

At home with literacy:

A study of family
literacy practices



NALA

National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

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The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) was established in 1980 and is an independent membership organisation, concerned with developing policy, advocacy, research and offering advisory services in adult literacy work in Ireland. NALA has campaigned for the recognition of, and response to, the adult literacy issue in Ireland.

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Executive summary

Literacy is a vital resource for families who experience inequality through education disadvantage and who seek to avail of resources to build their literacy wealth. Family literacy programmes, which build family literacy wealth, can play a significant role in promoting economic and social equality. Lamb et al (2009) argue that family programmes aim to encourage family members to learn together and programmes have “explicit outcomes for adults and children.” Consequently, family literacy is a powerful tool for building an interest in learning and developing lifelong learners” (Lamb et al, 2009:p.14).

It can be argued that current approaches to literacy do not, despite clear statements about the importance of the family, focus on the family or the home as a location for improving literacy skills and increasing literacy wealth for adults and children alike. The primary aim of this research was to talk to families in order to gain an insight into, and a greater understanding of their literacy wealth and the full range of family literacy practices in the home.

Methodology

The research adopted a largely quantitative approach. This involved the administration of a questionnaire which included demographic data including age, gender educational attainment and employment status. The focus however was on literacy practices in the home including oral and visual practices, numeracy practices, reading and writing practices, new technologies and community and leisure activities. A number of follow up interviews were also conducted with some of the participants. Verbal and written consent was sought from the families who participated in the research. The quantitative data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) computer software programme.

Sample profile

The research was carried out in four projects in Ireland providing family literacy services. The research targeted families that were living in designated areas of disadvantage in both

rural and urban settings. Four geographical areas were selected for inclusion in the study:

- An inner city area;
- A suburban area;
- A Midlands rural town; and
- A small rural community in the West.

Forty one families (ten from three areas and eleven from one area) were recruited into the research. The vast majority of the participants were female 88% and nearly half of the sample (49%) were aged 45+ years. The majority of the participants were early school leavers and all participants had completed primary school. Analysis of the data also shows that 22% of the participants have one child, 30% have two children, 12% have three children, 12% have four children and 24% of the participants have five or more children.

Summary of findings

Demographic

The majority of the participants were women and aged 35 years of age or over. Nearly half are currently working in the home. Of those who are working outside the home, the same percentage (15%) are working for pay as are currently employed in a labour market scheme. Education levels varied with 29% of respondents having primary level, 28% having lower secondary level educational qualifications and 15% having upper secondary level education. Only 15% had technical or vocational education and 8% had third level qualifications.

Community involvement

When asked about their involvement and use of community facilities 46% of respondents indicated that they are not a member of any community group or club, 44% said they are and 10% stated they were not aware of any in their area. 95% of the respondents indicated that they are registered to vote. 88% replied that they do plan to vote (at the time in the

2009 local elections), 10% stated no they would not vote, and 2.5% said they were not sure.

Respondents in this survey overwhelmingly rated their literacy skills as good and the gap between that and their average and poor rating is quite big. In addition, while respondents rate their spouses' and child's skills as predominantly good, the figures would suggest that, in their opinion, the average and poor ratings are higher than their own.

Literacy practices

The data in this survey illustrated the variety of family literacy practices that are engaged with on a daily and weekly basis, including oral and aural literacy practices, numeracy practices, reading and writing practice, technology literacy practices and leisure activities. The importance of technology was highlighted with mobile phones, radios, MP3 players and television being used daily. Use of computers and the internet was not as high. Dealing with family finances was the most frequent literacy activity using numeracy. It is particularly relevant that the most frequent reading and writing practice was helping children with their homework. Texting was the next most popular reading and writing activity.

Recommendations

This research highlighted the need to develop programmes that use the wealth-based approach to family literacy, and build upon the range of competencies that people use in their everyday lives at home and in their communities. This includes developing a refreshed adult literacy strategy, which includes family literacy and takes account of the following:

- Developing and supporting strategies to promote partnerships between families, schools, community and voluntary organisations and other stakeholders as part of improving access to and provision of family literacy programmes.
- Providing a budget for a DEIS family literacy initiative to cover all disadvantaged families, and as a first step in this regard, supporting family learning initiatives in all schools in designated areas of disadvantage.
- Establishing the extent to which education and training programmes and labour market schemes effectively promote literacy attainment and whether there are opportunities to build in family literacy approaches to these schemes.

- Developing family literacy approaches that incorporate multi-media and new technologies to promote engagement in family literacy programmes.
- Providing support for family literacy programme providers to incorporate multi-media and new technologies into their programmes.

Introduction

Family literacy programmes, which seek to build family literacy wealth, can play a significant role in promoting economic and social equality. Literacy is an important asset required by all members of all families for everyday living. Taylor (1997) puts the proposition clearly when she says, "the seeds of school failure are planted in the home, and we cannot hope to uproot the problem by working only with schools" (Taylor, 1997, p.2). Research shows the impact of school literacy on home life, but in contrast to this home literacy practices do not have the same impact on school literacy (Cairney & Ruge, 1995).

To date, research has shown the benefits to the individual, the family, the community and society of engaging in family literacy programmes (Lamb et al, 2009; Auerbach, 1997; Taylor, 1997; Cairney & Ruge, 1995). Literacy, is framed and acquired through changing social practices and processes in all social institutions, and one important institution is the family. The family in all its shapes and forms is an important space for the acquisition of literacy assets and is therefore key to our literacy development. Yet, we currently know very little about family literacy practices as they happen in the home.

In light of this, this research set out to talk to families about their literacy practices in order to gain an insight into their literacy wealth and the full range of family literacy practices in the home. It provides an overview of the most frequent daily and weekly literacy activities of respondents and their spouses under the following categories of literacy practices:

- Oral and visual practices;
- Numeracy practices;
- Reading and writing practices;
- New technology practices; and
- Leisure activities.

Family literacy in Ireland

One of the most significant social institutions in modern Ireland is the family. The Irish constitution contains two sections of note in this regard. Article 41 defines the family as being indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State.¹

Article 42.1 states that

the State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children (Bunreacht na hEireann. 2009, Article 41.1).

Despite this acknowledgement, significant levels of state funding continues to be directed at supporting learning in schools, rather than in the home (NALA, 2009: p.5). Yet as the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) highlight, children's literacy levels in Ireland (in terms of reading ability) are relatively good, but "these have not changed for almost thirty years" (NESF, 2009, p.1). This finding, while in relation to children rather than adults, is very much in keeping with the findings from the 1997 the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) which examined adult literacy in Ireland under prose, documentary and quantitative domains. The IALS (1997) results show about 25% of the Irish population, around 500,000 people scored at the lowest level 1 (IALS1) of a five level scale while another 30% were at level 2 (IALS2) meaning they could only cope with very simple material. This average score put Ireland second from the bottom among the twenty-two countries.

The IALS also drew a number of conclusions regarding literacy in everyday life. It highlighted that some kinds of literacy practices are engaged in by almost all of the population while other kinds of involvement in literacy activity are not nearly as widespread. For example, one fifth indicated that they never read a book, and over three fifths never borrow books from a public library. Likewise when asked about their mathematical skills, over 20% of the IALS respondents said that their skills were moderate or poor. The IALS

¹ Bunreacht na hEireann. Article 41.2 *"The State recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptibly rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law"*.

also found that involvement in one kind of literacy activity tends to be associated with involvement in other kinds of literacy activities. For example, being involved in literacy activities is associated with involvement in non literacy activities including attending sporting events, plays, concerts as well as participation in community organisations. On the other hand the IALS findings demonstrate that the amount of television viewing is negatively associated with all literacy and non literacy activities. The IALS concluded that non literacy pursuits do not necessarily compete with literacy activities.

In 2000, the Department of Education and Science (DES) published the White Paper on Adult Education, which highlighted adult literacy as a top priority for government educational policy and focused attention on second chance and further education. Despite these commitments Dorgan points out that between the years 2000 and 2006 "per capita outlays on adult literacy students declined by 14%" (Dorgan, 2009, p.17).² There are few school based family learning programmes in the country, although there are a range of other type of supports such as Home School Liaison Scheme (HSLs). The HSLs is a major mainstream preventative strategy targeted at pupils at risk of not reaching their potential in the education system because of background characteristics which tend to affect adversely pupil attainment and school retention.

The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) - an Action Plan for Educational Inclusion - was launched by the DES in 2005 to promote educational inclusion. The DEIS initiative is designed to ensure that the most disadvantaged schools benefit from a comprehensive package of supports, while ensuring that others continue to get support in line with the level of disadvantage among their pupils. NALA (2009) highlights that DEIS supports, while geared to benefit the most disadvantaged schools, also aim to develop family literacy initiatives, and in "2009, there are 19 family literacy projects at a cost of €200,000" (NALA, 2009, p.4).

Literacy tuition is provided in local literacy schemes, co-ordinated by Adult Literacy Organisers and resourced through Vocational Education Committees (VECs) all over Ireland. Literacy tuition takes place within a number of adult education programmes which target

² In 2006 the Oireachtas Committee on Education and Science endorsed the priority status of literacy and recommended a target of reducing the numbers with low literacy (deemed to be those in IALS1) by half in fifteen years. The National Action Plan for Social Inclusion (NAPSINC) 2007-13 recommended the reduction in the number of adults with 'restricted literacy' (meaning IALS1) to between 10% and 15% of the population by 2016.

particular groups, for example, Youthreach Centres, Centres for the Unemployed, Prisons, Community Training Centres. According to Dorgan (2009, p. 16) participation in VEC adult literacy services has increased from 5,000 students in 1998 to 35,000 in 2005. Literacy training is also an element in a number of second chance-type education schemes operated by the Department of Education and Science (DES). The Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment also funds work-based literacy training operated mainly through FÁS. In 2008, 3,551 participants engaged in mainly short family literacy programmes, or 7% of the total number of adult literacy students (NALA, 2009:p.4).

Family literacy programmes are primarily funded under the adult literacy budget. The adult literacy budget in 2008 was €30 million, which amounts to 0.3% of the €9.3 billion budget for education. So relatively, funding for literacy provision is insignificant in the overall education budget, and family literacy is a tiny proportion of this. This is despite the fact that there is a growing understanding internationally that by encouraging both informal and formal learning and by giving support to learning at home, family literacy approaches help literacy and numeracy learning for all age groups (NALA, 2009, p.5).

This research seeks to build our understanding of family literacy practices in the home, so that we can have a clearer picture of the assets that are used in everyday lives in the home that can be built upon to improve literacy levels in Ireland.

Methodology

Introduction

This research aimed to generate an understanding of current family literacy practices in the home in Ireland. Therefore the research strategy was designed to gather detailed information as to the literacy practices among a range of families in a variety of settings.

To achieve this four sites were selected on the basis of their work on family literacy issues, their ability to become involved in the project and the fact that they characterised the different geographical and community settings in Ireland. Thus, one inner city project was included, one rural setting, one rural-urban setting and one city-suburb setting. Survey data was collected through:

- I. An interview questionnaire distributed through the four sites. Ten families in three of the sites and eleven families in one site were selected;
- II. Follow up in-depth interviews with seven participants from each site were then conducted to explore in more detail trends with regard to family literacy practices.

Recruitment procedures

In each of the sites workers in literacy and community projects were recruited as field workers to invite ten families to participate in the research, assist participants to complete the survey questionnaire, conduct in-depth interviews with participants who had returned questionnaires; and provide information about their projects' aims and activities. Each of the field workers identified ten families who signed consent forms and agreed to participate in the project.

Data collection methods

The research adopted a largely quantitative approach. This involved the administration of a questionnaire which included demographic data including age, gender educational attainment and employment status. The focus however was on literacy practices in the home including oral and visual practices, numeracy practices, reading and writing practices, new technologies and community and leisure activities. A number of follow up interviews

were also conducted with some of the participants. The quantitative data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) computer software programme.

The questionnaire was designed in four sections to gather information on:

- Respondents background information including demographic information, school experiences, educational attainment and employment history;
- Their involvement in their community and involvement in local groups such as sports and involvement in school based activities. In addition respondents were asked about their voting behaviour;
- Their family's literacy practices on a daily, weekly and monthly level. Home literacy practice activities included written word, listening, new technologies and helping children with homework; and
- The respondents level of confidence with regard to both formal and informal use of 'literacies' in their day to day lives.

The questionnaire was piloted in two of the sites and feedback was incorporated to improve it. It took approximately one hour to complete the questionnaire. Forty-one questionnaires were completed and returned. These questionnaires were collated and analysed. The results are contained in chapter four of this report. Follow up interviews were then conducted with a small number of participants, selected from the original forty-one participants. Selection was based on the respondents willingness to participate in the interview. The interview schedule followed the structure of the questionnaire outlined above. These interviews were designed to gather more detailed information to illustrate the literacy practices in families. Twenty-eight interviews were conducted. The interviews illustrated in some detail the range of literacy practices and help to build a greater understanding of what is required to improve literacy levels in Ireland.

Ethical considerations

The principle of informed consent was applied during the course of the research and no questionnaire was administered or interview conducted without the written and verbal consent of the participants. Time was spent with each participant explaining the nature of the research and the respondents were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary and therefore they could refuse to take part. They were also informed that if at any stage of the research they wanted to withdraw or discontinue they were free to do so. All information provided by the participants was kept confidential and they received assurances that their names or any other identifiers would not be mentioned in the distribution of the findings.

Study limitations

The study is a limited one, which was designed to provide an illustration of the literacy practices of forty-one families in four locations that are participating in family literacy projects. Families that are not participating in such projects were not included. Participants in this study were recruited through specific literacy projects and through projects based in their communities. One limitation to the study in this regard was the omission of a question to distinguish respondents' definition of community involvement from their involvement in literacy projects that were based in the community.

In addition, the questionnaire is a self-reporting exercise and families were not observed in the home. This study therefore is an initial scoping exercise to give information as to the use of family literacy resources and practices in the home.

Summary

This study was designed as an initial survey of family literacy practices among those who are participating in literacy programmes. It was designed to gather as much information as possible to illustrate the range of family literacy skills used by people on a daily, weekly and monthly basis and to explore patterns with regard to specific oral and visual, numeracy, reading and writing and information technology literacy practices.

Literature Review

Defining family literacy

The term 'family literacy' was introduced as a concept by Taylor (1983) in a study of the development of literacy and language at home in the USA. Since then the term family literacy has been used to describe literacy development work that focuses on how literacy is developed at home, and education courses that support and develop this dimension of literacy development. Taylor (1997) argues that "the accumulated ways of knowing and funds of knowledge of family members – their local literacies – are complexly and intricately woven into their daily lives" (Taylor 1997:p3). In other words the concern should not just be about formal schooling, but about taking into consideration the cultural and language resources of the families who participate in family literacy programmes. These research findings led her to conclude that there was a need for recognition of the importance and diversity of literacy activities in everyday life through daily practices within families and communities. It was the focus on daily activities and learning within families and communities that was new (Taylor, 1997; 1983).

NALA (2004) states the term family literacy is now broadly used to describe many literacy activities which involve more than one generation and that the family literacy approach also describes "an awareness of learners in a family and community context" (NALA,2004:p25). International studies that document literacy practices within homes and communities also recognise family literacy as diverse and complex social practice rooted in broader social goals and cultural practices (Lamb et al, 2009; Brooks et al, 1997;Cairney et al, 1995). Understanding family literacy as social practice illuminates the way in which power relations, including those having to do with social class, in that some literacy practices carry more weight or cultural capital than others.

Socio-economic status is a factor that can critically affect whose 'literacy' counts. Some are more powerful and dominant, while others are devalued and constrained (Barton, 1997; Taylor, 1997; Freire & Macedo 1987). Research shows that children from disadvantaged areas are a poor fit for the dominant literacies that the schools value, recognize and uphold as neutral. Therefore, to redress such inequities, literacy needs to be understood in its socio-political context, and the practice of family literacy education should be informed by inclusive and critical pedagogies (Tett, 2000; Cregan, 1997). However, research also shows

that parental engagement in children's education at all stages has a positive affect on a child's academic performance. As a result there is a growing understanding of the need to support parents who wish to improve their own literacy skills and confidence (Fan & Chen, 2001; Feinstein & Symons 1999). Parental involvement in a child's learning has more of an impact on a child's educational outcomes than any other demographic measure, including social class or level of parental income. Therefore, it can be argued that this conclusion offers potential opportunities to break intergenerational cycles of underachievement by working with families to best support their child's learning (Feinstein & Symons, 1999).

Family literacy approaches

According to Taylor (1997) family literacy programmes help parents and carers to understand and develop their role as their children's first educators, improve their own confidence and skills, support their language and literacy learning and discover more about how children and adults learn. Lamb, et al (2009) show that family programmes aim to encourage family members to learn together and programmes have "explicit outcomes for adults and children" (Lamb et al, 2009:p14).

Family literacy approaches should include opportunities for intergenerational learning and, wherever possible, lead both adults and children to pursue further learning. Wider family learning programmes are those specifically designed to enable adults and children to learn together or those programmes that enable parents and/or carers to learn how to support their children's learning. They aim to develop the skills or knowledge of both the adult and child participants, to help parents and/or carers to be more active in the support of their children's learning and development, and to understand the impact of that support.

Family learning draws on a number of traditions including adult literacy, early learning, community development, parenting, parental involvement, school improvement and supporting children's learning. Family learning pedagogical approach can be summarised as one that:

- promotes the family as a learning environment;
- builds on home culture and experience;

- encourages participatory learning;
- promotes learning as a change in or affirmation of skills, attitude and knowledge;
- promotes family relationships as supporting well-being and readiness to learn;
- promotes a culture of aspiration in adults and children; and
- gives opportunities and builds confidence to try out new skills and ideas (Lamb et al, 2009:p5).

An evaluation of the Manukau Family Literacy Programme in New Zealand, highlights the valuable changes that occur from participation in family literacy programmes and state that often these changes have occurred because of new understandings of educational processes. Therefore, family literacy approaches can ensure that educational processes are broadened enough to use the full range of contexts for learning and build on the full range of assets, including those literacy assets in families. The achievements associated with such a pedagogical approach included increased educational attainment and progression to further education, greater self-confidence of individuals who were more confident in expressing themselves and better relationships between parents and children (Bensemen, 2005).

The benefits of family literacy approaches

Research has highlighted the implications of the home learning environment for instruction in reading and outcomes in formal schooling. In their study of family literacy activities "*Family Literacy Works*" the Basic Skills Agency (1996) found benefits for parents and children taking part in family literacy programmes. For parents they found that:

- During the courses, the parents improved their average reading test scores by 5% of the maximum score and their average writing score by 10% of the starting level; and that,
- At the end of the courses, over 80% of parents planned to go on studying; 12 weeks later 70% were actually doing a further course.

For children they found that:

- The children made greater than expected improvements in vocabulary and reading during the courses and in the twelve weeks after the courses ended; and that,
- There were substantial increases in literacy-related home activities, especially those carried out jointly by parents and children (Basic Skills Agency, 1996, p. 6-9).

The National Governors Association (NGA, 2002) found that “research has long supported the positive educational outcomes brought about by parental involvement in general and the family literacy approach specifically” (National Governors Association, 2002, p.9).³ The NGA (2002) study revealed that students that participate in family literacy as preschoolers score significantly higher on standardised tests of reading and mathematics in early elementary grades, and parents achieved significant gains on the reading and maths tests for Adult Basic Education. In fact, “the gains were comparable to or greater than those observed in other studies of adult education programmes” (National Governors Association, 2002, p.9).

Brooks et al, (2008) conducted a review of family literacy practices to identify effective and inclusive family literacy, language and numeracy practices. The ‘meta-study’ included a quantitative and qualitative review, based on evidence from Britain, Canada, Germany, Nepal, New Zealand, South Africa, Turkey, Uganda, the USA, and from a six-nation initiative led by Malta which also involved Belgium, England, Italy, Lithuania and Romania (Brooks et al, 2008, p.32-45). This comprehensive review of available research of the benefits of family literacy approaches found that parents in studies significantly improved both their English and their ability to help their children. In addition, the children made substantial progress in writing and in early literacy generally. They quote from one study, by Tizzard et al, that found that children who read to their parents on a regular basis made significant gains, in fact greater gains than children receiving an equivalent amount of extra reading instruction by reading specialists at school (Brooks et al, p.28-31).

Brooks et al (2008) highlight that a key concern for policy-makers and practitioners in today's more complex world - is parents' ability to contribute to their children's education (Brooks et al, p. 28-31). Eight out of eight of the studies they reviewed reported gains, and

³ The National Governors Association (NGA) is the bipartisan organisation of the governors of the United States of America that “*promotes visionary state leadership, shares best practices and speaks with a unified voice on national policy*”.

numerous studies reported wider benefits, including improved childrearing practices, increased parental involvement in their children's schools, greater parental self-confidence and increased employment (Brooks et al, p. 28-31).

The National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) in England produced a policy briefing on family literacy. They found strong evidence that family literacy programmes can reverse the intergenerational transfer of educational disadvantage and that most follow-up studies suggest that gains made by parents and children on family literacy programmes are maintained over time. They argue that “courses offer excellent opportunities to build on families’ existing practices, such as oral story telling” (NRDC, p.6).

Promoting wealth based family literacy approaches

Early studies that explored literacy issues did so by examining the issues for middle-class families and focused on young children. Subsequent studies focused on family literacy practices as demonstrated by disadvantaged families, that is, those in economically depressed and inner city areas, families at risk and immigrant families. As family literacy became the focus of formal literacy programmes and as concerns with lack of literacy skills emerged, policy was devised with poor families being the focus of much of the programme activity. In this way the deficit model emerged. Studies and activities were focused on highlighting the lack of literacy skills, rather than clarifying and illustrating family literacy competencies.

This is a significant limitation of the research on family literacy practices. Hannon in Brooks et al (2008) argues that very “few, if any, families could be said to totally lack literacy, or concern for children’s development and education, yet some programmes appeared to be premised on such beliefs” (Brooks et al, 2008, p.17). The research conducted by Brooks et al (2008) indicates that improved educational outcomes do not necessarily depend on the ‘formal’ literacy levels of the parents but the climate in which children are encouraged, given opportunities to read, provided with recognition of their attainments and subject to interaction and modelling of language and daily problem solving activities.

At present, family learning and informal learning are poorly understood, and the creative ways in which families learn literacy, language and numeracy remain under explored. The research to date indicates the importance of acknowledging and understanding the needs

and circumstances of families before making assumptions about or developing programming to address perceived needs.

The focus on family resources is a move towards asset or wealth based thinking and away from the traditional deficit model of literacy provision. Taylor (1997) argues that family literacy approaches that focus on the wealth or assets within families can lead us to view literacy as a human right given that literacy practices are specific to their political and ideological contexts, "the context is not so much a lack of literacy, but a lack of social justice" (Taylor, 1997, p. 4).

NALA (2004) highlights the importance of this approach in family literacy work as the 'wealth' model of family literacy which reflects "the literacy learning that already exists at home and aims to validate, support and develop the work that parents already do" (NALA, 2004, p. 25). This focus of our examination then becomes more valid, as it takes into account both the literacy wealth within families and the social and economic context in which they seek to improve their literacy skills.

This wealth-based approach to understanding families and the strengths that lie therein, offers much for educators and policy makers regarding improving education outcomes and literacy levels for families. The Ministry of Education in New Zealand (2004) highlight that this requires "early childhood, school and adult educators to work together in ways that few have done previously. It requires them to understand each other's terminology, ways of working, bureaucratic structures and philosophies" (Ministry of Education in New Zealand, 2004, p. 21).

Family literacy is one area of literacy development work that can improve the literacy wealth of parents and all family members. If we understand that families have literacy resources and can, and do provide the circumstances for building family literacy wealth in a manner similar to the framework laid out in Box 1, then we can begin to support their strategies more effectively.

This wealth-based framework identifies practices that parents and children do together. The concern must be to build on these activities and help to increase the literacy wealth of all families.

BOX 1 The ORIM Framework

Opportunities for their childrens literacy development (trips, visits, shopping, materials for writing, drawing, books, opportunities for play)

Recognition of their literacy practices (explicitly valuing what children do, and listening to them talking, playing and writing)

Interaction with children to develop their literacy (such as spelling out words children want to write, looking at letter/sound names)

Modeling of their own literacy practices (*reading signs, directions, instructions, writing notes letter, shopping lists, reading newspapers*)

Brooks et al (2008, p.14)

Summary

To summarise, the research demonstrates the benefits of family literacy approaches for children and adults. The wealth-based approach to understanding families, and the strengths that lie therein, offers much for educators and policy makers regarding improving literacy confidence and education outcomes for all members of the family. This study, by providing data on literacy practices in the home may contribute to the body of research and the findings from the study can inform the development of family literacy approaches in Ireland.

Demographic profile of participants

Introduction

This section presents a profile of the participants that took part in the research. It provides an overview of age, gender, educational attainment, employment status, household data and community involvement and their confidence levels when dealing with literacy issues. The data from the questionnaires also sought to generate information as to the daily, weekly and monthly literacy practices of respondents, their spouses and the children's activities. This data is supplemented with quotations from interviewees, taken from one-to-one interviews that were conducted on the basis of the questionnaire.

Demographic profile

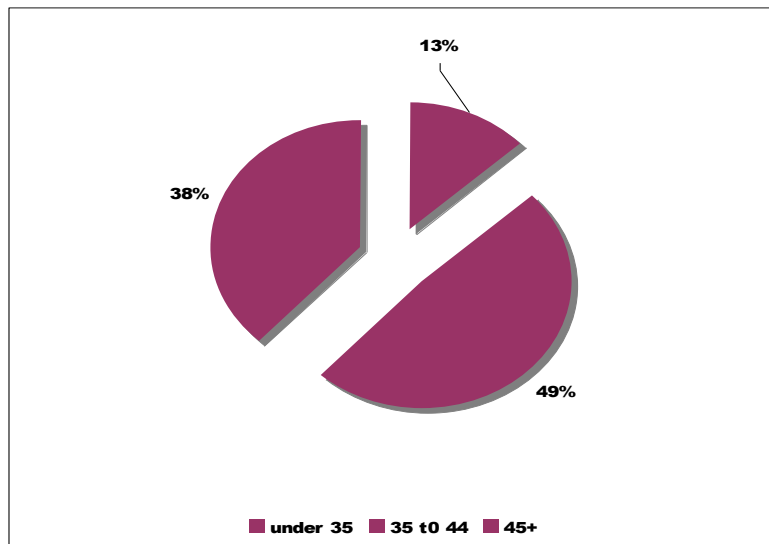
The survey was distributed to 41 families in literacy programmes in four different locations, rural, rural town, inner-city and a city suburb. 49% of the participants described their setting as urban and 51% as rural. Over 88% of the participants were women and 12% men. The data also suggests that the majority of rural participants have difficulty with reading, writing and spelling, while among city participants few expressed any difficulty with reading, writing and spelling.

Over 42% of the participants are currently looking after the family and home and when you add the 7.5% whose status is full time carer in the home, nearly half of the participants are currently working in the home. Gender is undoubtedly an issue here. The majority of the participants are women, and women still constitute the majority of home workers and carers.

Age profile of participants

Chart 1 shows that the majority of the participants were over 45 years of age, with a significant number being in the 35-44 year old age group and 13% were under 35 years of age.

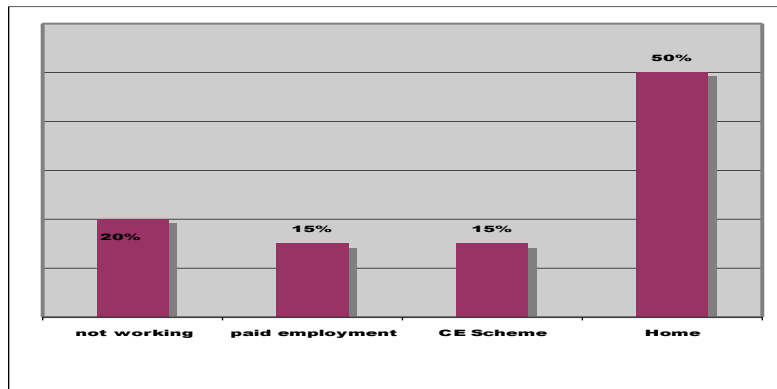
Chart I: Age of respondents



Labour market activity

As chart 2 illustrates, of those who are working outside the home, the same percentage (15%) are working for pay as are currently employed in a labour market scheme. 15% are working under one labour market scheme, namely community employment, a part-time employment scheme.

Chart 2 Employment of respondents



Education and training

When asked if they or a member of their family had taken part in any education or employment schemes, i.e FÁS training or adult learner courses, 80% said yes and 20% said no. The connection to education and training schemes appears to be quite strong.

When schooling is examined, 29% of respondents have primary level, 28% have lower secondary level educational qualifications and 15% of respondents have upper secondary level education. 15% had technical or vocational education and 8% had third level qualifications.

When educational qualifications were examined, 34% of the respondents replied that they have a FETAC/Post Leaving Certificate qualification, 22% have a junior/inter certificate qualification and 13% have a leaving certificate. 6% of respondents who answered this question stated they have a third level qualification. It is interesting to note that 16% chose

'other' in response to this question, which suggests that the variety of qualifications people are attaining is difficult to capture.

When asked what level of education you would like your child to complete, 82.5% replied third level, 12.5% upper secondary and 5% technical or vocational level. Participants clearly want their children to achieve educationally irrespective of their own level of education.

The data also shows that of those that did speak about their experience of school, only one said *"I loved school"*. All others disliked it, teachers and their manner being the most cited reason for disliking it. There seemed to be a pattern of participants loving primary school but hating secondary school. One participant stated *"Realistically I could be in a better place than I am now if I had a better education"*.

The challenge is to break the inter-generational trend of negative experiences of schooling and learning, as illustrated by the following quote, participants reported receiving little support or encouragement from their parents in relation to education.

Quote: Urban Participant no. 7

"I don't think she [mother] could even think about education or she just made sure you went to school every day and at the time we never got homework ... I started to do my primary and I didn't know my A from B, you know. Like if you didn't know, if they were doing sums on the blackboard with chalk and if I couldn't add them up or whatever, get down to the end of the classroom, back of the classroom, you know".

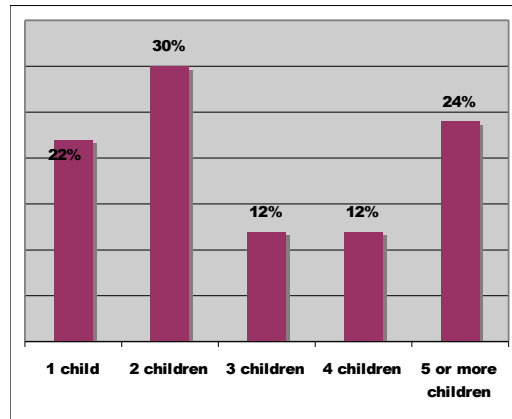
Households

Over a quarter of the participants were in households of four people, 24.3% were in households of three and 18.9% are in households of six. Over 87% stated that they have family living nearby. 71% of those have family living within three miles, 13% with family within 4-10 miles, 8% with family living 11-20 miles away, an 8% with family within a 20 mile radius. 54% of respondents lived in the area for four years, 20% lived in the area for three years, 13% lived in the area for two years and 13% for one year.

Children in households

Chart 3 shows 30% of the respondents have two children and 24% of the respondents have 5 or more children. 22% of respondents have one child, 12%, have three and 12% have four children.

Chart 3 Number of children



With regard to the children's school level, Chart 4 shows that 64% were in primary school, 25% in a crèche or preschool and 11% were in secondary school.

Chart 4 School level of children

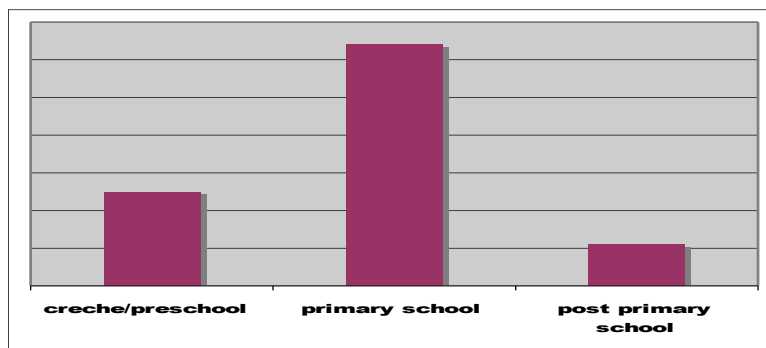


Chart 5 Care arrangements for children

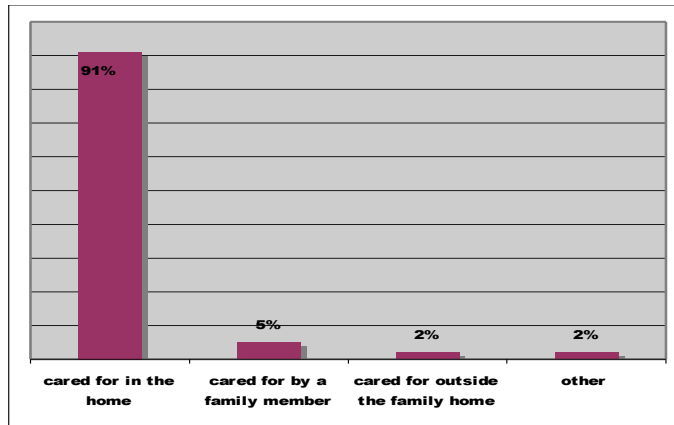
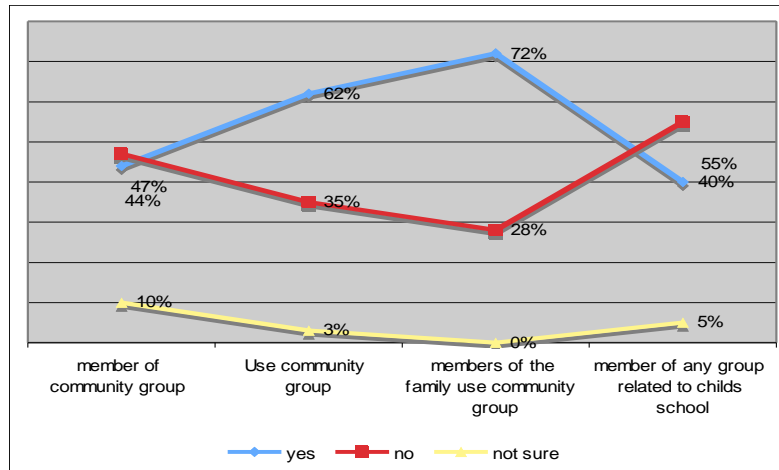


Chart 5 illustrates that 91% of the children are cared for within the home, 5% are cared for by a family member, 2% are cared for outside the family home and 2% responded other to this question.

Community involvement

Chart 6 below illustrates community involvement activity among participants. When asked about their involvement and use of community facilities 46% of those that responded to this question indicated that they are not a member of any community group or club, 44% said they are and 10% stated they were not aware of any in their area. One can only assume that respondents were referring to activities other than their participation in a literacy project. When asked if they use any local group or club 63% said yes, 35% said no and only 2.5% indicated they were not aware of any in their area. When asked if family members made any use of local community groups or clubs 72.5% replied yes and 27.5% said no.

Chart 6 Respondents involvement with local community groups



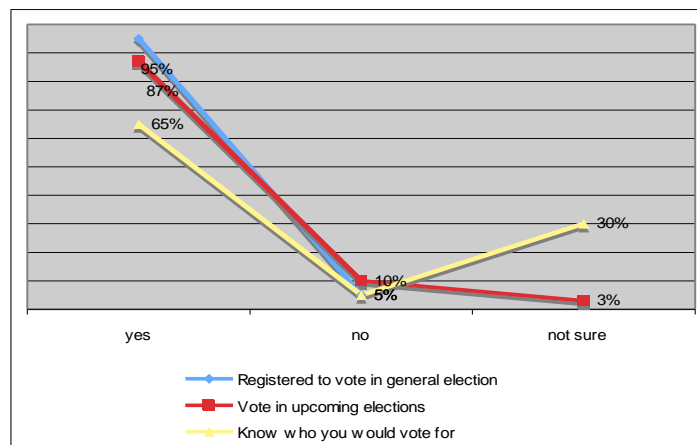
Respondents were also asked if they, or any member of their family had taken part in any volunteer or community organisations in the last year, e.g. fun run, sponsored walks etc. Chart 6 shows that 60% said yes and 40% said no. When the question was asked about groups related to your child’s school that figure drops considerably, with 40% saying yes, 55% saying no and 5% saying they are not aware of any in their area.

When asked if they or a member of their family had taken part in any groups, such as parent groups and Irish Cancer Society for example, 32.5% said yes and 62.5% said no. When asked the same question regarding special interest groups i.e. pigeon racing club, weight watchers, GAA clubs, 63.2% said yes, 34.2% said no and 2.6% said they were not aware of any in their area.

Active citizenship

Chart 7 shows voting activity. 95% of the respondents indicated that they are registered to vote and 5% are not. 88% replied that they do plan to vote (at the time in the 2009 local elections), 10% stated no and 2.5% said they were not sure. 65% stated that if they were to vote they know who they would vote for, 5.4% said no and 30% said they were not sure. The figures indicate that those participating in family literacy programmes are quite active when it comes to being ready to vote, preparing to vote in upcoming elections and are actively considering who will get their vote.

Chart 7 Respondents voting activities



Levels of confidence reported

Levels of confidence are crucial to improving our skills. The following section describes the results of the section of the questionnaire that asked respondents to rate their, their partners' and their children's levels of confidence with the full range of literacy practices.⁴

⁴ While there is data on all children, given that the majority of respondents have one child the analysis is confined to them for this report.

Chart 8 Respondent levels of confidence

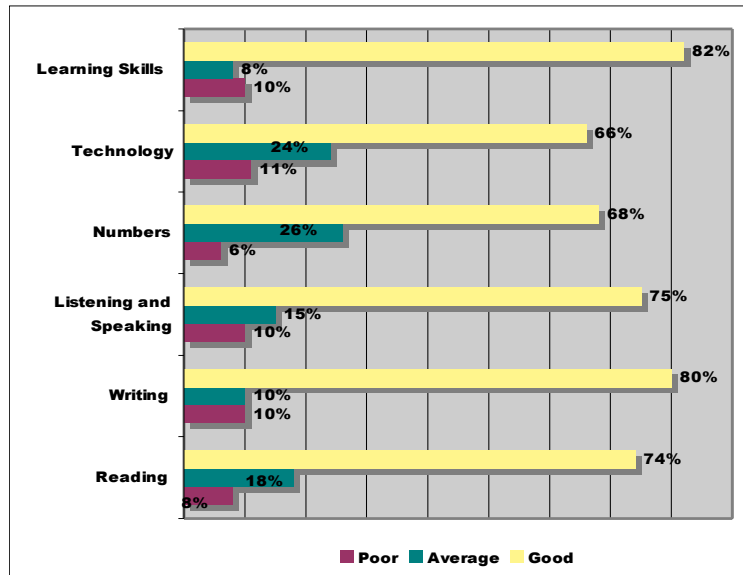


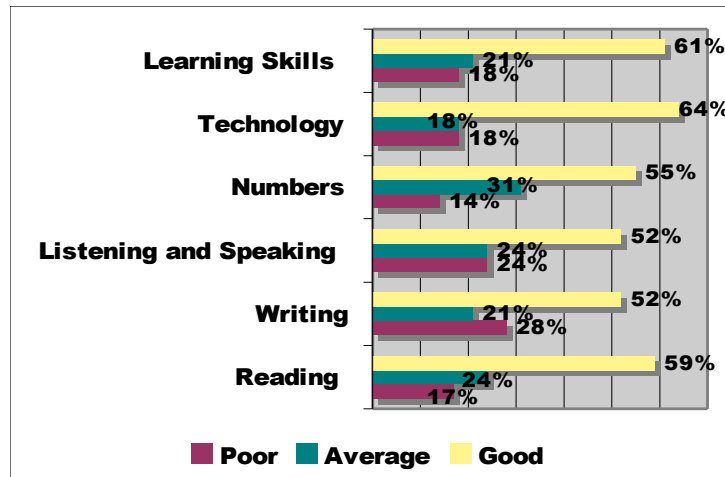
Chart 8 shows respondents overwhelmingly rate their literacy skills as good and the gap between their average and poor rating is quite high. As the chart illustrates respondents rated their learning skills highest, with 82% reporting them as good, compared to 10% rating them as poor and 8% rating them as average. Respondents rated their writing skills as the next highest, with 80% reporting them as good, compared to 10% rating them as poor and 10% rating them as average.

Respondents also rated their reading skills and listening and speaking skills highly. 74% reporting them as good, compared to 18% rating their reading skills as average and 8% rating them poorly. The poor and average ratings are lower for listening and speaking, with 15% rating these skills as average and 10% rating them poorly.

Numbers and technology get the lowest good ratings. 68% of respondents report their skills with numbers as good and 66% rate their technology skills as good, compared to 28% rating their numeracy as average and 3% rating themselves as poor. With regard to technology, 24% of respondents rate their skills as average and 11% rate themselves poorly.

As Chart 9 shows respondents rated their spouses' technology skills highest, with 64% reporting them as good, compared to 18% rating them as poor and 18% rating them as average. Respondents rated their spouses' learning skills as the next highest, with 61% reporting them as good, compared to 18% rating them as poor and 21% rating them as average.

Chart 9 Spouses' levels of confidence

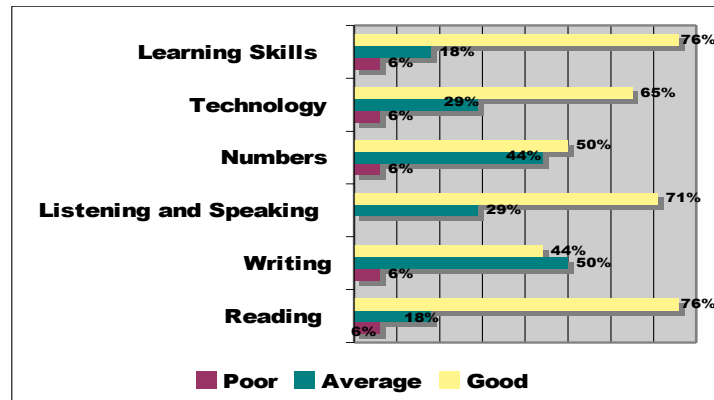


The chart illustrates that respondents also rated their spouses' reading skills highly. 59% reporting them as good, compared to 24% rating their reading skills as average and 17% rating them poorly. Respondents rated their spouses' numeracy skills as 55% being good, 31% being average and 14% being poor.

Respondents rated their spouses' writing skills and listening skills similarly. 52% of them rated these skills as good. The average and poor ratings are 24% for listening and speaking compared to writing skills, with 21% rating them as average and 28% rating them as poor.

This would seem to indicate that respondents rate their spouses' skills as lower in general, and their writing, listening and speaking and numeracy skills as much lower than theirs.

Chart 10 Levels of confidence of child



As Chart 10 illustrates respondents rated their child’s learning skills highest, with 76% reporting them as good, compared to 18% rating them as average and 6% rating them as poor. Respondents rated their child’s reading skills similarly, with 76% reporting them as good, compared to 18% rating them as average and 6% rating them as poor.

Respondents rated their child’s listening and speaking skills as good at 71%, average 29% and none of the respondents rated these skills poorly. Technology get the next highest rating, with 65% of respondents rating their child as good, 29% rating them as average and 6% rating them poorly. With regard to numeracy skills, 50% of respondents rated their child as good, 44% rated them as average and 6% rated them poorly.

The lowest good rating was given for their child’s writing skills, with 44% rating their child’s writing skills as good, 50% rating them as average and 6% rating them as poor. It is interesting to note that respondents rated their child’s writing skills as much lower than their own, and that this was the lowest good score, and highest average score, 44% and 50% respectively (compared to 80% and 18% for themselves).

Summary

This chapter gave a profile of the study participants paying particular attention to how they rated their community activity, voting patterns, and confidence levels in terms of thier literacy skills. One of the most striking aspects of the findings is that although the majority of the participants were early school leavers, they rated their literacy skills as good. This could well be an indication of an increased confidence among the participants as they work

to improve their literacy skills. In terms of active citizenship the data indicates that the study participants are quite active in terms of voting registration and are highly active regarding involvement in community and voluntary activity.

Literacy practices of participants

Introduction

Research suggests that we use a range of literacy practices daily, often without thinking about the literacy skills involved, to present and share information. As we go about our daily living, we need to share and gather information in order to be able to participate and glean benefits from participating in society. Parents need to interact with each other, their children, childcare services, schools, clubs, state welfare and taxation services, medical services, other parents and children, and children that their children are interacting with. Workers need to interact with each other, managers and supervisors. Children need to interact with each other, parents, grandparents, relatives, teachers, care givers etc (Fan & Chen, 2001).

The complexity of modern living requires a wide range of literacy skills, which we use daily, and requires the use of greater and greater range of devices, such as mobile phones, computers and a greater range of information sources such as news media, information leaflets, the internet etc. This requires increasing our literacy wealth more often, as we seek to understand how to use the range of media and devices that are now more readily available to more people, to gather and share information.

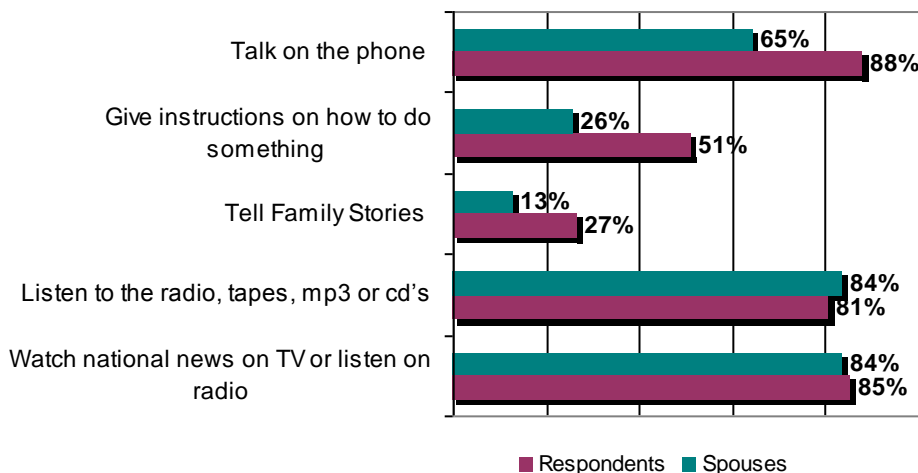
The previous chapter detailed the demographic profile of the study participants with a broad focus on age, gender education, community involvement and confidence levels. Following on from this, this chapter provides an overview of the most frequent daily and weekly literacy activities of the respondents and their spouses under the following categories of literacy practices:

- Oral and visual practices;
- Numeracy practices;
- Reading and writing practices;
- New technology practices; and
- Leisure activities.

Oral and visual practices

Communication involves the use of verbal and non-verbal messages and increasingly we converse through mediums that facilitate greater use of oral and visual messages. Mobile phones, computers, radios and the television all present opportunities to use oral and visual practices on a daily basis. With this in mind we examined the oral and visual practices of the participants and their spouses.

Chart 11 Oral and visual practices of respondents and spouses



As Chart 11 illustrates the highest category of daily activity in the category of oral or visual communication relates to the use of telephones. 88% of respondents and 65% of spouses talk on the phone daily, 84% of respondents and 85% of spouses watch national news on TV daily and 81% of respondents and 84% of spouses listen to radio, tapes, mp3 or CD's daily. The greatest difference in practices between respondents and their spouses emerges when we look at the giving instructions. Almost double the percentage of respondents, 51%, give instructions daily compared to 26% of spouses.

Quote: Rural no.13 "I would try to listen to the Midwest every morning because its all local news, local topics etc".

Quote: Inner City no.1 "They watch Casey Friends at the moment, she's loving that and like she only discovered them now, its been out a long time. The older one is more cartoon and fantasy. And then the little fella is Sponge-Bob mad".

This suggests that these media are very important, both in terms of building awareness of opportunities for participation in family literacy programmes and in terms of tools for improving literacy levels.

Almost 30% of respondents and 13% of spouses tell family stories on a daily basis. There is a strong emphasis on intergenerational learning in family literacy approaches. As the following quote illustrates this is often about what things used to be like and encourages comparison among the generations.

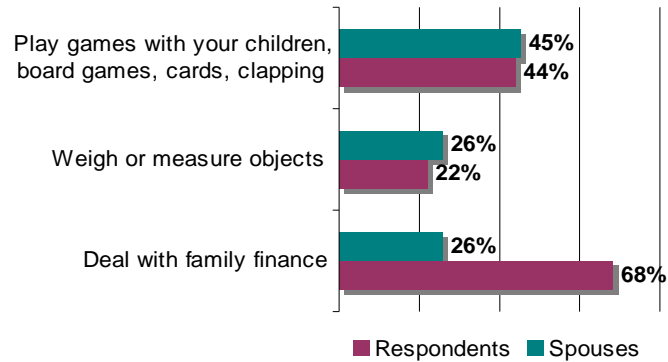
Quote: Rural Participant no.15

"We just tell stories of what we used to do when we were her age, what games we used to play, we used to play skipping and tags and that lot whereas they don't do that nowadays".

Numeracy practices

Numeracy is very important in today's society, particularly when it comes to financial literacy (NALA, 2005). The results show that dealing with family finances is the most frequent family literacy activity using numeracy skills and that there is a significant difference between the levels of activity among respondents and their spouses. 68% of respondents and 26% of spouses deal with family finance daily. The increasing complexity of financial products means that people are engaging in this literacy activity more frequently and would indicate that low financial literacy may pose a problem for people with numeracy difficulties.

Chart 12 Numeracy practices of respondents and spouses



As Chart 12 illustrates, other numeracy skills are used daily. Playing cards and boardgames require numeracy skills, 44% of respondents and 45% of spouses do this on a daily basis, and 22% of respondents and 26% of spouses weigh or measure objects daily.

The importance of numeracy skills is brought into focus when families are under financial pressure. With increasing unemployment, as the following quote illustrates, the need to manage family finance tightly, and in some cases, the worry about the cost of educational expenses which become a significant proportion of family finance, is a more familiar experience for families.

Quote: Urban Participant no. 4:

"Yeah any other year I wouldn't bat an eyelid to go in and pay all that money, the fact that he's out of work now and we get €300.00 a week to live on, that's more than my weekly wage gone out now on the young one this week, her uniform is €183, her tracksuit €76 and the books that I did get, I have more books to get but the ones I did get was €385".

Reading and writing practices

Given that 80% of respondents and 45% of spouses help their children with homework or school work daily, the importance of parental understanding of the school curriculum needs

to be considered in the context of improving family literacy levels. In addition, 56% of respondents and 39% of spouses read aloud to their children daily.

Chart 13 Reading and writing practices of respondents and spouses

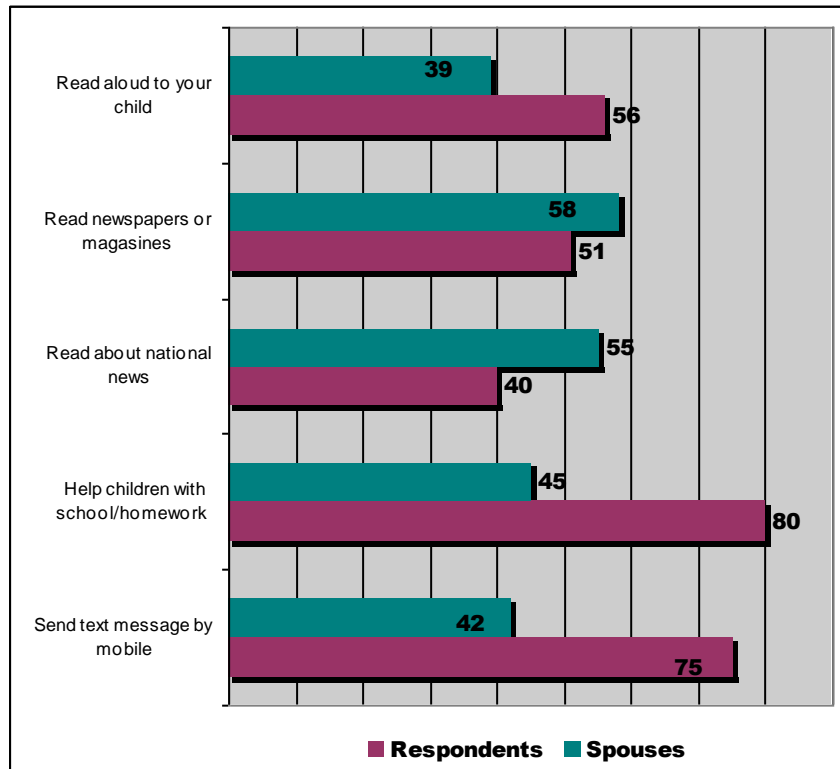
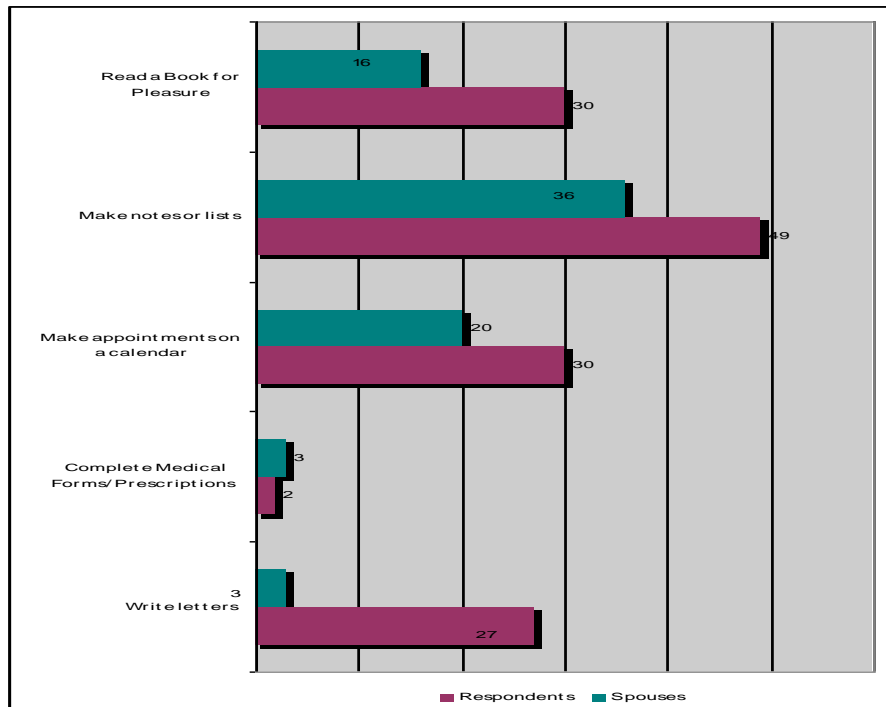


Chart 14 shows that 75% of respondents and 42% of spouses text daily and while it is not possible to examine the level of written English used as opposed to symbols and shortened text, it is clear that this is an important medium frequently used by families. It should not be ignored in the development of family literacy competencies. Reading newspapers or magazines also emerged as significant daily activities with 51% of respondents and 58% of spouses reading papers or magazines daily. The IALS (1997) found a much higher percentage, 94.3% reported reading newspapers or magazines.

Chart 14 Reading and writing practices of respondents and spouses



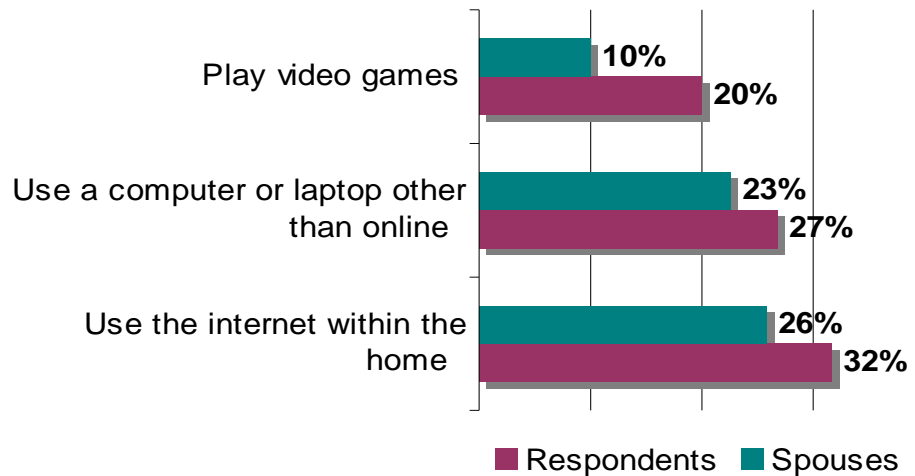
As Chart 14 illustrates 49% of respondents and 36% of spouses use daily writing activities which include making notes or lists. While 40% of respondents and 55% of spouses read national newspapers. The chart also shows that 30% of respondents and 16% of spouses read a book for pleasure daily, and 30% of respondents and 20% of spouses make appointments on a calendar daily. Interestingly, the IALS (1997) results show over half of the sample saying they read books daily/weekly and 25.5% write letters daily/weekly.

New technology practices

Chart 15 illustrates practices among participants with regard to technology. 32% of respondents and 26% of spouses use the internet in the home on a daily basis. 27% of

respondents and 23% of spouses use computers on a daily basis and 20% of respondents and 10% of spouses play video games daily.

Chart 15 New technology practices of respondents and spouses

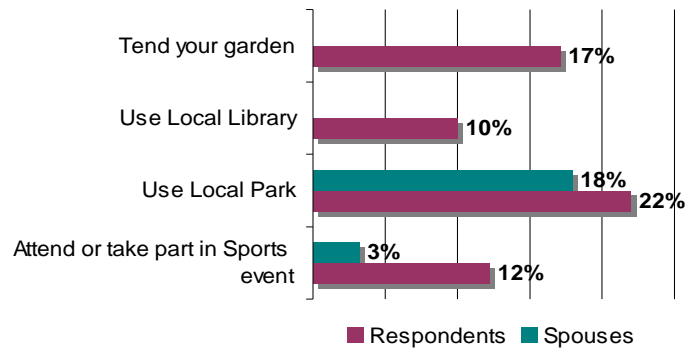


Given the increasing importance of computers and the internet as a means of getting information, their use as literacy practices is becoming more vital for families.

Leisure activities

Chart 16 shows the leisure activity of respondents and spouses, 22% and 18% respectively use the local park daily. It is interesting how few respondents and the much lower percentage of spouses who use the local library, 12% and 3% respectively..

Chart 16 Daily leisure activities of respondents and spouses



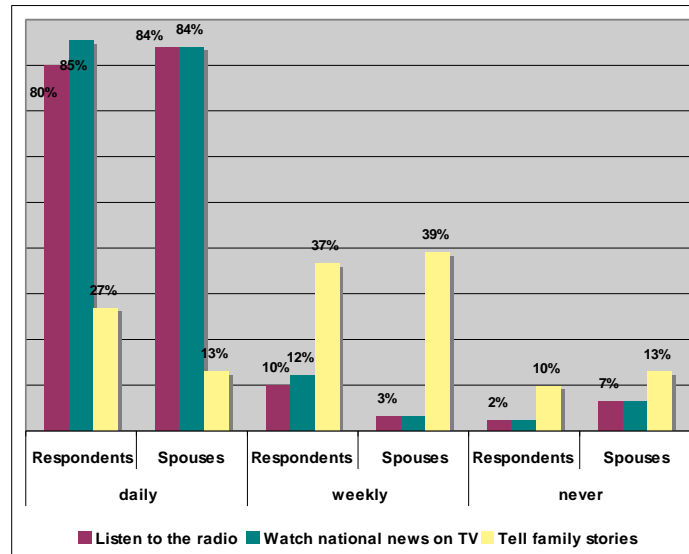
Oral and visual practices of respondents and spouses

A number of trends emerge when we compare specific oral and visual practices of participants. The following section explores the preferred oral and visual practices of participants.

As Chart 17 shows, respondents and spouses display similar patterns when it comes to oral and visual literacy practices. The preferred oral and visual activity is watching TV closely followed by listening to the radio.

Telling stories is an oral literacy practice that should not be ignored in the search to find effective approaches to improving family literacy competencies. The research shows that telling family stories is quite a regular practice. 37% of respondents and 39% of spouses tell family stories weekly.

Chart 17 Oral and visual practices of respondents and spouses



Numeracy practices of respondents and spouses

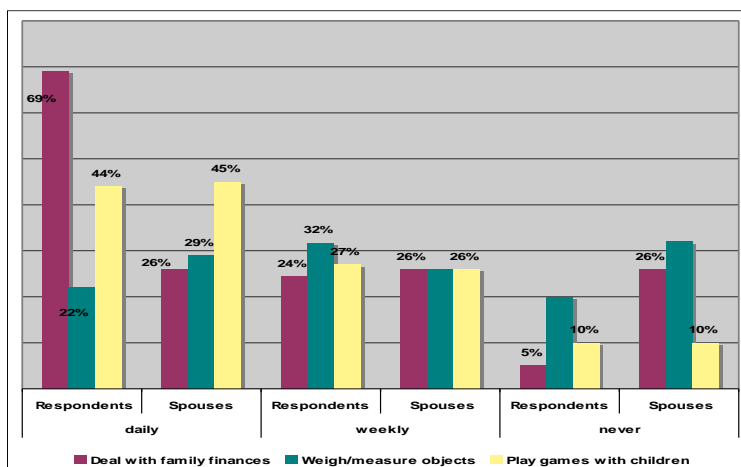
A number of trends emerge when we compare specific numeracy practices of participants. The following section explores the preferred numeracy practices of participants.

Chart 18 below illustrates that there are marked differences in the daily activity of respondents and spouses with regard to dealing with family finances. 69% of respondents do this daily, in comparison 26% of spouses are reported as doing so daily. While only 5% of respondents never deal with family finance 26% of spouses never do it. The gender pattern is clear, given the fact that the majority of respondents are female and spouses are male.

They do however display similar patterns when it comes to weighing or measuring objects and playing with children. 32% of respondents and 26% of spouses weigh or measure objects weekly. While this may appear low, further research is needed to establish the relevance and value of such activities as part of family literacy programmes. It is interesting to note that similar percentages of respondents and spouses stated that they never weigh or measure objects. These results may have to do with personal capacity for such activity.

Playing games with children is a very important way of passing on numeracy skills and respondents and spouses display similar patterns of daily and weekly playing activity. This would appear to be an activity that could be usefully built into family literacy programmes with parents.

Chart 18 Numeracy practices of respondents and spouses



Reading and writing practices of respondents and spouses

Trends emerge when we compare specific reading and writing practices of participants as illustrated here.

Chart 19 shows that sending text messages and reading aloud to children are the highest daily and weekly activities. This high number suggests that texting through mobile phones could be a valuable asset in development, design and delivery of family literacy programmes.

Nearly twice as many respondents as spouses sent text messages, at 75% and 42% respectively. Adults with literacy difficulties use this medium to write every day. Symbols and a shortened form of the language are often used by all who send text messages irrespective of their literacy levels. Text messaging is a part of everyday life nowadays and as such an important literacy tool.

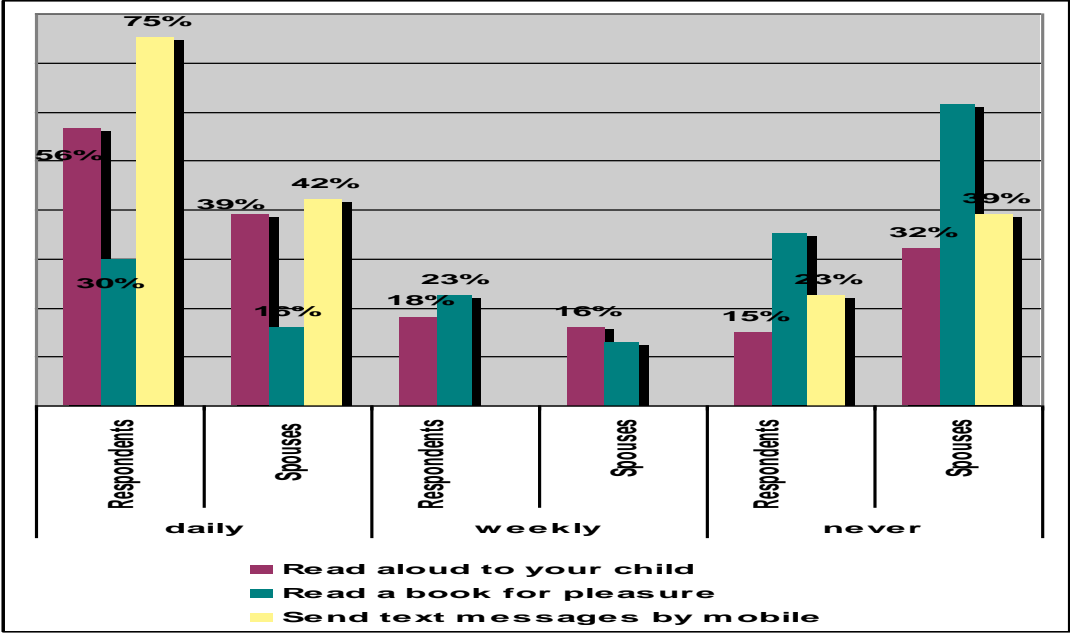
Fewer participants, 56% of respondents and 39% of spouses read aloud to their children daily. 18% of respondents and 16% of spouses do so weekly and interestingly 15% of respondents and 32% of spouses never read aloud to their children.

Quote: Rural Participant no. 13:

"My wife, she's not the best letter writer ... she would usually ask me ... we had to do a letter for the school for one of the kids who was off yesterday, she was saying to me would you do a letter for them, I mean as a parent I've no problem writing letters"

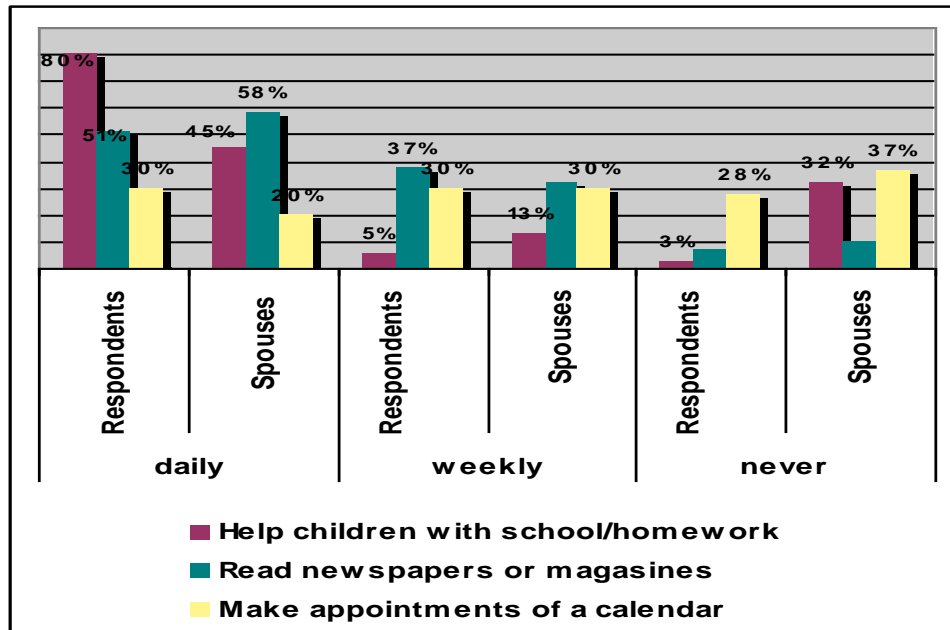
Finally, when we compare the figures for reading a book for pleasure 30% of respondents and 16% of spouses do so daily, while 23% of respondents and 39% of spouses never read a book for pleasure which correspond roughly with the IALS (1997) results which show that almost one-fifth of respondents say they never read books (IALS, 2007, p. 69).

Chart 19 Reading and writing activities



Participants display similar trends when it comes to reading newspapers or magazines as illustrated in Chart 19. 51% of respondents and 58% of spouses do so daily, 37% of respondents and 32% of spouses do so weekly and 7% of respondents and 10% of spouses never read newspapers or magazines. Further research could prove useful to ascertain the relative use of local, national weekly and national daily newspapers.

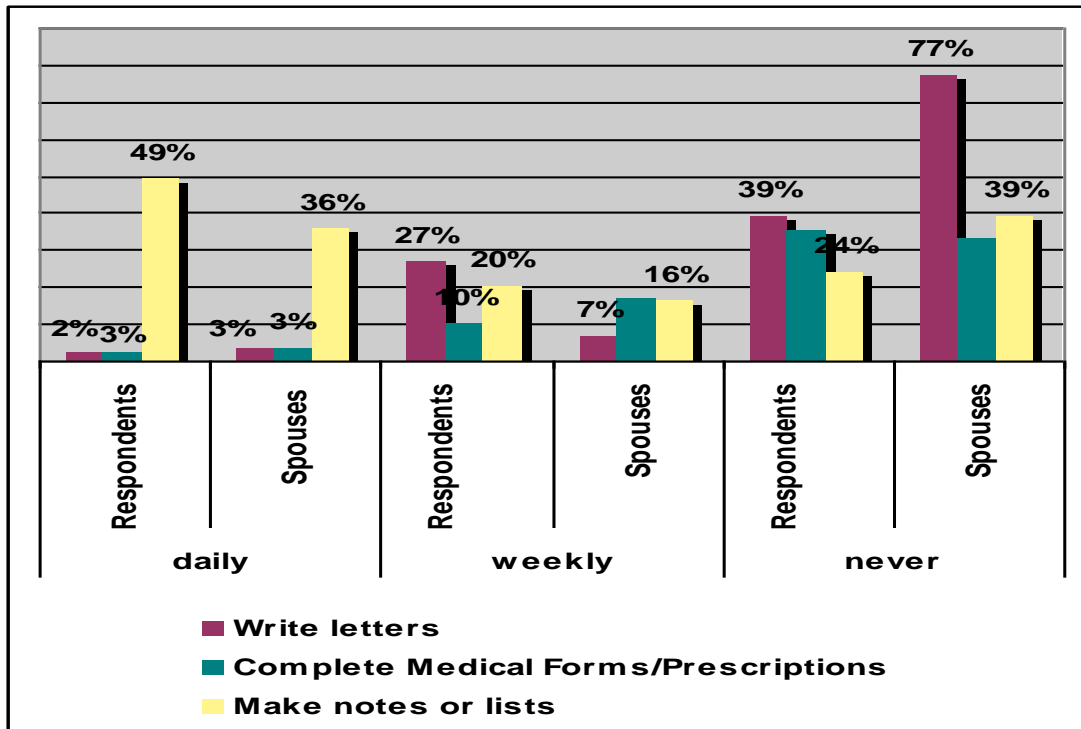
Chart 20 Reading and writing activities ..contd



Participants were asked a question with regard to assisting with school work. 80% of respondents do this daily. 5% do it weekly. 3% state they never do it. This compares to 45% of spouses reported as helping with their children’s schoolwork daily, 13% weekly, 32% who never help their children with their schoolwork. Thus, it would appear there is quite a gender difference when it comes to helping children with schoolwork. There are programmes that assist parents to engage with the school curriculum, and while participants were not asked to indicate if they take part in these programmes, this research suggests that parents, mostly mothers, do seek to help their children achieve educational outcomes.

Finally, participants were asked if they mark calendars. Chart 20 shows that 30% of respondents reported doing this daily, 30% weekly and 28% never compared to their reporting that 20% of spouses do it daily, 30% weekly and 37% never do it. There appears to be little difference between respondents and spouses in this regard.

Chart 21 Reading and writing activities ..contd



Writing letters, completing medical forms and making notes or lists are the least reported daily and weekly activities. The figures in the IALS (1997, p, 69) survey reveal that 25.5% of respondents write letters daily/weekly. While participants were not asked why they write the letters they do, one can surmise that, as all of the participants have children, quite a substantial percentage of the letter writing activity might have to do with communication with schools. 27% of respondents and 7% of spouses write letters weekly.

Technology practices of respondents and spouses

A number of trends emerge when we compare specific technology practices of participants as illustrated here. The use of new technologies to communicate and gather information is a literacy practice that cannot be ignored. While the question as to availability of the internet at home was not addressed in this research, lack of access, if left unattended could reinforce literacy inequality and have a direct impact on the improvement of family literacy practices.

Chart 22 Use of technology

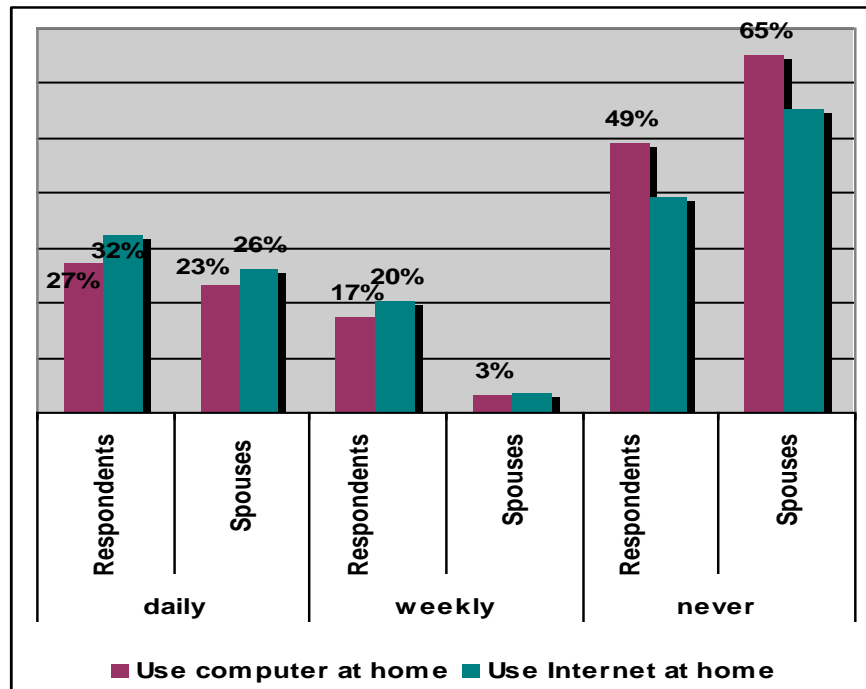


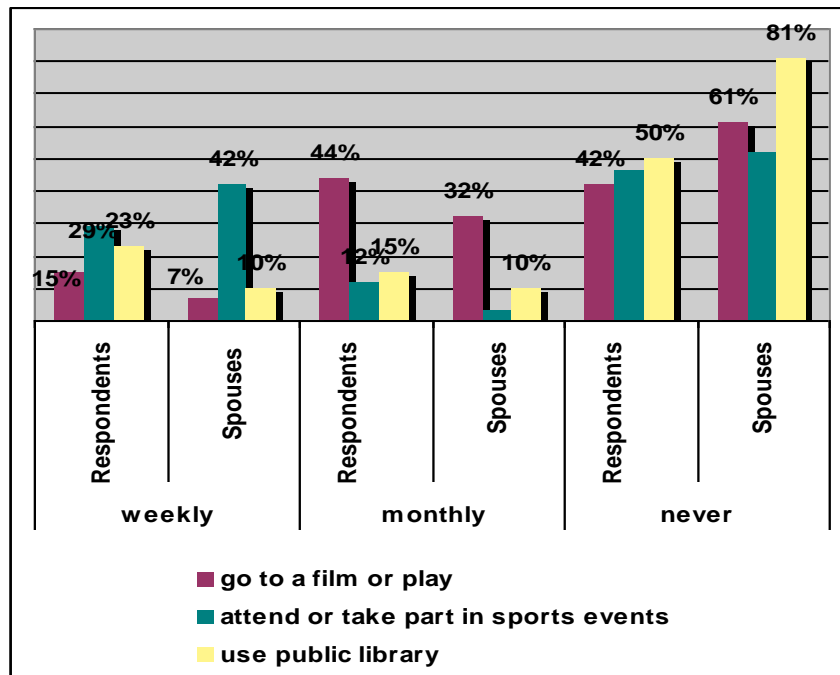
Chart 22 shows that 27% of respondents and 23% of spouses use computers at home and 32% of respondents and 26% of spouses use the internet at home. 49% of respondents and 65% of spouses never use computers at home and 39% of respondents and 55% of spouses never use computers or the internet at home. The figures for lack of use may reflect lack of access to the internet at home and low ownership of computers. Notwithstanding the figures indicate that use of computers and the internet is a fairly frequent activity, and as such, would offer an important medium for the improvement of family literacy competencies.

Leisure activities of respondents and spouses

A number of trends emerge when we compare the leisure practices of participants as illustrated by Chart X23. The highest percentages relate to never engaging in leisure activities. 42% of respondents and 61% of spouses never attend a film or play, 46% of

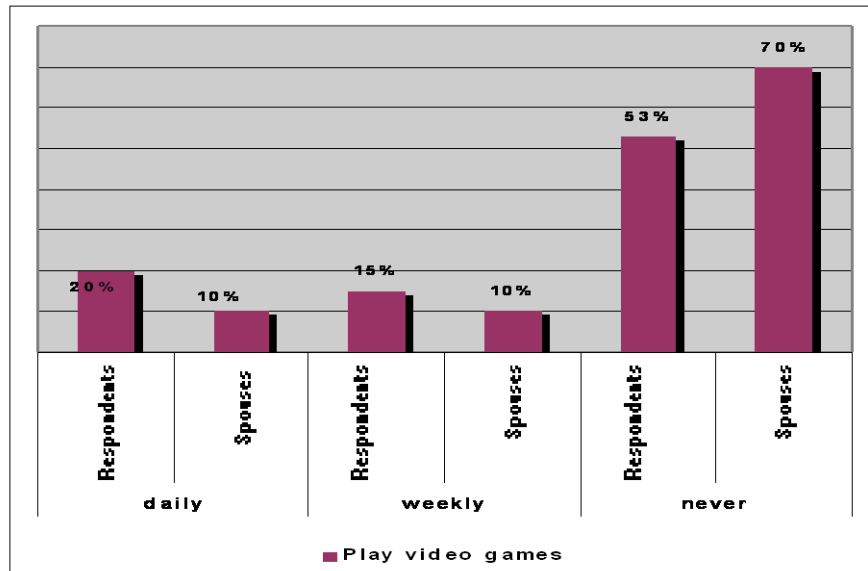
respondents and 52% of spouses never attend or take part in sports activities and 50% of respondents and 81% of spouses report never using public libraries. 44% of respondents and 32% of spouses report attending a play or film monthly and 15% of respondents and 7% of respondents attend weekly.

Chart 23 Leisure activities



AS Chart 24 shows, video games are not engaged with regularly, 53% of respondents and 70% of spouses report never using video games, 15% and 10% report using them weekly and 20% and 10% daily.

Chart 24 Leisure activities cont..



Summary

This chapter has provided an overview of the literacy practices of the participants in their everyday lives. It illustrates a variety of family literacy practices that are engaged in on a daily and weekly basis, including oral and aural literacy practices, numeracy practices, reading and writing practice, technology literacy practices and leisure activities. The data shows that respondents and spouses display similar patterns of literacy and that the preferred visual activity is watching television. The data also suggests that the use of computers and the internet is a fairly frequent activity. However, by comparison when it comes to leisure practices a substantial number of the participants reported that they never take part in sports, or attend a film or play. Similarly, a high percentage reported never using public libraries in their areas.

Discussion and recommendations for the development of family literacy approaches.

Introduction

This chapter will briefly summarise the study's main findings and will make a number of broad recommendations with regard to the development of family literacy approaches. The study set out to examine literacy practices in the home and the research questions were designed to investigate all aspects of family literacy practices people use in the home, the oral and visual, the numeracy, the reading and writing practices, new technology practices and leisure activities. The aim of the study is to illustrate the range of literacy resources and practices that families use and reveals the resourcefulness of the respondents, their spouses and children. Members of the families that participated in this study use many oral and visual skills, numeracy skills, reading and writing skills, use technology and participate in leisure activities and continue to build their literacy wealth.

The data in this study also illustrates the variety of family literacy practices that are engaged with on a daily and weekly basis, including oral and aural literacy practices, numeracy practices, reading and writing practice, technology literacy practices and leisure activities. The challenge is to develop programmes that use the wealth-based approach to family literacy, and build upon the range of competencies that people use in their everyday lives at home and in their communities. This level of increase in confidence may well be an important resource to build upon when seeking to involve people in family literacy projects.

A number of trends emerged from the data, for example, data participation in a family literacy programme has had a positive impact in terms of active citizenship, most notably in terms of voting behaviour. The data shows that the participants are quite active when it comes to being ready to vote, preparing to vote in upcoming elections and are actively considering who to vote for. These results taken with the data regarding active involvement in community and voluntary activity would indicate active citizenship and has positive implications in terms of increasing their family's wealth literacy. The IALS (1997) found that the correlations between literacy activities and participation in community and voluntary organisations range from .15 to .25. It also notes that 'what is especially noteworthy about these correlations is that they are all positive, indicating that people who

have frequent involvement in literacy activities also tend to have relatively greater involvement in community activities' (IALS, 1997: p74).

The data illustrated that respondents overwhelmingly rated their literacy skills as good and the gap between and their average and poor rating is quite big. In addition, while the respondents rate their spouses' and child's skills as predominately good, the figures would suggest that, in their opinion, the average and poor ratings are higher than their own. This is broadly in line with the findings from the IALS (1997) which highlights that those whose literacy skills were good were likely to say that their skills were excellent and almost never gave a 'poor' self assessment. Overall, this would indicate that when it comes to self assessment people may tend to rate their literacy skills highly even while working to improve them.

A number of trends emerge when we compare the leisure practices of participants. For example, the highest percentages relate to never engaging in leisure activities. 42% of respondents and 61% of spouses never attend a film or play, 46% of respondents and 52% of spouses never attend or take part in sports activities and 50% of respondents and 81% of spouses report never using public libraries. 44% of respondents and 32% of spouses report attending a play or film monthly and 15% of respondents and 7% of respondents attend weekly. The findings also show that the use of computers and the internet is a fairly frequent activity, and as such, would offer an important medium for the improvement of family literacy competencies.

Interestingly the data shows the underuse of libraries by participants. Local libraries provide a wide range of useful resources. Many now provide access to the internet free of charge, facilitate the renting of DVD's and videos, and hold book clubs and organise readings for children. In addition many libraries are working to ensure the accessibility of their services. It is noteworthy that even those who are attending family literacy programmes report a low use of such facilities. The IALS (1997, p, 69) noted that "three-fifths of respondents said they never use the public library. Further research is required to identify the factors that prevent the use of library resources and work is needed to explore options for integrating these services into family literacy programmes.

The data shows, respondents and spouses display similar patterns when it comes to oral and visual literacy practices. The preferred oral and visual activity is watching TV closely followed by listening to the radio. The IALS (1997) results show that almost all of the

participants listen to the radio or tapes, fewer than 5% said they do not watch television on a daily basis and roughly four-fifths reported watching for more than one hour a day. The report asserts "that the amount of time spent watching television is related negatively to both literacy and non-literacy leisure activities... thus it would seem that non-literacy pursuits do not necessarily compete with literacy activities" (IALS,1997, p. 77).

The television and the radio have been used successfully in promoting literacy programmes and providing learning modules for adults seeking to improve their literacy levels. There may be possibilities for replicating this success when it comes to family literacy approaches. While it is not possible to discern from this survey the extent to which local or national radio is preferred, the radio, local and national could prove vital in the promotion of family literacy programmes and opportunities.

Story telling featured among the oral literacy practices of the participants. Sharing information between the generations, building understanding of historical contexts and creating pictures for translating meaning are all important for the inter-generational focus of family literacy approaches. This would appear to be an activity that could be usefully built into family literacy programmes with parents.

The data illustrated that 56% of respondents and 39% of spouses read aloud to their children daily. 18% of respondents and 16% of spouses do so weekly and interestingly 15% of respondents and 32% of spouses never read aloud to their children. However, further work is needed to establish whether parental literacy levels have anything to do with these figures. In addition, it is not possible to determine if the reading aloud is school reading or reading for pleasure, as participants were not asked this question. Further research is warranted to establish the extent to which parental literacy levels determine the likelihood of parents reading aloud more regularly to their children.

Finally, when we compare the figures for reading a book for pleasure 30% of respondents and 16% of spouses do so daily, while 23% of respondents and 39% of spouses never read a book for pleasure which correspond roughly with the IALS (1997) results which show that almost one-fifth of respondents say they never read books (IALS, 2007, p. 69).

There would also appear to be gender differences with regard to reading books for pleasure, with almost double the number of women as compared to men reading a book for pleasure daily. While it is not possible to establish how this compares to a national average, the

figures do indicate that reading for pleasure is an activity that could be integrated into programmes to develop family literacy practices.

Recommendations – Policy development

This section offers a series of broad recommendations arising from the findings of the research. NALA (2009) advocate that family literacy approaches should be a significant part of a refreshed national adult literacy strategy and the Department of Education and Science should develop a dedicated and significant funding stream for family literacy work.

These research findings illustrate the range of family literacy practices that can be built upon by the Department of Education and Science (DES). NALA (2009) argue that the Department should take a lead role in promoting an integrated national strategy for the development of family literacy and, “building on experience to date including DEIS, should involve other key Government Departments: the Department of Health and Children, the Department of Social and Family Affairs and the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform” (NALA, 2009, p. 9).

Recommendation: Put in place mechanisms and resources to provide family literacy services through a refreshed literacy strategy.

This research shows that local community groups and schools are important connections that are underdeveloped. 60% of the respondents indicated that they had taken part in activities to raise money for local community or voluntary groups, however the rate drops considerably to 40% when it comes to activities related to their children’s school. This research suggests that opportunities to make connections with schools as part of any programme of development of family literacy responses should be encouraged. The NESF (2009) state that while the DEIS policy recognised the importance of an integrated approach, and while there are many community-based and family literacy initiatives throughout the country, “in most cases, the link between them and school-based initiatives is minimal” (NESF, 2009, p. XIII).

NALA (2009, p.9) argue that there is a “need for schools to engage with family literacy and support family learning and adult learning initiatives led by other stakeholders”.

- **Recommendation:** Strategies need to be developed and supported to promote partnerships between families, schools and other stakeholders as part of improving access to and provision of family literacy programmes.

Recommendation: Establish a budget for a DEIS family literacy initiative to cover all disadvantaged families, and as a first step in this regard, support family learning initiatives in all schools in designated areas of disadvantage.

Recommendations – Developing provision

Family literacy approaches should include opportunities for intergenerational learning and, wherever possible, lead both adults and children to pursue further learning. While the survey did not capture the range of qualifications people are attaining, a significant percentage of participants (80%) responded positively when asked if they or a member of their family had taken part in any education or employment schemes. The connection to education and training schemes appears to be quite strong.

- **Recommendation:** Further work is needed to establish the extent to which education and training programmes and labour market schemes effectively promote literacy attainment and whether there are opportunities to build in family literacy approaches to these schemes.

The data in this survey illustrates the variety of family literacy practices that are engaged with on a daily and weekly basis, including oral and aural literacy practices, numeracy practices, reading and writing practice and technology literacy practices. The challenge is to integrate the internet, mobile phones and computers into family literacy programmes and work to improve access to these mediums.

- **Recommendation:** Develop family literacy approaches that incorporate multi-media and new technologies to promote engagement in family literacy programmes.
- **Recommendation:** Provide support for family literacy programme providers to incorporate multi-media and new technologies into their programmes.
- **Recommendation** for practitioners: The role of community and voluntary organisations in promoting and supporting adult literacy approaches needs to be further explored.

When asked if they use any local group the percentages were low so there is room for developing the community and voluntary sectors' contribution to the promotion of family literacy approaches.

- **Recommendation:** Connections between those offering access to family literacy programmes and community and voluntary sector organisations could usefully be developed to promote awareness of the value of family literacy programmes.

Recommendations – Further research

Central to building good practice in family literacy provision is the role of research in building our understanding of what is required, how it can best be provided and evaluating the effectiveness of interventions. This research project has demonstrated the range of family literacy resources and practices that are prevalent among a cohort of participants in family literacy projects. It has, as all research does, raised a number of questions that require further exploration and elaboration.

This research has shown that there is low use of public library facilities among adults, but that they appear to use these facilities with their children. This suggests a greater concerted effort is required to encourage adults to use library services to build their own literacy skills.

- **Recommendation:** Research is needed to identify the factors that prevent the use of libraries and the extent to which those who are seeking to improve their literacy levels could be enticed to use this public resource. In addition, work is needed to explore options for integrating these services into family literacy programmes.

Summary

This study has revealed a range of family literacy resources and practices among participants. The challenge now is to expand the range of options available to people to engage in developmental activity and provide supports to help families improve their literacy wealth.

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