

**Family learning in
action:** an overview of
family learning
programmes



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

Family learning programmes can help to overcome the barriers to learning felt by families who find it difficult to relate to school learning. It is an important way of recognising and building on the strengths of families who hitherto have felt excluded or marginalised from the expectations of school and society. This research provides an overview of family learning as it takes place in local communities and details the benefits of participation to the families involved. A case study design was used with the purpose of interviewing parents attending the family literacy programme, adult literacy organisers (ALO's) course tutors and school staff who support the programmes.

Our findings show that participation in family learning is beneficial to families and has a positive impact on the relationship between home and school. A summary of the research findings is presented below

Research findings.

Benefits to families

Our findings show that taking part in family learning:

- Has provided parents with an opportunity to socialise with other parents;
- Has provided parents with support, information and help needed to develop their learning skills;
- Has been of benefit to families regarding helping with their children's homework and other related school work;
- Has provided all round family support that extends beyond the requirements of school work;
- Has helped to alleviate some of the pressure experienced by parents with literacy difficulties; and
- The provision of a small allowance to cover additional costs e.g. childcare costs has assisted low income families to continue in and progress in family learning programmes.

Impact on the home school relationship

Participation in family learning programmes can also help to break down barriers between the home and school and facilitate a better relationship between parents and school staff.

Our data shows that participation in family literacy programmes:

- Has provided parents with a better understanding of the requirements of their children's school work;
- Has help to equip parents with the coping skills needed to interact more effectively with schools and school staff;
- Has raised a recognition among school staff of the important role family learning performs in enhancing the relationship between the home and the school
- Has had positive academic outcomes for the children involved; and
- Has helped facilitate better communication between the home and the school.

Finally, our findings show that the key factors that contribute to the success of the family learning programmes are that:

- All of the services have made concerted efforts to build good networking relationships with local schools and community services. The services emphasise the importance of this networking as fundamental to having a successful family learning service. To this end it might be valuable to look at ways to disseminate information on successful methods of networking to all family learning services;
- One of the services provided a small allowance to low income parents to cover any additional costs associated with taking part in a course. Perhaps this is something that might be taken into consideration when looking to attract marginalised and low income families into family learning programmes;
- All participants; parents, staff and school staff agree that participation in family learning programmes is having a positive impact between the home and school environments. With this in mind family learning programmes might explore ways of developing structures that facilitate and promote communication and collaboration between themselves and school staff, in particular the HSLC; and

- All three family learning programmes provide a very specific service that is tailored to local need. Therefore, it would be undesirable to try to adopt a 'one fit all' policy in relation to the design and content of family learning programmes. Each service has designed innovative and creative programmes that exemplify models of good practice in family learning. No doubt this good work is repeated in other family learning programmes around the country. Given the value of this work the IVEA with the support of NALA might examine ways to effectively share this information among all family learning practitioners.

In carrying out this research NALA is endeavouring to add to this knowledge base that exists in the area of family learning in Ireland. In this regard and in partnership with other relevant stakeholders, NALA will continue to promote the importance of family learning in combating generational educational disadvantage, and to be a support and resource to parents and practitioners engaged in family learning programmes across the country.

Introduction

Effective family literacy practices in Ireland are of particular interest to the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA). In its strategic plan 2007-2010 NALA placed a strong emphasis on research into family literacy practices in Ireland and to date has published two reports on this topic¹. NALA's focus on family literacy is from the perspective of the adult learner. In *Working Together: Approaches to Family Literacy* (2004) NALA suggests that a key feature of an adult education approach to family literacy work is the recognition that literacy is a broader concept than the needs and demands of school work.

The term family literacy describes: the uses of literacy within a family or wider community, especially activities which involve two or more generations; and education programmes which help to develop literacy and numeracy learning in a family context (NALA, 2004). The literacy learned at home and in the local communities is rich in the use of local language and the expression of the experience and history of families, communities and cultures.

In Ireland there are different models of family literacy programmes that take place in diverse settings. Such programmes aim to:

- support and develop the language, literacy and numeracy learning that happens in families:
- work with families where the adults are interested in the opportunity to develop their own basic education, as well as to help their children learn, build on literacy practices within families and communities:and
- aim to develop skills and confidence across generations.

In Ireland 'well known' family learning programmes have been documented and profiled, for example, the County Clare family learning service. This service is widely regarded as a flagship service in terms of its content, resources, learning materials and training for tutors. Whilst, acknowledging the contribution of the service to the development of family literacy programmes, with this research NALA is endeavouring to add to this knowledge base that exists in the area of family learning. We have included in this research family learning

¹At home with literacy: a study of family literacy practices
Taking care of family literacy work: an enquiry with parents

programmes that involves parenting in a teaching sense, that is, programmes that build and enhance the literacy skills of parents, rather than focusing on parenting skills.

The services are located at 3 different sites across the country. They are:

- Co. Wicklow VEC Bray Adult Learning Centre;
- City of Limerick VEC – Basic Education Solutions; and
- South Tipperary VEC Adult Education Service.

During the research we interviewed adult literacy organisers (ALO's), course tutors, parents who attend the programmes and local school staff. In the presentation of the study findings and in the case studies, representations of the participants experiences and perspectives are supported by excerpts from the interview transcripts. Fictitious names are used to preserve the anonymity of the participants.

Methodology

The techniques employed for use in the research were primarily qualitative methods. Qualitative methods were chosen because they are particularly designed towards discovery and they allow the researcher to explore identified themes and issues in great depth and detail (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). These methods were semi structured in-depth interviews with ALO's tutors and parents. A class observation during a site visit, and a self-administered questionnaire filled out by the ALO's. The questionnaire comprised the quantitative component of data collection and provides an overview of the type and frequency of programmes available in the three services.

A case study design was also used with the purpose of interviewing parents attending the family literacy programme and school staff who support the programmes. Case study research entails the detailed analysis of a single case and is concerned with the complexity and particular nature of the case in question (Bryman, 2001). The most common use of the term links the case study with a community, organisation or location and is also associated with qualitative research. In this report the purpose of the case study was to elicit data on the impact of attendance to the parents and to identify where possible the benefits of attendance

Ethical consideration and confidentiality

NALA has developed guidelines for good practice that emphasise the duty and responsibility of the researcher to:

- respect the rights and dignity of study participants;
- to obtain their voluntary informed consent to participate in the research;
- to safe guard their anonymity and confidentiality; and
- to be honest and open with them about the purpose of research and the destiny of the data.

These guidelines were adhered to and maintained during the course of this research. Data collected within each organisation was treated as confidential to the organisation and the NALA.

Family learning in Ireland

In May 2005 the government launched the *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools* (DEIS) action plan for educational inclusion (DES, 2005). Although it focuses on the primary and secondary sector, DEIS included provision for expanded family literacy programmes and recognition of the vital role of the home and community in children's learning experience and outcomes. The target of DEIS and of the subsequent *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016* is to reduce the proportion of pupils with serious literacy difficulties to less than 15% by 2016 (DES, 2005; Government of Ireland, 2007).

In 2009 the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF, 2009) reported on the progress made to date in improving child literacy and social inclusion. The general findings were that the delivery on DEIS objectives in schools has been delayed and patchy yet much good practice exists in the community sector and in the area of family literacy. NESF (2009) recommends greater cooperation between home, school and community in tackling the literacy gap and specifically mentions NALA's role in facilitating interagency literacy partnerships.

The services included in this research place a strong emphasis on partnership and networking at a local level, particularly with local schools and community services. They attribute a large portion of their success to these partnerships and the role they play in promoting the benefits, to families, of participation in family learning programmes. The three services are:

- Family learning in Co. Wicklow VEC Bray Adult Learning Centre;
- Family learning in South Tipperary VEC Adult Education Service; and
- Family learning in City of Limerick VEC - Basic Education Solutions (BES).

Many of the families who attend family learning programmes have children who attend DEIS funded schools. A significant proportion, though not all, of the parents who attend family learning programmes have literacy needs. As a consequence many family learning programmes are tailored to meet individual need through the provision of a variety of family literacy programmes. These include FETAC level 3 Child and Development Play, Family IT, Story Sacks and ESOL family learning for asylum seekers.

Below a brief profile of each of the three sites is provided. The profiles are accompanied by individual site tables that outline some of the programmes available in the services, the frequency of the programmes, the number of learners who attend the programme, the gender of the learners and the number of tutors who run the programme. Also included are case studies with parents in two of the sites and a description of a class observation at one of the sites.

Co. Wicklow VEC Bray Adult Learning Centre - Family learning

According to Census 2006 Bray is a town with a population of 27,041, of which 13,080 are males and 13,961 are females. The total of the population that had ceased formal education during the week of the census is 21,283 of which 3,118 left school with primary or no formal educational qualifications and 3,977 finished school at lower secondary level. The 2009 Department of Education and Science (DES) adult literacy returns, provided by the VEC's, show that the total number of adults availing of adult basic education in the Wicklow area is 1,295 (excluding ESOL, Back to Education Initiative(BTEI) and Intensive Adult Basic Education (ITABE)). Of this number 553 have primary or no formal educational qualifications, 533 have a lower secondary school attainment and 209 have upper secondary attainment. Of this number 63 people participate in family literacy programmes with females (58) significantly outnumbering males (5).

Family learning in Bray, Co. Wicklow began its life when the Co. Wicklow VEC Bray Adult Learning Centre (ALC) made an application to the local community partnership for funding to develop a family learning based project. Funding was secured to conduct an assessment of need for family learning in the area. The need for such a programme had initially been identified by the service in consultation with a home school liaison teacher with the local school.

Like people didn't know what family learning was [back then] I'm not sure even at that stage if I knew what it was myself...I kind of formed an idea of what it was and then presented it to the home school liaison teacher (staff member Co. Wicklow VEC, Bray ALC).

When the research was completed the service gave a presentation on the findings and invited local parents along to gauge their opinion and feedback on the findings. Following on from that consultation process a family learning programme was developed incorporating feedback from parents. Initially the programme comprised of parents telling and reading stories to children. However, over the years, and based on continuous consultation with parents, the service has evolved to a stage where it now offers to:

- Support the educational needs of families;
- Encourage parents to become involved in their child's education; and
- Facilitate parents to meet their own learning needs.

Co. Wicklow VEC's family learning programmes are held in six of the VEC's adult learning centres and classes are also held in outreach centres including the local schools. Co. Wicklow VEC Bray Adult Learning Centre has developed strong and durable relationships with some of the local school staff, in particular the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) teachers. Through their interaction between the home and the school the HSCL has been instrumental in identifying and recruiting parents to participate in family learning. As a welcome addition the schools have also made space available in the school building to house the family learning programmes. The programmes take place during school hours and this helps to overcome any child minding issues for parents.

Networking

As stated above Co. Wicklow VEC Bray ALC advocate a partnership approach to the implementation of their family learning programmes. It has a particularly strong partnership with the local DEIS schools, and the local HSCL teachers are very involved in the school based programmes, which are provided by Bray ALC. They are in regular contact with the ALO and course tutors and have an active role in identifying and recruiting parents to the family learning programmes. During interview with one of the HSCL teacher he reported that he has noticed a marked improvement in the school performance of children's whose parents attend the courses, and among the parents themselves.

The main thing is the confidence. The key factor is the parents become much more involved and parental involvement is hugely important to the child doing well in school. It's great to get the parents, especially those who might have had a

negative experience of school, coming into the school and taking part (HSCL teacher, Bray).

Many of the family literacy programmes take place during school hours, and the school provides the material resources needed for example an available room for the programme, to the parents and tutor. All agree that this partnership approach is fundamental to the success of the family literacy programme. According to the HSCL as well as an improvement in the child's school work another significant benefit of parents participating in family learning is the impact on the child's attitude to school.

You can see an almost immediate improvement in their [child's] concentration in the classroom, completion of homework, attendance and general overall behaviour (HSCL teacher, Bray)

It is the view of the HSCL that this tangible improvement in the child's educational development is largely attributable to the parent's participation in the family learning programme. He has also noticed that parents who take part in the family learning programmes tend to become more involved in the running of the school and in organising schools based activities. Moreover, the enhanced level of cooperation between the school and the home is beneficial to the child's educational development and experience. It also facilitates an improvement in the relationship between the parents and school staff, in particular, class teachers.

Stella's story

Stella is a mother of two, one grown up daughter and a son is who is school going age. She is involved in local community activities and plays a strong role in promoting local issues and concerns to politicians in the area. Stella was first introduced to family learning through her involvement in the parents' association in the local school. The school had advertised the family learning programme through letters sent to parents offering them an opportunity to participate on the course. The timing was perfect for Stella as she had recently been made redundant and found that she had the time on her hands.

I had been made redundant, I was working full time so I never really got involved in the school ... then the courses came up and you just got involved. I went to a coffee morning and the next minute you were doing stuff, so that's basically how it happened.

Stella reported that she found participation in the family learning programme beneficial in a number of ways. It provided her with 'fun ways' to help her child with his homework and this in turn was transmitted to her child who started to enjoy his homework more.

I done the Story Sacks and it was beneficial to the kids because it was helping you to do stuff with the kids and to, you know, educate them in a fun way. It's also an informal way to get to know people. Its a fun way to learn, more relaxed, because I'm not educational, I didn't finish school I just done my Junior Cert.

Participation in the programme also provides Stella with a social outlet where she meets with other mothers in a relaxed environment and share common experiences. Although Stella describes herself as 'not educational' she enjoys the new learning opportunities the course has opened up for her. She does not have specific literacy needs, however, participation in the course has introduced Stella to the world of IT and while she is still very much in the learning stage its something that she enjoys and wants to continue with.

Below is a table of the programmes that Co. Wicklow VEC Bray ALC ran during 2010.

Table 1: Co. Wicklow VEC Bray ALC 2010

Name of VEC	Type of programme	Frequency of programme	Number of learners	Gender of learners	Number of tutors
Wicklow VEC	FETAC Level 3 Child Development and Play	14 weeks – 2hrs per week	6-8	Female	1
	Story Sacks (parents or parents and children)	6-8 weeks	6-8	Female	1
	Maths support for parents	8-12 weeks	6-8		1
	Irish language support for parents	8-12 weeks			
	Family Language	8-14 weeks	10-12	Male/female	1-2
	Creative activities for parents and pre-school children	6 weeks	6-8 and children	Female	1-2
	Settling into secondary school	Workshops	10-12	Male/female	1-2

For further information on Co. Wicklow VEC’s family learning programmes and the VEC’s other adult basic education services in the Wicklow area log onto www.wicklowvec.ie

South Tipperary VEC family learning

Data from Census 2006 shows that 83,000 people live in the South Tipperary area, 42,250 are males and 40,971 are females. Within the population the data shows that the total number of the population who has ceased full time education is 57,000 individuals. Of this number 11,136 have primary or no formal educational, 14,508 finished formal school at lower secondary level and 17,414 upper secondary level.

The DES adult literacy returns show that in the South Tipperary area 582 adults are involved in adult basic education (excluding ESOL, BTEI and ITABE). Of this number 199 learners have primary or no formal educational qualifications, 325 completed school to lower secondary level and 58 to upper secondary level. South Tipperary has a large number of migrant families who attend family literacy programmes and their participation rates in adult literacy are as follows. Total number participating is 115 individuals. Of these 26 have completed primary education, 57 lower secondary education and 38 upper secondary education. The vast majority of the learners (106) are categorised as migrant workers with the remaining 9 categorised as asylum seekers. The majority of asylum seekers are early school leavers and South Tipperary VEC has adapted their family learning programmes to suit the need of this particular population.

We do family learning in Carrick on Suir but we're doing it differently there. There is an asylum seeker hostel there and there are a lot of early school leavers in that group. There's also a lot of different nationalities. So we started a family learning group with parents and children and we've had such interest in it that we've had to do two classes(staff member South Tipperary).

Family learning in South Tipperary began approximately seven years ago when the local Adult Literacy Service responded to the needs of a particular group of parents. Staff from the local Community Development Programme approached the service about helping parents who were struggling to help their children with school homework, in particular, Irish and maths. More recently the service has identified, mainly through the local schools, a need for family learning for new Irish communities.

South Tipperary has a long tradition of working with families from minority communities. In 2006 the service was the winner of the NALA/EBS ACE Award for their Barrel Top Wagon

Project. This involved the design and construction of a Barrel Top Wagon involving men and women from the Traveller community in Clonmel. Family learning provision in South Tipperary is needs based and as such offers a variety of programmes targeting national and non national families alike. They use a number of learning tools but have found the Life Copybook works especially well with non national families as it can be tailored to the requirements of the migrant families. The Life Copybook originated in France and was designed by an educationalist who worked with prisoners. The purpose of the tool was to allow the prisoners to stay engaged with their children while incarcerated. South Tipperary Family Learning Service has adapted it to address the needs of the migrant families they work with.

The Life Copybook is meant to make the integration process easier, to develop a feeling of belonging to a community, to fight against repression, confront cultures and migration paths from different angles (staff member South Tipperary).

Using the Life Copybook allows migrant families to tell the story of their migration to Ireland in a way that is accessible and easy to understand.

Networking

Like Co. Wicklow VEC Bray ALC, South Tipperary has a strong network of local development workers, local librarians, school staff and other stakeholders to support and promote its adult literacy work. The network is key in making the service the success

We have a very, very, good education network ... we have people from the schools, from the community development project, from the neighbourhood youth project, the RAPID coordinator organises it. There is even members of the business community ... this is a hardworking and vibrant network and we get so many referrals and interchange a lot of information at them [meetings]. Everyone is working and it's for the greater good, it's the synergy of the group that makes it, that brings such good outcomes for the community (staff member, South Tipperary)

This strong education network is viewed by the ALO as a vital component of delivering quality programmes to families in the South Tipperary area. Each of the family learning programmes is tailored to suit the specific needs of the families. This response to the identified rather than assumed needs of families has ensured the continuing success of

family learning in South Tipperary. Also, the diverse backgrounds and skills of the people involved in the network goes a long way to promoting and encouraging the continued success of the service.

Class observation

South Tipperary has a Parent Support Programme for families living in Tipperary Town. Some families are referred to the programme by local schools or health board staff, however the vast majority of the families are self referrals. The programme is run for two hours once a week for eight to ten weeks and a total of six families are involved in the programme including 2 fathers. We were invited along to observe the parents taking part in a class. On the occasion of the visit the parents were working on Story Sacks, which in terms of content and order of content follows the Co. Clare Family Resource Guide very closely.

During the class the parents were completing a Story Book that they can use at home with their children. Each parent's book is started and completed with a particular objective in mind. For example, one of the fathers was working on a book about cars and trains to share with his young son. The book included picture of cars and trains and the creative use of material and other resources that the child can touch and feel while reading the book. One of the mothers was working a book that included all her daughters 'favourite' things including fashion, makeup and cooking. She was having difficulty getting her daughter to go to bed at night and thought the book might be just the enticement needed. She could read the book to her daughter, but her daughter could also take part by describing the various pictures and materials in the book.

I'm making this as a bedtime story for my daughter, she won't go to bed at night the little devil. But if I read this to her at bedtime I just might be able to get her to go to sleep (laughs) (parent, South Tipperary).

This mother reported how attending the programme and engaging in the activities had encouraged her to adopt a new approach to dealing with her children's 'difficult' behaviours, that is, not wanting to go to bed at bedtime.

Before, now, I would just get annoyed and lose the head, but now I think about ways of doing things different. Like, she'll be delighted with this book and I'd have never thought of doing that before (parent, South Tipperary).

According to parents, attendance at the family learning programme has had a number of unanticipated beneficial outcomes, including increased self confidence especially when helping their children with their school work. It offers a social outlet in which they can get together with other parents in a relaxed and supportive environment. It also allows parents to share their experiences of helping children with homework and on how to best interact with the school and school staff.

South Tipperary provides a variety of family learning programmes to national and migrant families. Below is an outline of the family learning programmes available

Table 2: Family literacy programmes South Tipperary VEC 2010

Name of VEC	Type of Programme	Frequency of Programme	Number of Learners	Gender of Learners	Number of Tutors
South Tipp VEC	ESOL – The Life Copybook & Family Learning in KRC (migrant parents)	Weekly for 8 weeks	20	11 Female, 9 Male	2
	Family Learning in KRC	Weekly for 10 weeks	7	5 Female, 2 Male	1
	ESOL Family Learning for Asylum Seekers (Group 1)	Weekly for 6 weeks	12	12 Female	2
	ESOL Family Learning for Asylum Seekers (Group 2)	Weekly for 6 weeks	6	6 Female	2
	ESOL Family Learning for Asylum Seekers (Group 1)	Weekly for 8 weeks	10	10 Female	2
	ESOL Family Learning for Asylum Seekers (Group 2)	Weekly for 8 weeks	8	8 Female	2
	ESOL Family Learning, Parents of Primary School Kids (Group 1) Clonmel (St. P+P)	Weekly for 13 weeks	7	4 Female 2 Male	1
	ESOL Family Learning, Parents of Primary School Kids (Group 2) Clonmel (St. P+P)	Weekly for 10 weeks	8	6 Female 2 Male	1
	ESOL Family Learning, Parents of Primary School Kids (Tipp Town)	Weekly for 8 weeks	7	5 Female 2 Male	1
	Maths Family Learning, Parents of 3 rd and 4 th class boys Clonmel (St. P+P)	Weekly for 8 weeks	6	6 Female	1
	Storysacks Family Learning, Parents of Jr. And Sr. Infants – boys, Clonmel (St. P+P)	Weekly for 8 weeks	7	7 Female	

For further information on family learning programmes in South Tipperary and other adult literacy classes log onto www.southtippals.com

City of Limerick VEC – Basic Education Solutions - family learning

Census 2006 data reveals that 52,539 live in Limerick city. Of this total population 25,698 are males and 26,841 are females. In terms of educational attainment the census data shows that in total 35,630 individuals have ceased full time education. The data also shows that 7,856 people left formal schooling with no formal or a primary qualification, 8,546 left secondary school at lower level and 9,921 at upper secondary level. The DES adult literacy returns for 2009 show that in the City of Limerick 790 people are enrolled in adult basic education (excluding ESOL, BTEI and ITABE). Of these 180 have no formal or primary school qualifications, 238 completed lower secondary level education and 153 finished upper level secondary education.

Basic Education Solutions (BES), which is the adult literacy service in Limerick city, offers a wide ranging number of family learning programmes to families living in some of the RAPID Regeneration areas in Limerick City. BES offer a number of community based programmes that aim to engage hard to reach parents into family learning programmes and other basic education opportunities. The programmes target mothers and fathers and include the Dads and Lads IT programme which is run by the Community Education Department in Limerick City AES. One of the collaborative programmes available to young mothers living in the Southhill area of Limerick was the 'Moving Forward Programme'. Over the past two years the programme, which is led by the Southhill Family Resource Centre in Collaboration with Limerick City AES. The mothers, all of whom were Social Welfare recipients and had left school without formal educational qualifications, received a small allowance from the Department of Social Protection to cover additional expenditure incurred while attending the class e.g. childcare.

The payment of the allowance was initially used by the service as an incentive to encourage targeted parents to sign up for the programme and proved to be successful in that regard. However, the programme offers more than an allowance and has both educational and social and community components to it. It also has a high progression rate and many of the parents have moved into PLC courses and other community based courses including FETAC Level 5 Community and Addiction Studies Course based in Southill.

We look at progression, that's the idea of the Moving Forward Programme. We have somebody from adult guidance work very closely with the ladies and in the first year a lot of them progressed onto other courses. The idea was to try and get a group of

mothers in, get them to experience education and get them moving on ... that was the idea (staff member, Limerick)

The high progression rate and the concerted effort to encourage and equip parents with the skills they need to continue in education is continued beyond the duration of the programme. The parents are continuously supported in their progression into further education courses by the staff and agencies involved.

Networking

Like both Wicklow VEC Bray ALS and South Tipperary Adult Literacy Services Limerick BES values the importance of developing and maintaining local networks. The service targets people living in the Limerick city area with a particular focus on community based adult education being delivered in over 33 venues in RAPID/Regeneration areas. A strong emphasis is placed on recruiting 'hard to reach' parents, with little or no prior educational attainment and who by definition are less likely to engage in services in the area.

In order to do this the Service works with many community partners including local HSCL teachers to help reduce barriers to participation.

He, [HSCL] his thing is that he puts the parents and the children to the fore. He was specifically able to target the parents we were looking for and bring them into a group setting (staff member, Limerick).

The service also links in directly with other school staff including class teachers. This way they can identify children who are struggling with school work and by extension parents who may have literacy needs of their own. As a result of the close collaboration between the school a number of educational interventions programmes were put in place, including Magic Maths² for parents and children. The service is also innovative in its approach to advertising literacy courses. For example 'Sponge Cakes and Spellings' is a themed literacy and numeracy approach using baking. The course participants work towards accredited programmes such as FETAC Level 3 Food and Nutrition.

² Magic Maths programme equips parents with the skills to support their children with difficult mathematical concepts in the home setting.

One of the family learning programmes is running in a community based primary school and has the full support of the school principal. He first became aware of the importance of family learning when he worked as a HSCL. During this time he experienced first hand the negative impact that intergenerational educational disadvantage has had on local families and communities in which they live. As a result he is a leading advocate on the benefits participating in family literacy and offers vital support to the ALO and tutors who run the programmes.

In my opinion education is power. In this particular area alone you can have third and fourth generations of families with a history of early school leaving. It is now very important that we remove the barriers especially around parents negative experiences of school. They have gone through a system that has left them with shattered confidence and self esteem, and has virtually thrown them out on the streets (school Principle, Limerick City).

According to the Principal family learning programmes are a vital component in breaking the cycle of educational disadvantage and in bringing 'marginalised parents' back in to education. He views family learning programmes as a key element in reducing stigma and barriers and essential to the work of all schools, but specifically schools included in the DEIS programme.

Linda and Angie's stories

Linda and Angie are two young mothers in their twenties with four children of school going age between them. Both of the women participated in the Moving Forward Programme and are very honest about the fact that it was the allowance for covering costs that initially attracted them to the course.

However, as the women progressed through the course and developed new learning skills, the small allowance, while still welcome, became less and less of an incentive. As they grew in confidence and developed new learning skills they realised that regardless of the allowance they wanted to stay and complete the course.

Don't get me wrong its great getting the money, but I really enjoyed the course, I really did. We planned on doing other courses when that was over and even if we aren't getting paid I'd come back and do it again next year, if they run it (Linda).

We learned a lot, we did a load of spellings and a lot of maths skills. Just doing something like that makes your confidence come up and you're after meeting new people and you're speaking to new people and you're after doing all this work yourself and it's like here I'm not stupid at all. Do you know what I mean? (Angie)

The women reported how taking part in the programme had given them a new found confidence when helping their children with their school homework and had been instrumental in turning reading storybook into a new and fun adventure for mother and child.

I always helped them with their homework, but now I just feel more confident about what I'm telling them to do (Angie).

Do you know its great reading a story and its not just saying the words, its about voices and making it interesting. One day I was reading Little Red Riding Hood and I was doing the part about the Grandmother and I could see she [daughter] was waiting for it and so I dived on top of her and said 'all the better to eat you my dear'. She loved it, and I would have never thought of doing that before (Linda).

This quote illustrates how storytelling with young children is more than just looking at or reading books. It creates a relationship between the teller and the listener; between the listener and the story, in this case mother and child. Storybooks and storytelling also help children learn language and reading skills and much of this learning happens naturally at home. The following quote also highlights how the programme has been successful in its aim to encourage the women to progress in their education

I want to go on and do a childcare course, it's all booked out for this year, but I'll definitely book it for next year (Angie).

Before concluding the interview the two women went on to provide a ringing endorsement on the benefits to themselves and their families from taking part in the programme. They were also very complimentary about the level of interest and commitment show by all the staff involved.

Table 3: Family literacy programmes Limerick City VEC - 2010

VEC	Type of programme	Frequency of programme	Number of learners	Gender of learners	Number of tutors
City of Limerick	Family IT	Weekly	6	All Female	1
	Family IT	Weekly	5	All Female	1
	Family IT	Weekly	7	5 Female, 2 Male	1
	Family IT	Weekly	3	All Female	1
	Family Learning	Weekly	12	All Female	1
	Maths Box	Weekly	8	All Female	1
	Magic Maths	Weekly	4	All Female	1
	Spongecakes & Spellings	Weekly	9	All Female	1
	Spongecakes & Spellings	Weekly	5	All Female	1
	Spongecakes & Spellings	Weekly	9	All Female	1
	Storysacks	Weekly	12	10 Female, 2 Male	1
	Storysacks	Weekly	13	12 Female, 1 Male	1
	Storysacks	Weekly	6	5 Female, 1 Male	1
	Storysacks	Weekly	6	All Male	1
	Storysacks	Weekly	9	9 Female, 1 Male	1

For further information on City of Limerick adult education services and on Basic Education Solutions go to www.limerickcityaes.ie

Conclusion

The previous sections detailed family literacy programmes in the three different sites included in the research. Each site was chosen to illustrate the diverse variety of family learning programmes available throughout the country. The services are not inter-related and provide programmes that are tailored to suit the identified need of the families living in the areas in which they are located.

Family learning in Ireland is an effective means of engaging many marginalised families who may have had a negative experience of formal schooling, helping to reduce barriers to returning to education and allowing parents to improve their own literacy and by the same token break the generational cycle of educational disadvantage for families. Participation in family learning programmes can enable adults to acquire new literacies skills including improved reading, writing and skill and/or acquire new skills such as IT. It can allow parents to grow in confidence, improve communication between home and school and by extension change the relationship between the school and the community for the better.

Moreover the projects provide a safe and supportive environment where parents can interact together, have their literacy needs assessed, get help with their own literacy and in general receive a lot of positive reinforcement. The programmes are also vital resource for communities where literacy levels are low, particularly among certain sections of the adult population.

Our data shows that the primary motivation for parents participating in family learning programmes is to enable them to support their children's education, rather than developing their own literacy skills. However, improving their literacy skills has become a by product or added benefit of participation and indeed has encouraged some parents to continue to progress into further education and training courses. Feedback from parents indicates that attendance has had a positive impact on their relationship with their children whilst feedback from school staff illustrates a marked improvement in terms of school attendance and behaviour in the classroom.

Looking at the data we can ascertain that there are tangible benefits to families who take part in family learning programmes.

Benefits to families

Some of the benefits of participating in family learning programmes are that it:

- Has provided parents with an opportunity to socialise with other parents;
- Has provided parents with support, information and help needed to develop their learning skills;
- Has been of benefit to families regarding helping with their children's homework and other related school work;
- Has provided all round family support that extends beyond the requirements of school work;
- Has helped to alleviate some of the pressure experienced by parents with literacy difficulties; and
- The provision of a small allowance to cover additional costs e.g. childcare costs, has assisted marginalised and low income families to continue and progress in family learning programmes.

Impact on the home school relationship

Participation in family learning programmes can also help to break down barriers between the home and school and facilitate a better relationship between parents and school staff. Our data shows that participation in family literacy programmes:

- Has provided parents with a better understanding of the requirements of their children's school work;
- Has help to equip parents with the coping skills needed to interact more effectively with schools and school staff;
- Has raised a recognition among school staff of the important role family learning performs in enhancing the relationship between the home and the school
- Has had positive academic outcomes for the children involved; and
- Has helped facilitate better communication between the home and the school.

Finally, it is important to note the key factors that have contributed to the success of family learning in Wicklow, Limerick and South Tipperary VEC's:

- All of the services have made concerted efforts to build good networking relationships with local schools and community services. The services emphasise the importance of this networking as fundamental to having a successful family learning service. To this end it might be valuable to look at ways to disseminate information on successful methods of networking to all family learning services;
- One of the services provided a small allowance to low income parents to cover any additional costs associated with taking part in a course. Perhaps this is something that might be taken into consideration when looking to attract marginalised and low income families into family learning programmes;
- All participants; parents, staff and school staff agree that participation in family learning programmes is having a positive impact between the home and school environments. With this in mind family learning programmes might explore ways of developing structures that facilitate and promote communication and collaboration between themselves and school staff, in particular the HSLC;
- All three family learning programmes provide a very specific service that is tailored to local need. Therefore, it would be undesirable to try to adopt a 'one fit all' policy in relation to the design and content of family learning programmes. Each service has designed innovative and creative programmes that exemplify models of good practice in family learning. No doubt this work is repeated in other family learning programmes around the country. Given the value of this work the IVEA with the support of NALA might examine ways to effectively share this information among all family learning practitioners; and

In conclusion the success of the family learning programmes included in this report is testament to the dedication, commitment, hard work and the determination of the staff who provide a much needed service to disadvantaged communities. NALA will continue to

promote the importance of family learning in combating generational educational disadvantage in Ireland and to be a support and resource to parents and practitioners engaged in family learning programmes across the country.

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