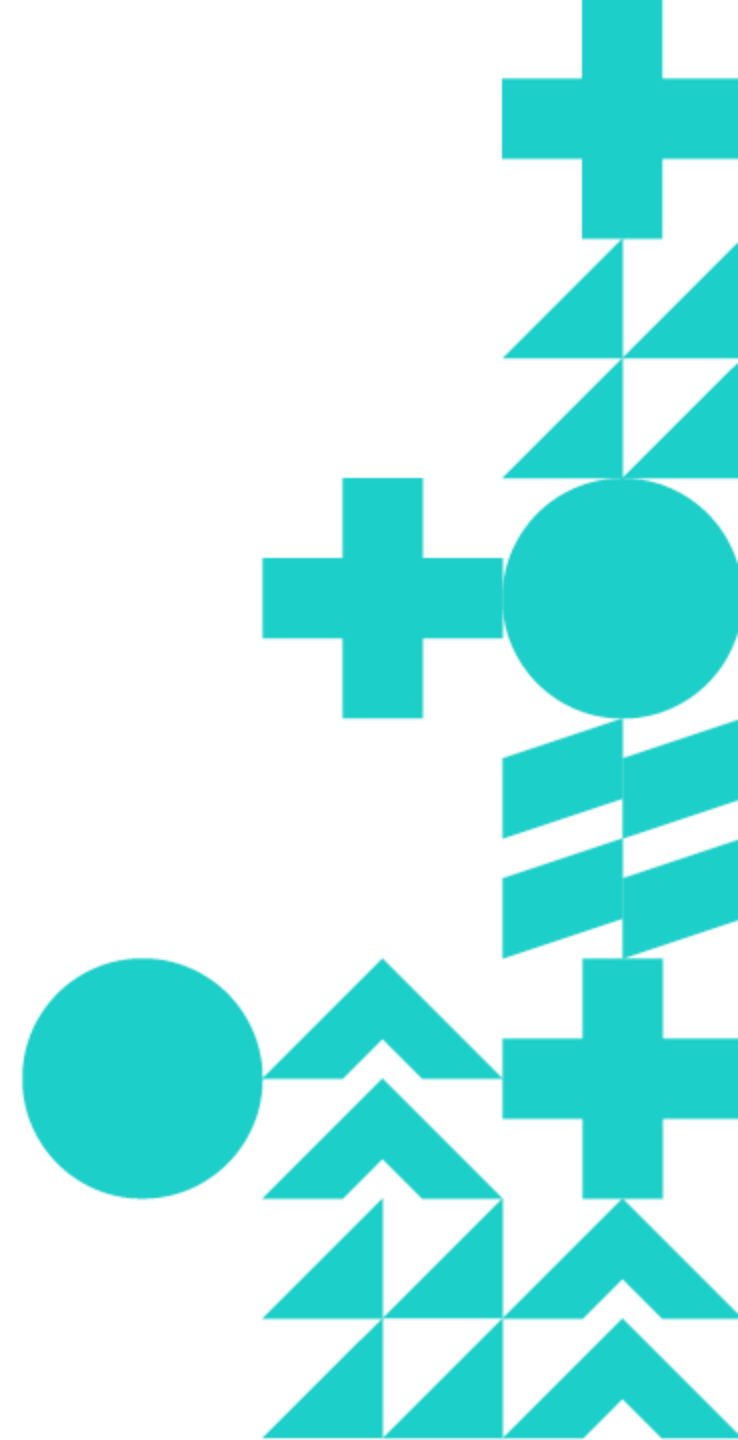
Asking loudly if parents have any qualifications or if they are in receipt of disability benefits or universal credit before jabbing the corresponding part of the form to indicate where to add the information.





Some parents have English as an additional language and struggle to understand the form, some lack the literacy skills to complete it, some object to the length and level of detail required and refuse to give the information.

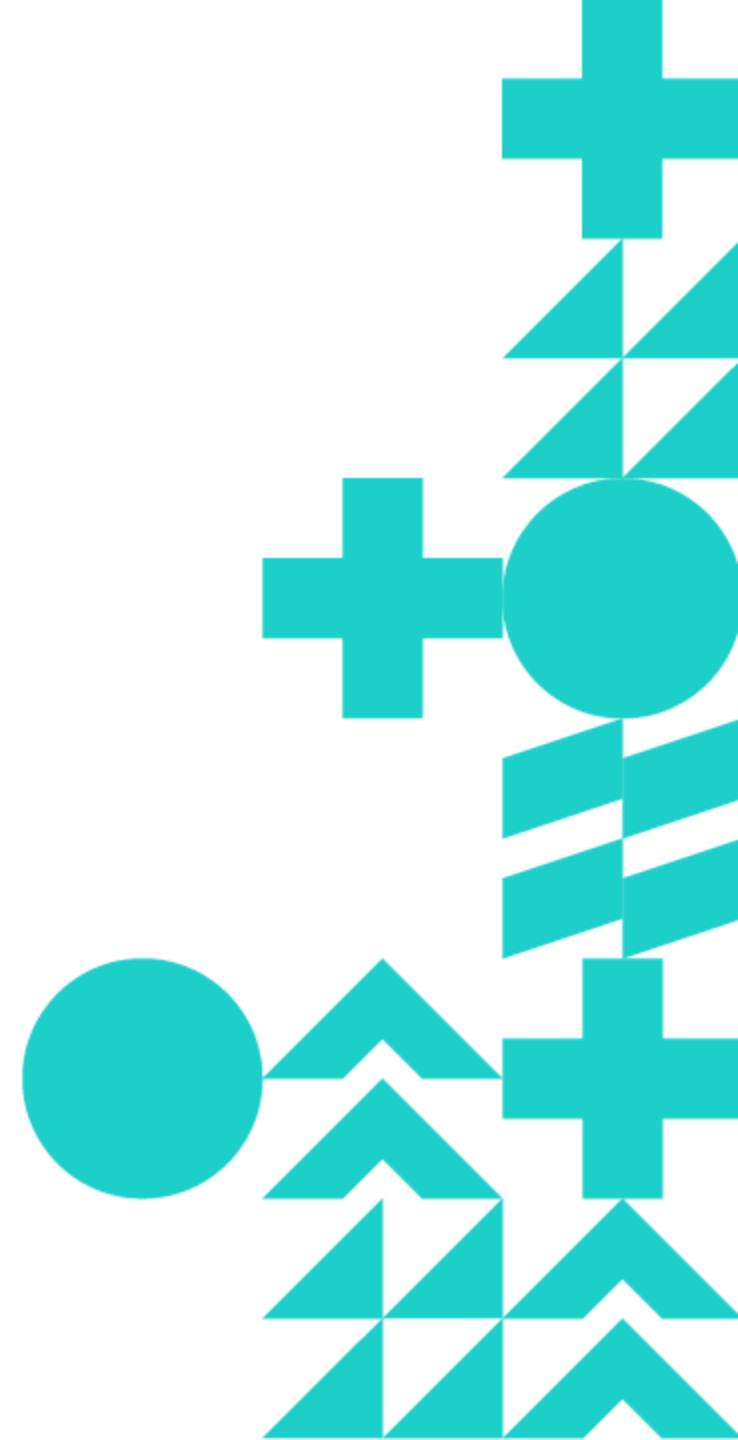
The small room is getting hot and tense as the tutor struggles to field all the questions about the form



A number of parents have given up and started to chat, “Are the children coming in?” one asks loudly, cutting through the chatter.

“Not today, there won’t be time. We just have a bit of admin to do this week and then we can be up and running next time”.

The parent raises her eyebrows “I don’t think I’m coming next time” she whispers to her neighbour.

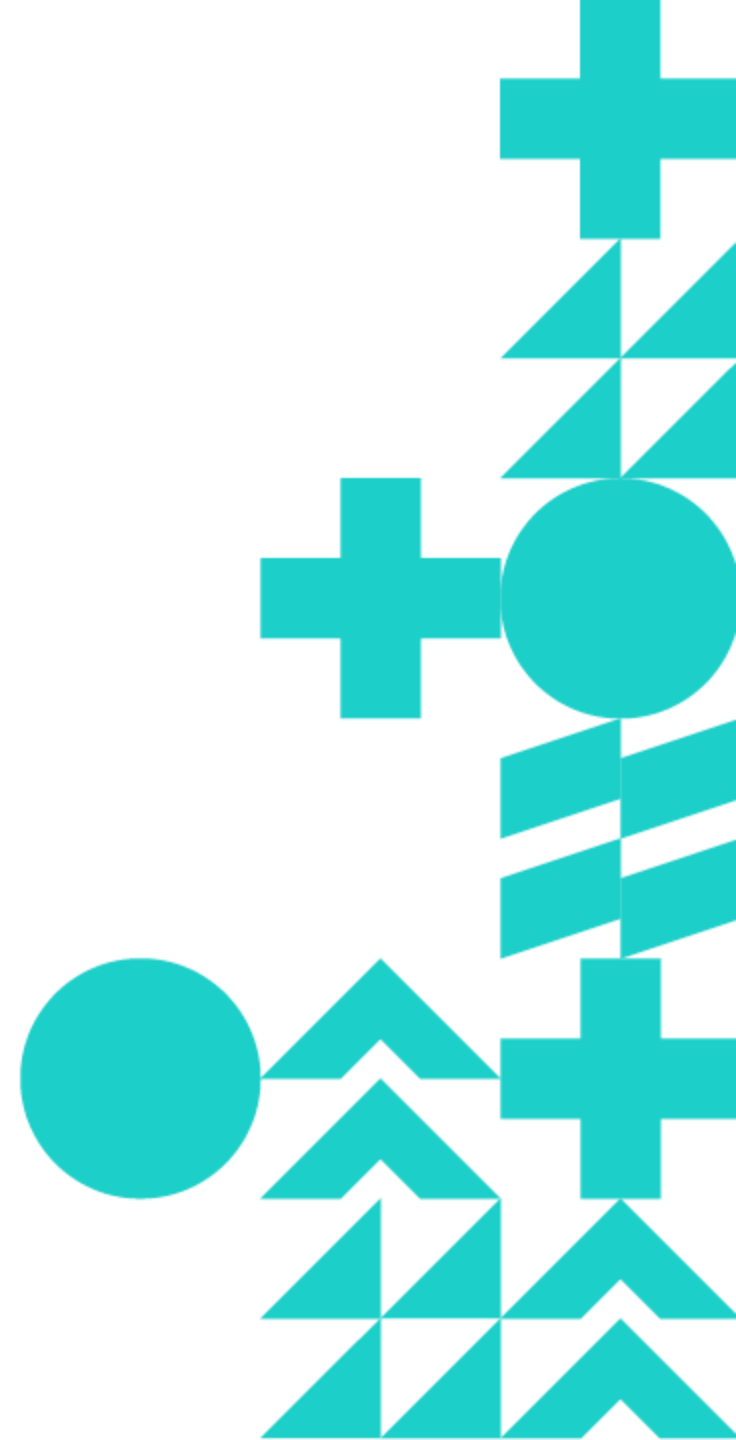


The tutor calls everyone to attention and explains that they are now enrolled on a 10-week family literacy course, paid for by the council with a qualification for anyone who would like to complete a test at the end of the course.

I glance at the recruitment flyer that is taped to the wall of the community room

“Family Learning: Have Fun Sharing Books with Your Child” it proclaims in loud, colourful letters above today’s date.

“Right” says the tutor, calling the room to attention: “To get us started, we’re going to complete our Initial Assessments and Individual Learning Plans, which should take about an hour....”





What is family learning?

# Local Authority Funded Family

## Learning is....

At its simplest, family learning refers to formal programmes – often run in schools and nurseries – that aim to:

- Engage parents in tackling the educational under-achievement of children
- Encourage family members to learn together at home
- Lead adults to pursue further learning and eventual paid employment



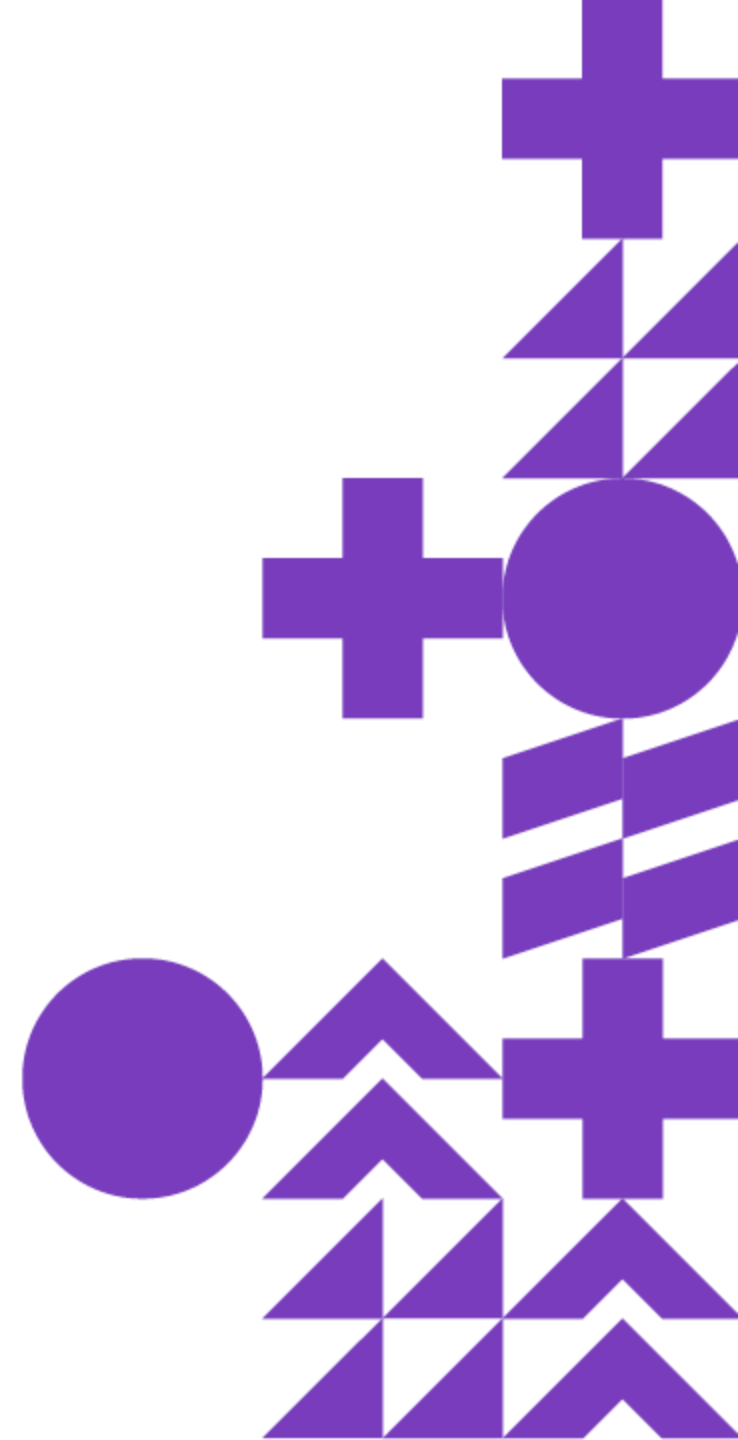
# Local Authority Funded Family

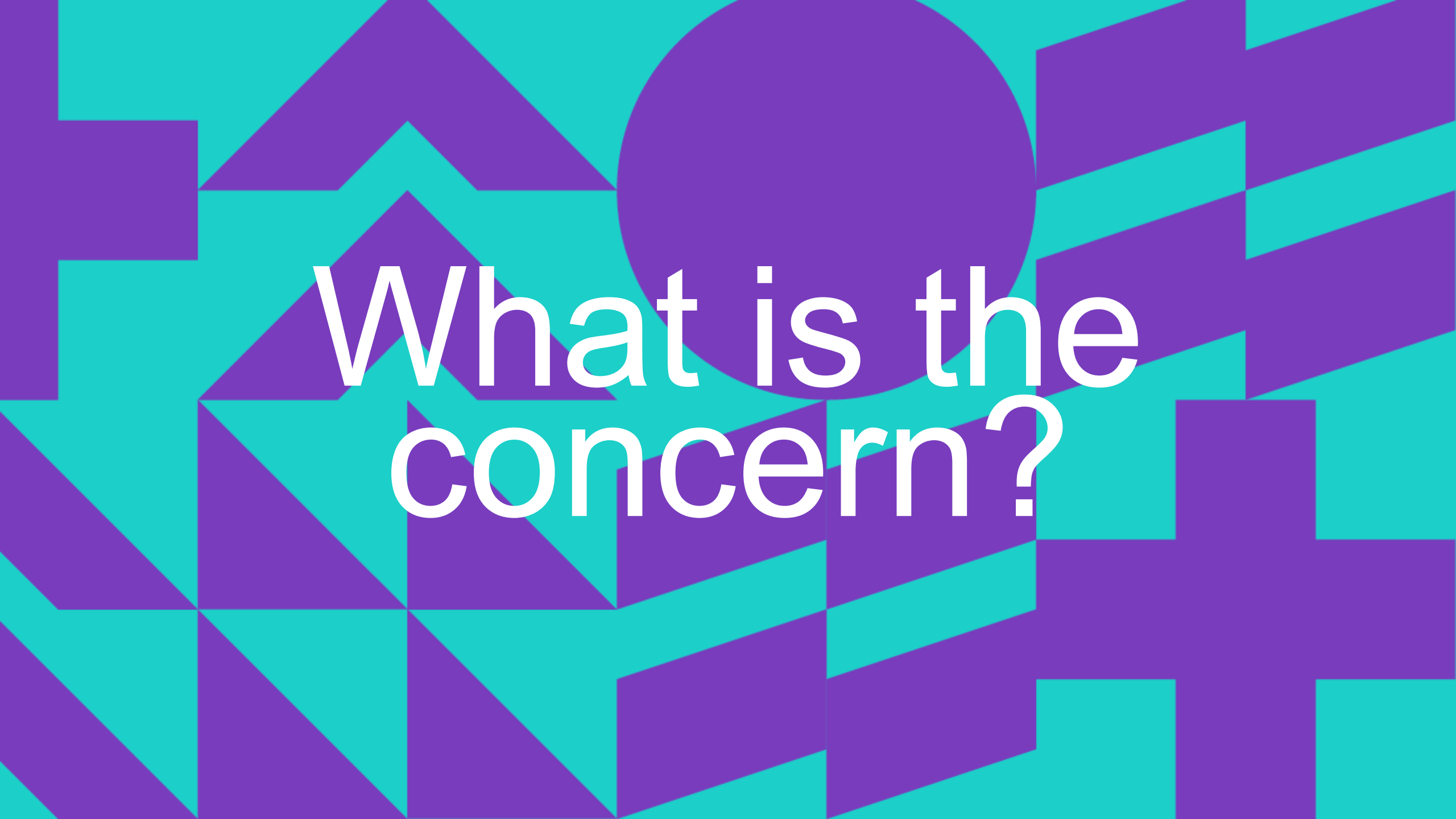
**Learning is...** I worked for a Family Learning team for a large local authority where I was tasked with delivering Family Literacy classes in primary schools across a city in North West England.

I was thrilled to join the team where I would be based in the community, working in different primary schools.

The aims of the ten-week courses I would be teaching were to:

- Help parents improve their own literacy
- Support parents to develop strategies for helping their child with reading and writing at home.



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What is the  
concern?

# Rhetoric vs. Reality

In practice, as the story I opened with showed, the rhetoric around the courses did not match the reality....

- No children in the classroom
- ‘Individual Learning Plans’ that were prepared in advance and impossible to complete
- Not telling parents about the ‘corrective’ aims of the programmes

....this was the starting point for developing an ‘authentic’ approach to family learning that would *do exactly what it said on the tin.*





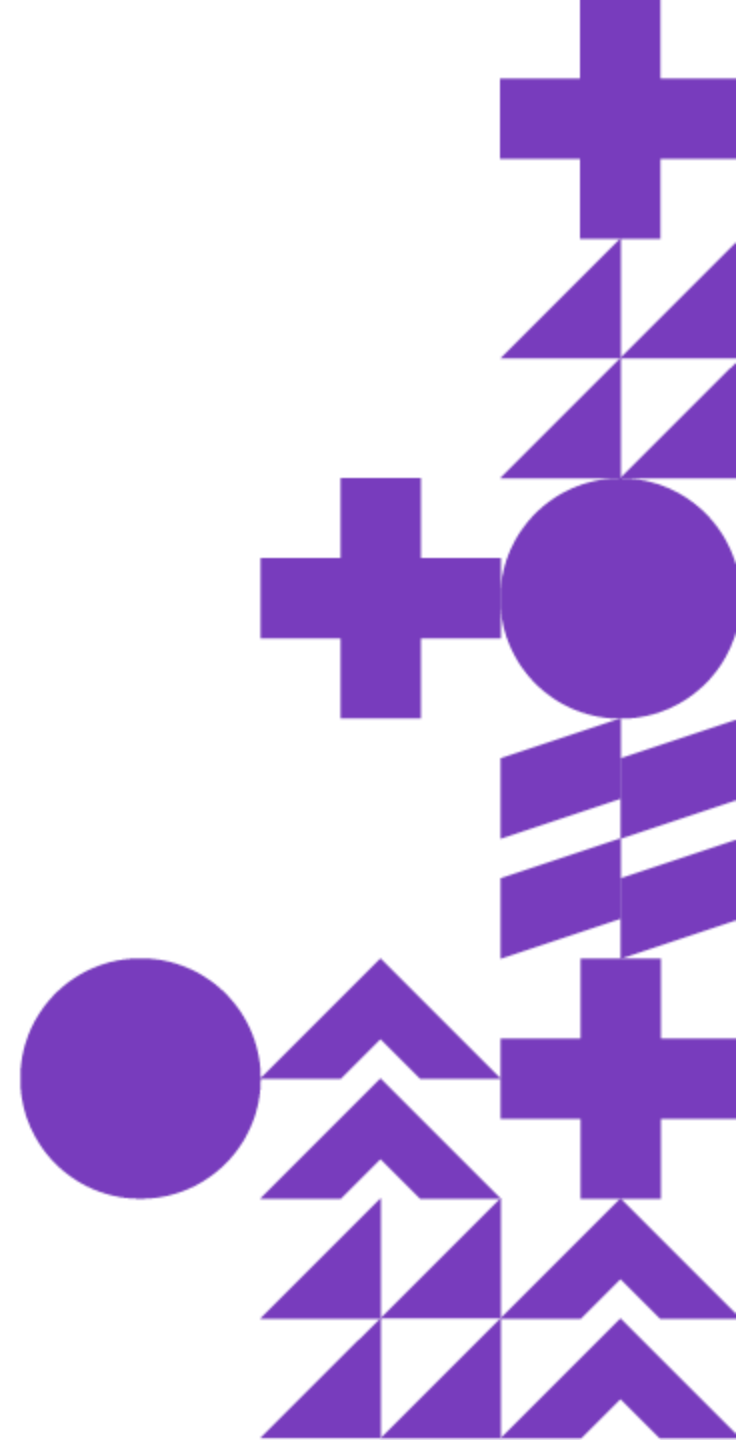
# Why might this be the case?

LA Funded Family Learning is comprised of two strands: Family English Maths and Language (FEML) and Wider Family Learning.

The former has been linked closely to the Skills for Life strategy and Skills Investment Strategy (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS] 2010), and is targeted at parents and children with basic skills needs.

The latter, is linked to widening participation, community capacity-building and neighbourhood renewal and regeneration.

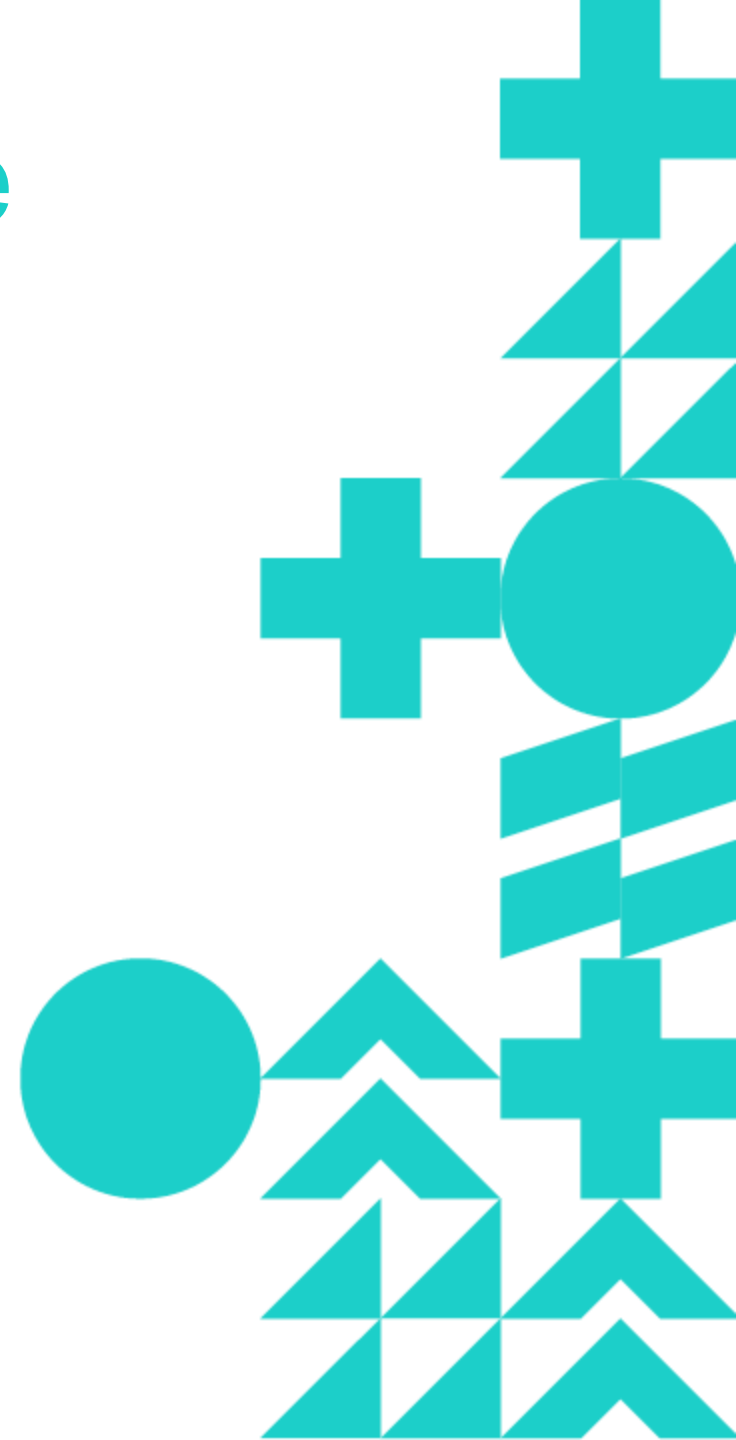
Family learning is therefore positioned at the **nexus** of a number of *social policy areas* whose focus go beyond education.



# Social Investment Perspective

So, the *traditionally private sphere of the family* has now been repositioned as a thoroughly public space.

In particular, parenting has been subject to sustained and broadening policy intervention through explicit classes aimed at *improving* parenting skills or *enhancing* home–school relations with parents as ‘active partners’ in their children’s education



# Social Investment Perspective

As we know, what goes on at home in the form of ‘at-home good parenting’ is considered to have ‘a significant positive effect on children’s achievement and adjustment’ (Desforges & Abouchar 2003).

As Gerwartz (2001, p. 369) notes, ‘good’ parents are those who are deeply embedded in their children’s education through their everyday activities.

Great people who believe in these values deliver family learning. People like us!



‘keep your view of sensitive issues private; protect yourself by avoiding interpersonal confrontation and public discussion of sensitive issues; protect others in the same way; control the situation and the task by making up your own mind and keeping it private’

(Mezirow, 1991, p.104)

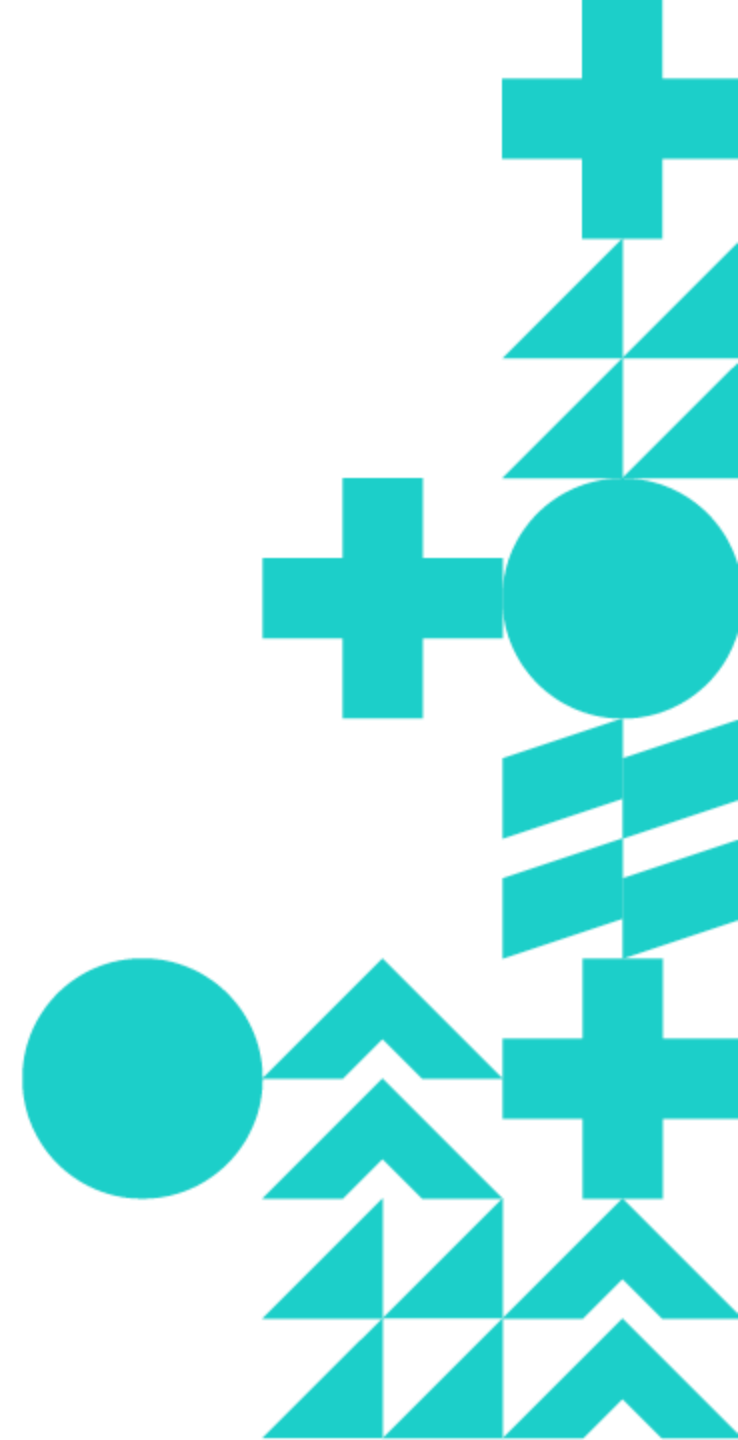


# What is AFL?

AFL is a form of Family Learning that focuses on real life activities that have meaning and purpose **and** that can be achieved as a group.

The focus shifted from decontextualised literacy tasks and tests to real life activities including

- Creating Story Sacks
- Arranging Educational Visits
- Creating classroom displays
- Writing letters to children





What did I do?

# Methodology

I used Burawoy's Extended Case Method

An immersive approach that moves through

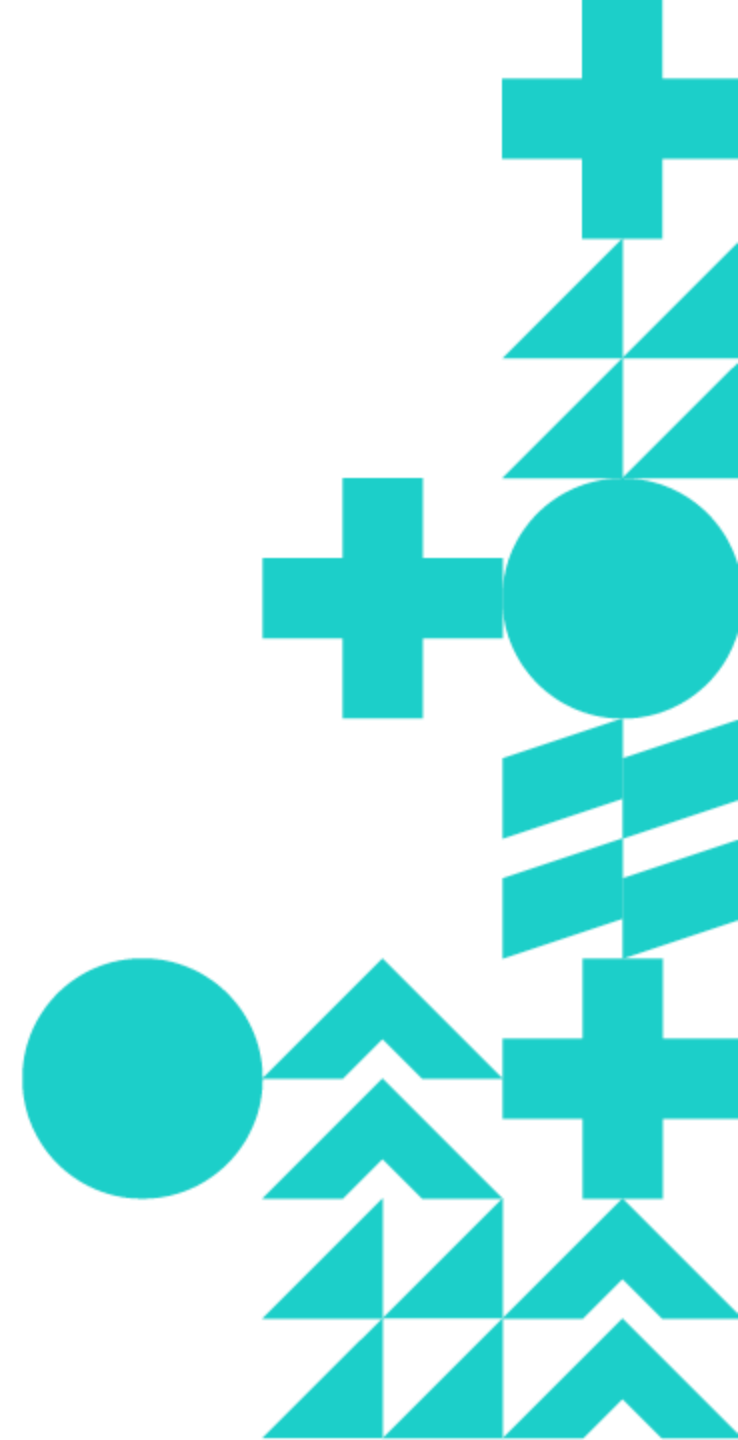
Intervention

Process

Force

Aims to relate interactions observed at the micro level to macro forces.

This helps establish how wider political, social and economic forces shape the individual's actions within Family Learning and strengthens my definition and characterisation of AFL



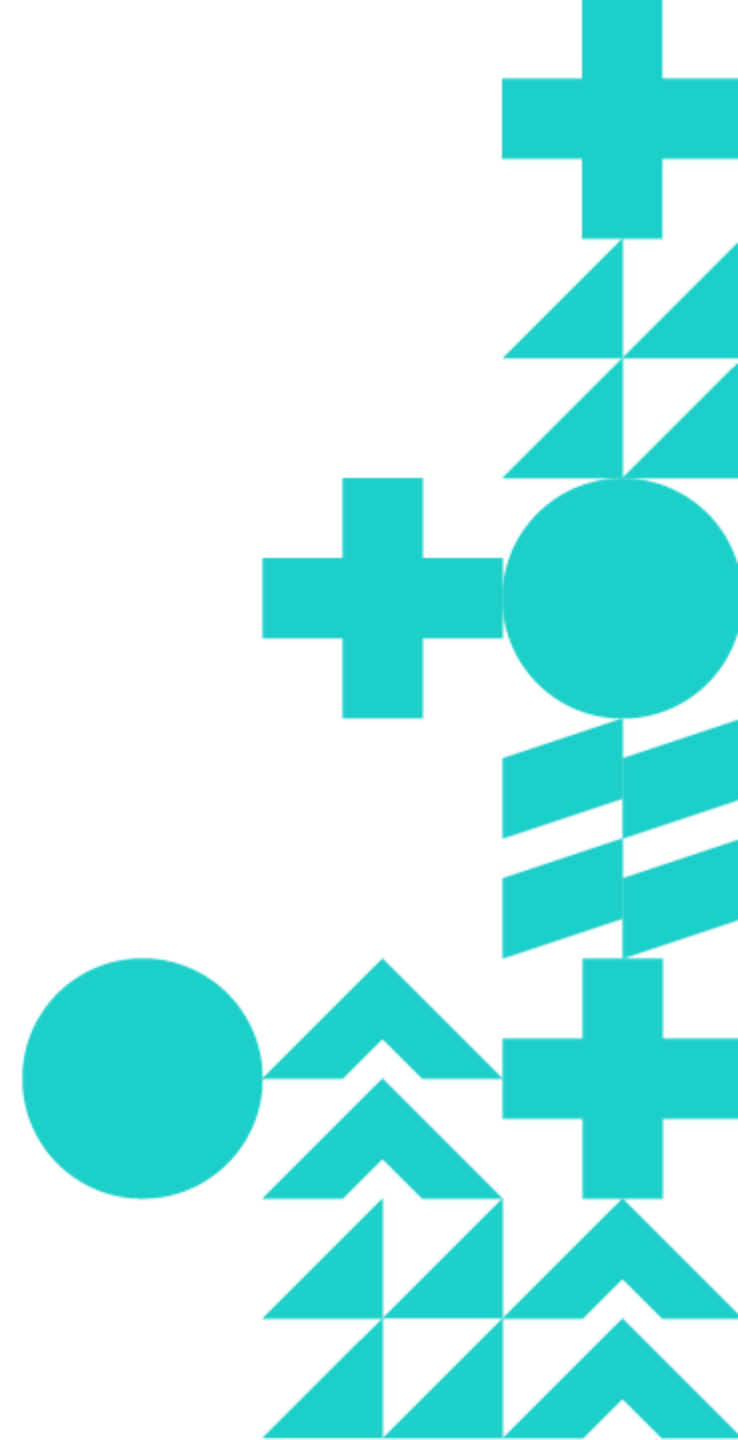
# Sample

I delivered 1 AFL course in 5 different primary schools

Each course was 10 weeks long

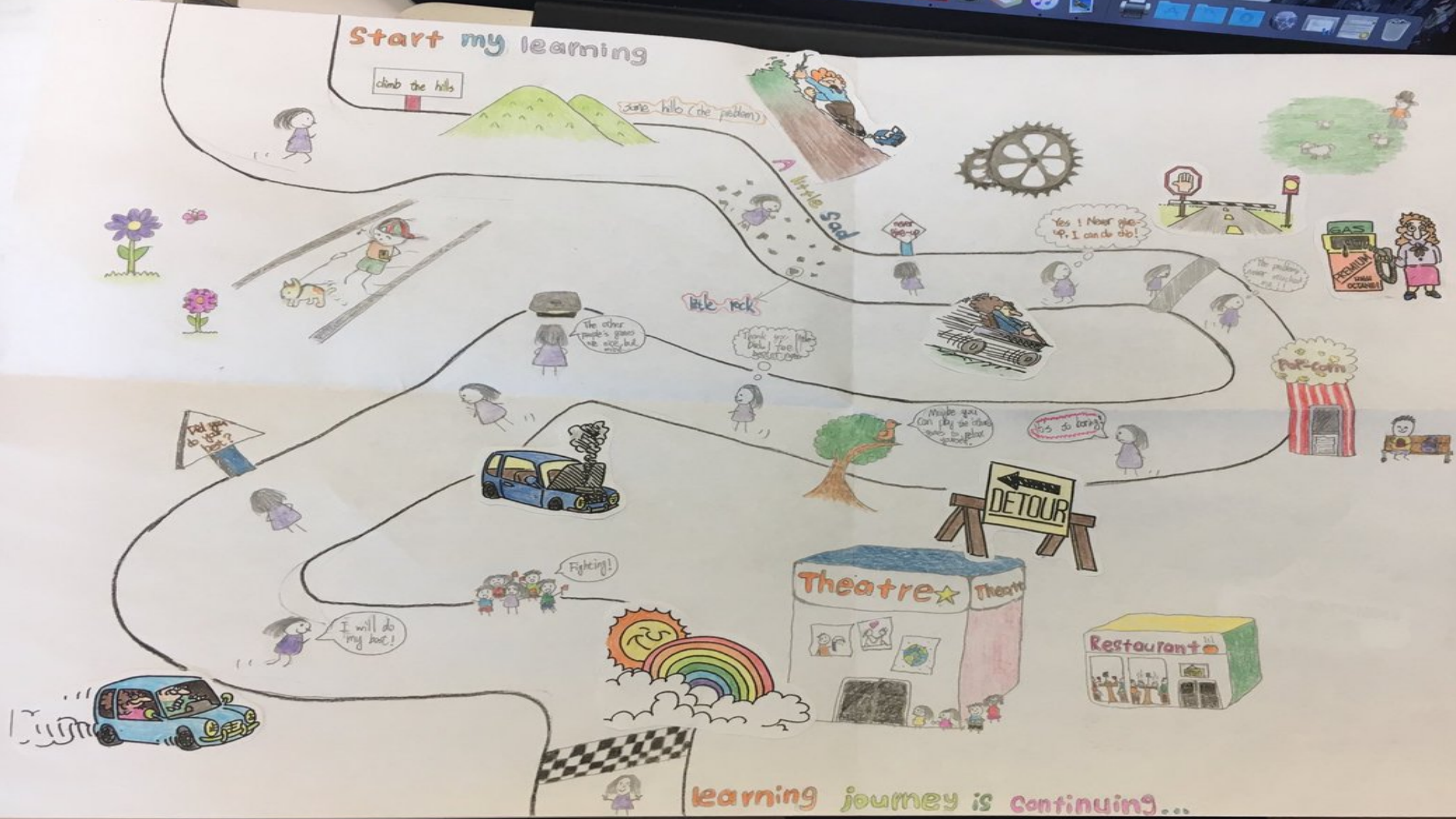
Project lasted 3 academic years

54 parents participated





# Start my learning



climb the hills

stone hills (the problem)

A little sad

near the up

Yes! Near the up, I can do it!

little rock

The other people's games are nice but...

Thank you for the basket!

Maybe you can play the other game to get a basket!

is so boring

Fighting!

I will do my best!

learning journey is continuing...

By Lisa



What did  
participants say?

Authentic Lifeworlds	Authentic Places	Authentic Agendas	Authentic Actions	Authentic Relating	Authentic Reflection	Emergent Categories
		Family Centred?				
"Out of my Shell"		"Learned Helplessness"	"What Curriculum?"	"What you're about"		
Resilience	Finance and Facilities	"Comfortable with Control"	Supportive Power	Collusion		Accountability
"Well thick me"	"Sore subject"	Hidden	"Say it how it is"	Intention		"Intervention Churn"
"Like a chav"	"Make a brew"	Power Relations	Social Trust	Tension Management		Status Anxiety
Values	Status	Critical Consciousness	Curiosity	Normative Reference Groups	Conforming	Asset Balanced



Parents were keen to understand the intentions of the tutor and the norms of AFL.

Authentic relationships can be established by creating the opportunities for sentiments to be openly communicated.

*'Cat: All of us here, we need to know what you're about before we give you the time of day. That's why at first we shut up talking when you came in the room, you know stuff like that. Cos, we thought you weren't from round here and then for me it was seeing you with the kids that's when I was like, right I know what she's about*

*Charlotte: You told me that. During the course I remember. After we did the Room on the Broom song that day, with the puppets*

*Cat: Yeah, I was letting you know that I thought you were alright cos you weren't leaving people out and were making sure everyone had a puppet. I told the other girls as well. I said she's alright'*

CR18. Cat. M







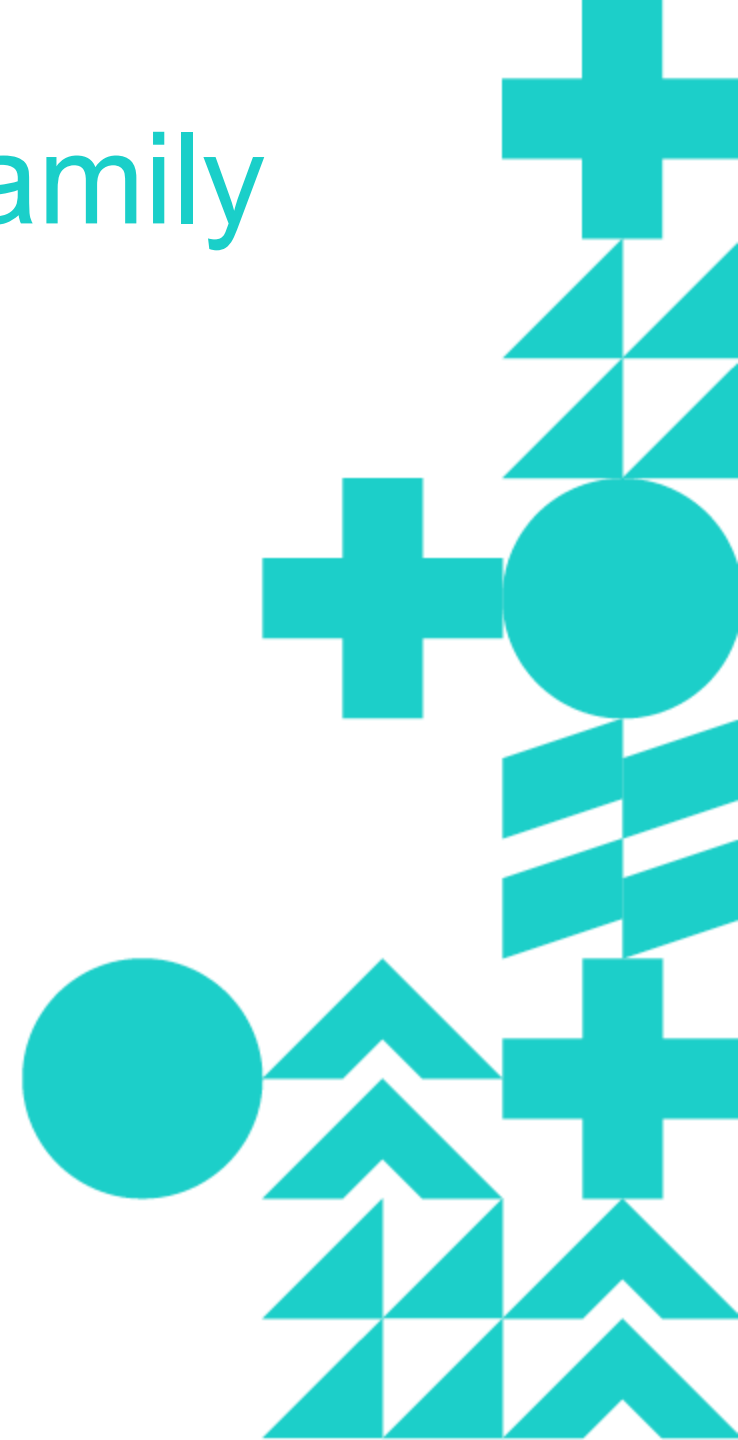
What does this  
mean?

# Characteristics of Authentic Family Learning

The data suggests there are good intentions across the complex ecology of family learning that takes place in schools

However, competing agendas cause us to drift away from authentic family learning.

To check we are on course and steering towards AFL I developed three characteristics, and a set of associated 'steering statements' that signpost the way towards AFL.

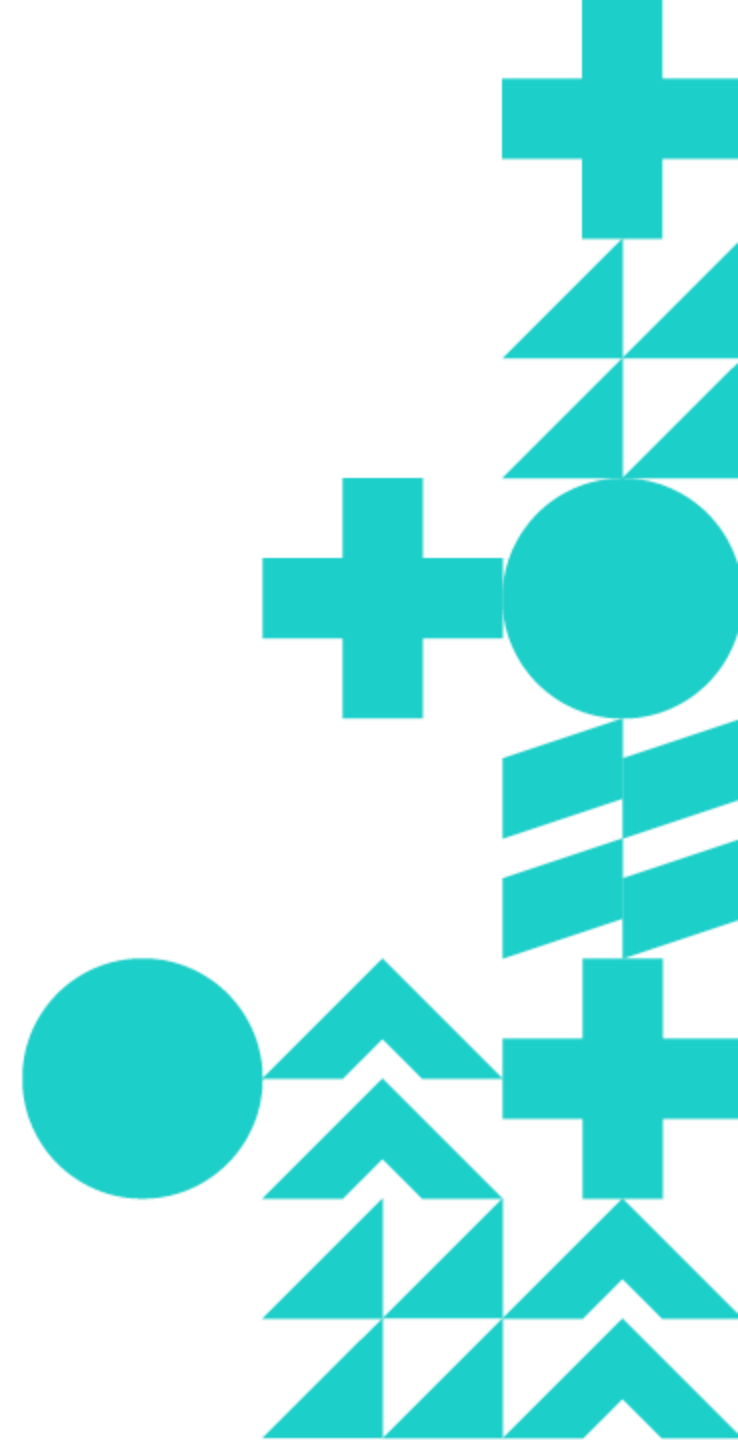


# Think Big/Act Small

Taking a serious interest in the small actions that connect and contribute to the wider context is characteristic of Authentic Family Learning .

This is an alternative to a singular focus on idealistic principals which may be impractical and unrealistic in real-world contexts.

Instead, AFL is a pragmatic approach with a focus on small, practicable actions that centre around making family learning courses easy, attractive social and timely for parents (EAST).

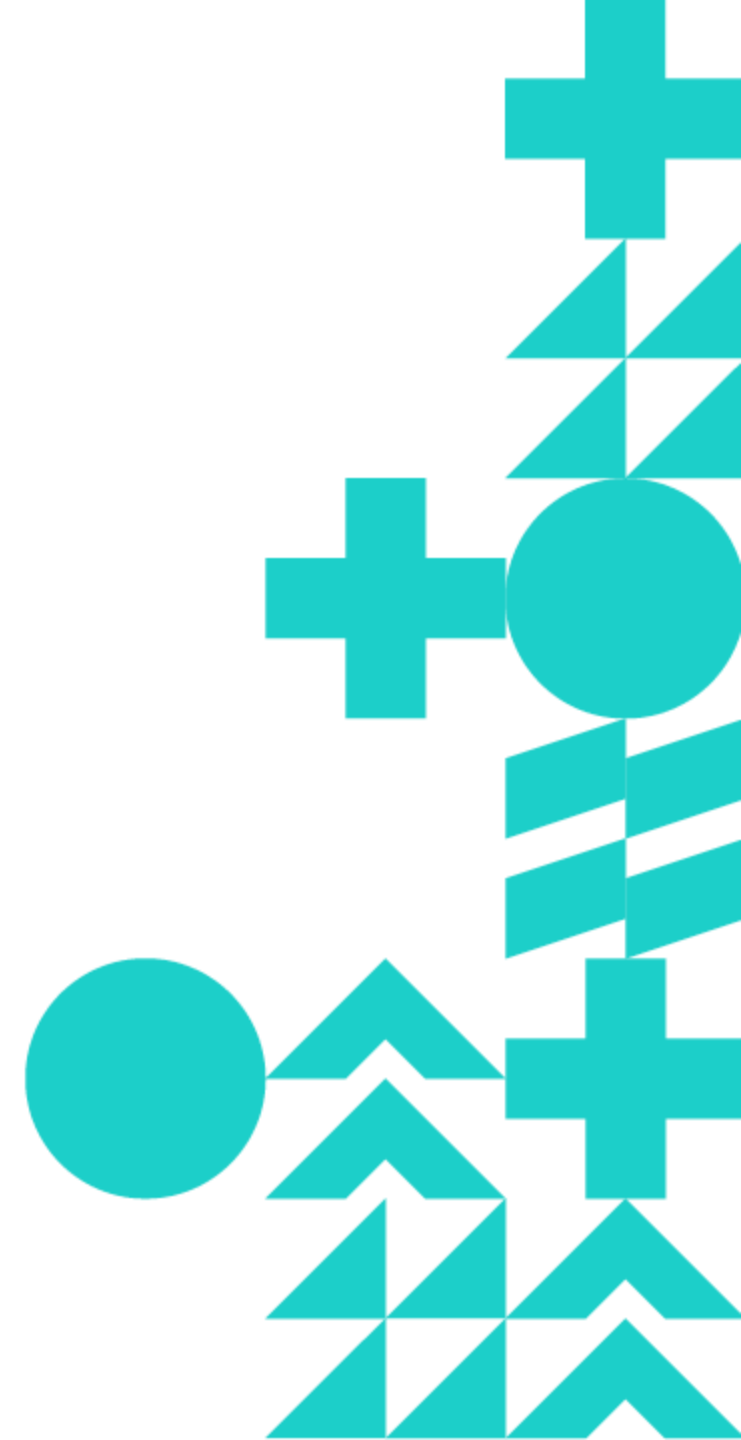




# Make It Easy

Participation in a family learning course is a straightforward endeavour that requires minimal hassle on the part of parents

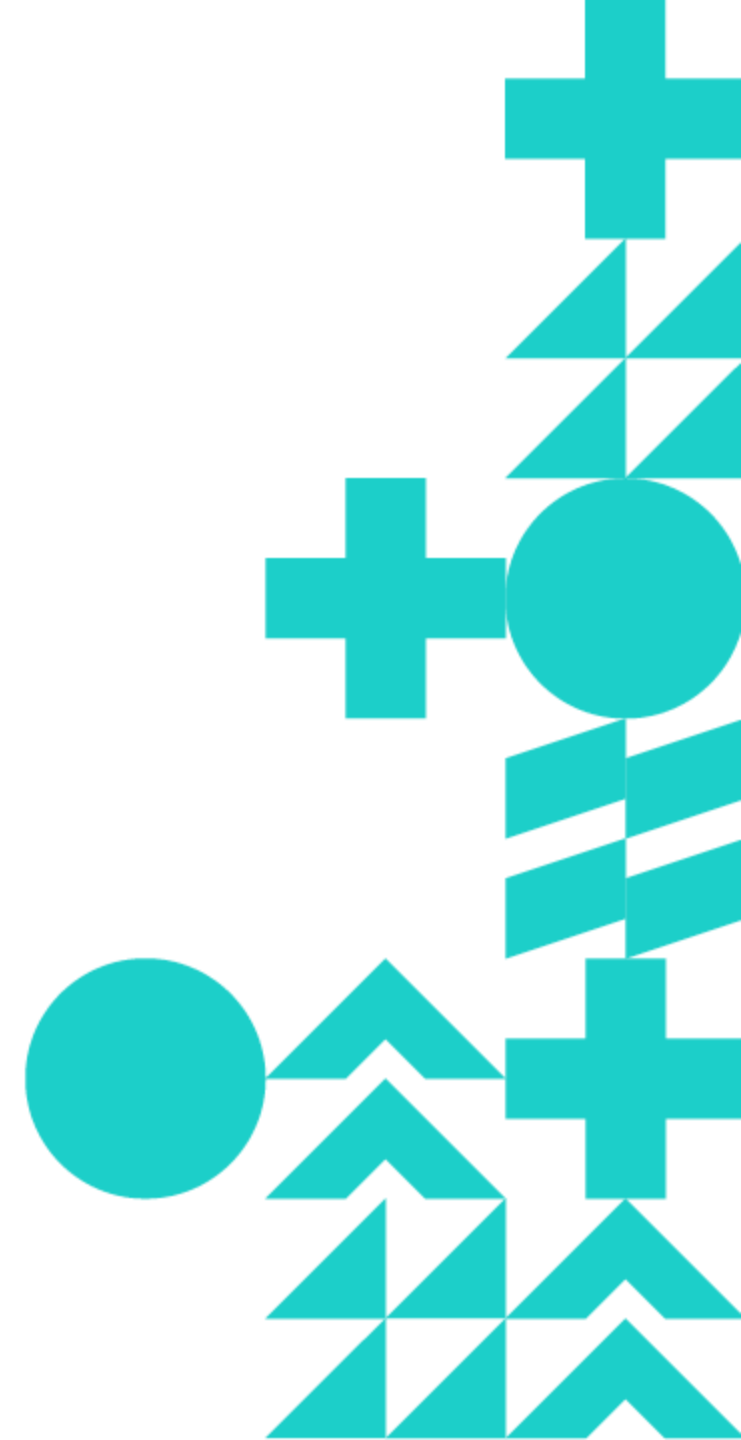
Do	Offer	See
Make it easy to find out about and enrol in the course.	Streamlined information gathering documents.	Parents who know where to go, when to go and what the course is about.



# Make It Attractive

Increase the appeal of family learning through eye-catching, accessible and personalised communication.

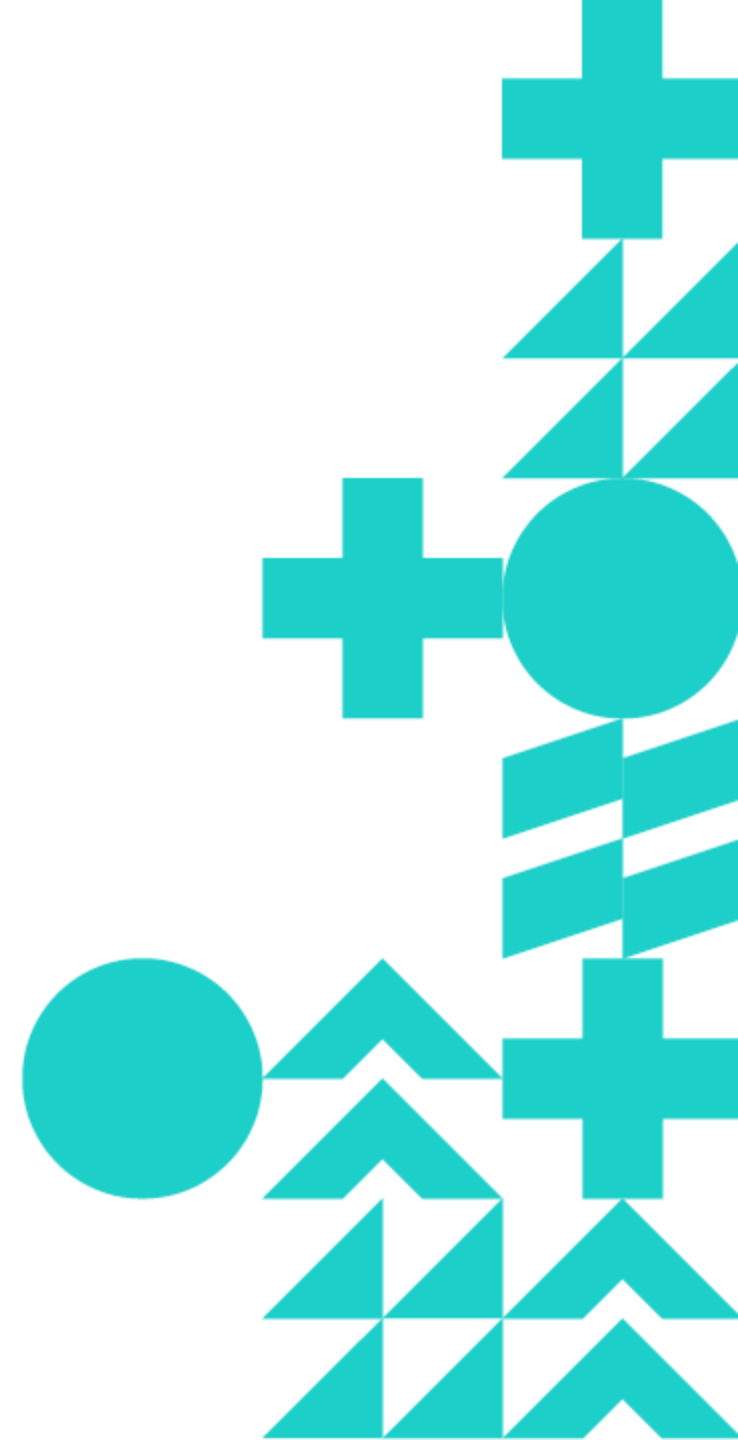
Do	Offer	See
Allocate a compelling messenger to personally invite parents to attend the course.	Eye-catching flyers with contemporary design and images that reflect the community.	Parents engaging in discussions with staff about the benefit the course would have for their family.



# Make It Social

Take a relational approach to implementing family learning and pay attention to the influence of social norms social networks.

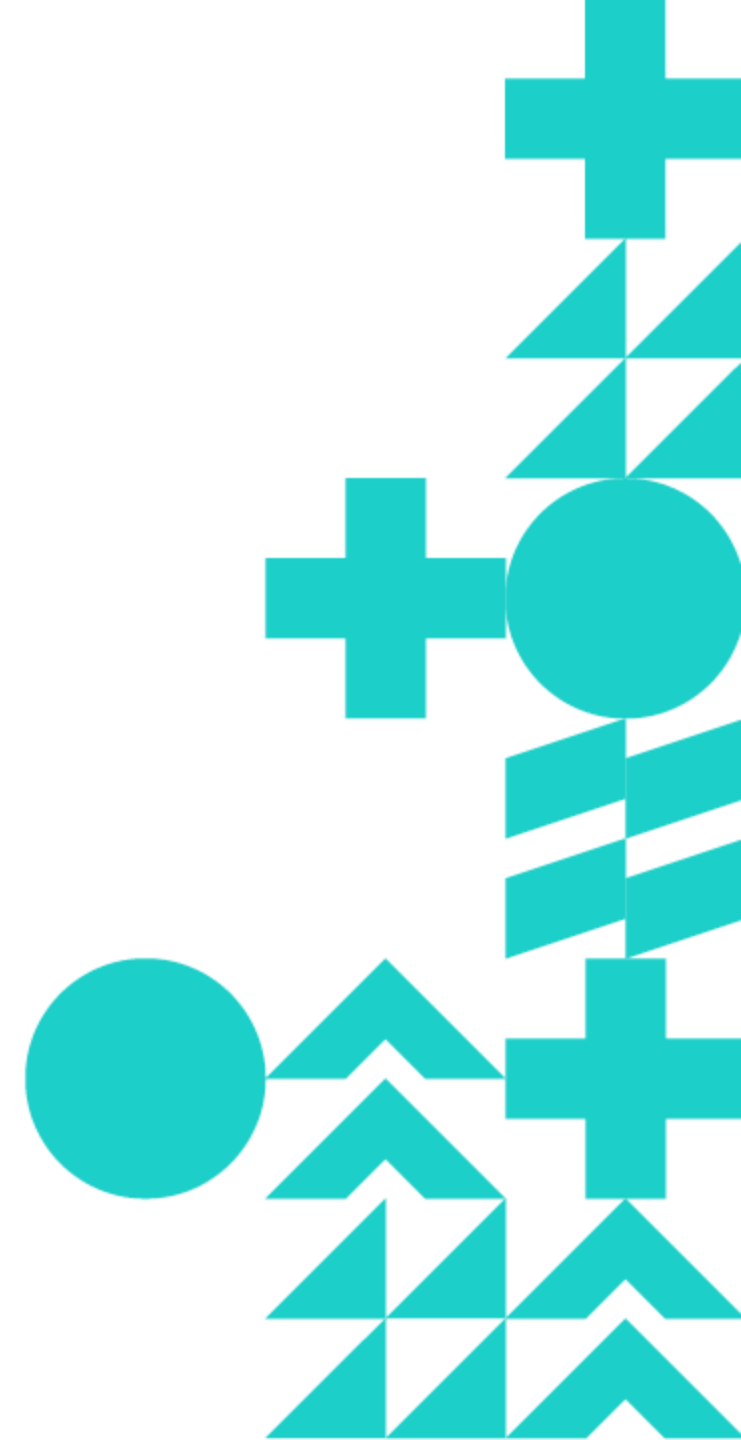
Do	Offer	See
If parents express an interest in family learning, ask for a commitment to attend for a specified period.	Refreshments and a comfortable space that allows for social interaction.	Parents mixing with one another and offering support and guidance.



# Make It Timely

A strategic approach should be taken to when announcements are made, when intentions are set, and when feedback is offered.

Do	Offer	See
Take the time to plan courses around the start of a new term or new topic	A calendar of courses that is posted online, distributed by class teachers and in displayed in public spaces.	Parents needing fewer prompts and parents starting to independently sign up for courses.





# Supportive Power

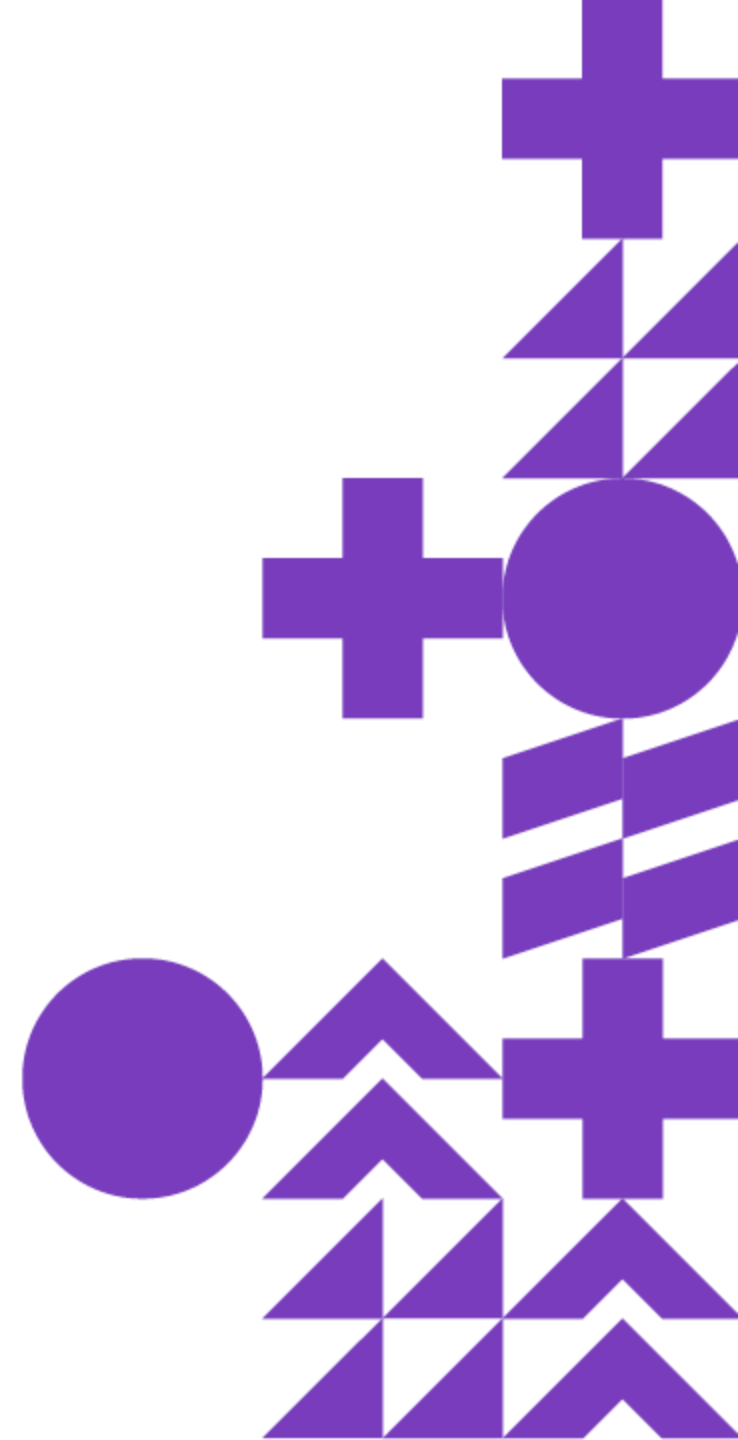
# Supportive Power

AFL elevates the role of the practitioner. Acknowledging their skill and effort

It suggests away from learner centred rhetoric towards balanced teaching practices.

Wainwright and Marandet's (2013, p. 504) suggest that family learning is accomplished through 'supportive power' whereby the projects of state governance are embodied in the helpful and nurturing relationships between tutors and parents.

This can be seen as the force of governmentality at work, whereby family learning becomes a tool for encouraging individuals to engage in programmes that build individual responsibility and self-improvement.



# Good as Gold or Stupid as Mud?

Additionally, in the academic literature, family learning programmes have been interpreted in different ways.

For example, Prins, Willson Toso, and Schafft (2009) articulate their **empowering impacts**, especially in helping women in poverty to receive social support that in turn enhances their psychosocial well-being.

In contrast, more critical evaluations by Pitt (2002), Sparks (2001), Tett (2001) and Smythe and Isserlis (2004) relay the more **coercive and regulatory dimensions** of family learning for variously troubling the role and place of parents/mothers in contemporary society.



# Carry on regardless...

Both readings are important and have their place.

As Vincent and Warren (1998, 191) point out family learning is neither wholly 'oppressive' nor wholly 'liberating'.

AFL has helped me understand that 'it is only by recognising and holding these opposing readings in tension, that an analysis can be formed which appreciates both strengths and weaknesses'.

