



NALA

National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

Impact and Implementation of Family Literacy Programmes:

Review and Recommendations



The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is an independent member-based organisation, working on improving adult literacy in Ireland since 1980.

We are:

- the voice of adults wishing to improve their literacy skills, and
- committed to raising adult literacy levels.

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Executive summary

This review examines existing studies and policy statements regarding the contribution that family literacy programmes can make to the literacy skills of children and adults. It also examines the broader effects in the family/school context. The review is especially concerned with policies and how such programmes can be devised and introduced.

Looking at the international literature, a very large number of studies of family literacy have been carried out together with some influential reviews and meta-analyses that collated the major findings.

The earliest studies involved paired-reading, usually parent-child and vice versa. Positive effects were found on subsequent school performance – a finding that held true for children from a variety of backgrounds.

Later studies showed that when children acquired specific literacy skills the benefits were greater than when parents merely read to their children. Summer reading programmes have also been shown to benefit children's literacy.

There is evidence that children from areas and schools designated as disadvantaged benefit greatly from such programmes. Studies that have attempted to quantify the extent of the enhancement brought about by family literacy programme have concluded that the effect can be as large as other significant educational interventions like reducing class size.

The benefits of family literacy are found to be greater if parents are trained in the relevant skills. This may involve social and emotional as well as cognitive features. These factors are especially important in ensuring that families experiencing educational disadvantage can be involved in family literacy programmes.

The international literature also shows that there are implementation issues with family literacy programmes. Some of these challenges derive from short-term funding. There is a need for partnerships between the various agencies to make relevant expertise available to ensure that programmes are effective.

The available research in Ireland in this area is broadly consistent with the international work. It is especially noteworthy that the extent of parental involvement is dependent on parents' perception of school support for their work. The indications are that existing programmes could be strengthened in a number of ways. These include:

- suitable training for parents, particularly parents from disadvantaged communities; and
- better communication between home and school in relation to literacy skills.

There is also a need to devise programmes that focus particularly on local needs.

Some recent work has underlined the beneficial effects for families of literacy programmes in ways that go beyond the development of literacy skills. These include social and emotional benefits for children and parents and the development of parents' confidence in their own literacy skills.

While relevant recent studies have been especially concerned with how family programmes can compensate for experiences of disadvantage, the most consistent finding is that children from all backgrounds benefit from the experiences.

Two other points emerge in contemporary research. Firstly, the involvement of both fathers and mothers is important for the achievement of the full potential of the programmes. Secondly, the positive impact of family literacy programmes can persist for some years after the experience, unlike some other interventions that have only short-term effects.

In considering interventions, the evidence relating to other parenting programmes is especially relevant. The beneficial effects of programmes that are directed mainly at social and emotional development, for example, **Incredible Years**, are especially noteworthy. This is because the positive effects extend to academic performance including literacy gains.

Also relevant are programmes that focus exclusively on school experiences. They can benefit children substantially and are especially effective when they:

- co-ordinate a whole-school approach to literacy;
- emphasise higher-order skills; and
- emphasise refined classroom management techniques.

The evidence is conclusive enough to allow guidelines for the development of family literacy programmes on a much broader scale than at present. It is especially noteworthy that the positive effects are found from childhood to adolescence and across different socio-economic backgrounds. Furthermore, beneficial effects are found across a wide variety of organisational arrangements.

The research provides broad guidelines regarding the most effective forms of family programmes. For example, the practice of providing core literacy skills is more effective than simply reading to children.

Because of the potential contribution of family literacy programmes to the education system, the present review has given attention to policy-relevant publications and their implications. With regard to literacy achievement, there was evidence that for decades the level of performance of Irish adults and children was below many other countries and had not increased over the years. However, more recent studies, especially of older children and adolescents, have found evidence of substantial improvement.

Because of the national importance of literacy skills, policy statements like those of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) are critically important. It is worth noting that the NLS gives particular attention to the importance of the partnership between home and school. In the development of programmes, a critical factor is the plan for implementation. In this regard, the ideas for inter-agency collaboration set out in the **Better Outcomes Brighter Future** (BOBF) policy statement could provide important guidelines at national level.

The central recommendation is for a national programme of family literacy that would have the main features of the successful programmes considered here. A critical component will be the collaboration between schools and other relevant agencies including non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In this context, the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) could have a major role to play.

In the short-term, it is recommended that a pilot programme located in a number of areas could provide a model for all subsequent programmes.





Context and overview

Concern is frequently expressed regarding the level of literacy competence of adults and children in Ireland. The outcome of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) in the late 1990s caused a huge concern. The major finding was that a significant number of adults (25%) scored at the lowest level of literacy in the study (Level 1 or below).

More recently, in 2013, the results of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) showed that just under 18% of Irish adults scored at or below Level 1. In addition, 42% of Irish adults scored at or below Level 1 in the domain of 'problem-solving in a technology rich environment'.

The outcomes of these studies have resulted in calls for policy changes to address these challenges. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2012) **National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020**, proposed initiatives to enable parents and communities to support children's literacy and numeracy development.

Drawing on research on the benefits of family literacy, **Family Learning in Action** (NALA, 2011) also proposed a comprehensive approach to family literacy to help overcome the barriers to learning that were experienced by some adults and children.

The report by the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) **Child literacy and social inclusion: Implementation issues** (2009) is also relevant. It focused on identifying best practice as well as effective supports for effective policy implementation in school, home and local community.

The **European Union High Level Group of Experts on Literacy: Report** (2012) is also worthy of attention. The specific focus of this review is on the contribution that family literacy programmes can make to children's literacy performance, as well as the additional benefits that accrue to parents and other participants. In this context, we review the research findings in relation to the large number of studies that have examined family literacy programmes outcomes.

Furthermore, we look at the extent to which benefits deriving from family literacy support initiatives extend to other domains and especially to social and emotional development. A particular focus is on aspects of the family literacy environment that are most effective in improving literacy performance. Because the findings converge with those on adult literacy, we also examine some of the central aspects of policy and practice impinging on literacy of adults, especially parents. Arising from these findings we put forward a number of recommendations on family literacy.

In line with these objectives, we present a synthesis of the research on family literacy from the late 1980s to the present day. Attention is given to international, European and research carried out in Ireland.

We present the outcomes of the research with a particular focus on reviews and meta-analyses that have been carried out, as well as on the factors that promote the successful implementation of these programmes.

The next section of this report examines some recent refinements with a special focus on the effects on family members especially parents. In addition, we examine the impact of programmes on aspects of development that are not strictly relating to literacy, especially social and emotional aspects.

Following this, we present a brief overview of the beneficial effects of other parenting programmes as well as interventions that are exclusively school based. We present an overview of potentially important conceptual links between family literacy and other relevant research areas, following which we set out the main conclusions of the literature review.

The report then goes on to examine policy issues. We present an overview of the national and international assessments of literacy allowing for comparisons with other countries, particularly in relation to assessments carried out in the last 30 years. Of particular importance, from a policy perspective, is the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) and the relevant features of this policy statement are examined.

Finally, the issues concerning policy implementation are set out against the BOBF policy statement, which proposes a series of national aims for children and young people. Furthermore, this report outlines an overarching national framework for the implementation of these relevant policies.



Family literacy: international, European and Irish findings

In looking at the research on family literacy, we examine the research as it has evolved over the last 30 years. As will be seen, the questions guiding the research have changed. Following this overview, the range of positive outcomes will be examined and particular attention given to identifying some factors that facilitate positive results. It is noted that the earlier studies came largely from the US, while European studies as well as work emanating from Ireland have been published in more recent times.

Early findings: paired book reading

Early studies were concerned with how parent-child book-reading experiences during childhood set the stage for future progress in academic achievement. One of the first major meta-analyses of the early empirical evidence on this issue was **Joint book reading makes for success in learning to read: A meta-analysis on intergenerational transmission of literacy**, Bus et al. (1995).

In examining the research, the authors focused on the frequency of book-reading to preschool children. They also examined the extent to which any beneficial effects of such reading might be moderated by social background factors. Another consideration on the Bus et al. review was an effort to include studies where data was obtained by observation rather than relying exclusively on parents' reports. The review also examined the extent to which there were differences associated with the age of the child, especially the extent to which there were larger effects with preschool children than with older children

This meta-analysis led to the conclusion that parents reading with their pre-school children is positively related to important outcome measures, including language growth and literacy achievement. Furthermore, because this was a meta-analysis drawing on the actual results of studies, it was possible to compute an average effect size. This yielded an estimate that was regarded in size as between moderate and substantial.

It is also important to note that the effects of frequent book-reading were not dependent on the social background of the family. The beneficial effects of book-reading were evident in homes with strong support for literacy as well as those characterized by educational disadvantage.

Another significant outcome emerging from the Bus et al. (1995) meta-analysis was that the beneficial effects were evident if frequency of reading was the measure or if a broader composite measure was used. This pattern of results suggests that book-reading may be an important part of a literate environment in which book-reading is a central feature.

Two other aspects of the conclusions are especially relevant. Firstly, book-reading in the home emerged as being as important as phonemic awareness as a predictor of later reading achievement. Secondly, the effect was partly dependent on the age of the child. Specifically, the effect of home-reading became relatively smaller at the stage where children were able to read on their own.

Later findings: home literacy activities

The review carried out by Senechal & Young (2008), was concerned with giving an overview of research in the intervening period following the Bus et al. (1995) publication.

The focus was especially on which aspects of family literacy interventions were critical in bringing about improvements in reading acquisition. They noted that parents could be involved in their children's literacy development in a variety of ways. These could range from general aspects of parenting to specific involvement in learning activities including reading.

Furthermore, the authors noted that the review by Bus et al., was based largely on correlational data, which merely showed that involvement of families with literacy was associated with increased scores. However, a difficulty of interpretation arose regarding the causal nature of the parental input.

The meta-analysis by Senechal & Young (2008), was based on 16 intervention studies with a total of 1,340 families. This meant it allowed for stronger inferences regarding the causal process. In addition, this analysis focused on a range of interactions rather than simply noting the frequency with which children were read to.

The main finding, supporting the earlier review, was that parent-child reading activities had a positive impact on children's reading acquisition. Especially important was the specific activity involved. The interventions in which parents tutored their children using specific literacy activities yielded larger effects than those in which parents listened to their children read books.

The review concluded that in deciding on the type of intervention to be implemented, attention needed to be given to the kind of activities that were central to the programme, since not all literacy activities were equally effective. They also suggested that two other factors were important: the resources needed to implement the intervention, and the reading level of children who were being targeted.

The review by Steensel, McElvany, et al. (2011), supported the findings published since the earlier reviews. Furthermore, they also attempted to give a more comprehensive picture in relation to the outcome of family programmes. In particular, they distinguished between **comprehension-related skills** and **code-related skills**. This distinction is related to theoretical models of emergent literacy development, which make a distinction between oral language capacity and code-based skills necessary for deciphering written language. At the same time various models recognize that reading involves a constant interaction between these sets of skills.

A particular strength of the Steensel, McElvany, et al, (2011) review is that it involved a large set of studies (47 samples) and incorporated a broad range of different types of programmes.

A number of important conclusions emerged from this review. The first concerns the types of programmes that were most typically used. The most frequently found were those that offered a broad range of activities, while only rarely did approaches focus on code-related skills to the exclusion of other facets.

The authors speculated that this tendency may have to do with the move towards holistic approaches rather than reading-readiness only. Furthermore, programmes involving a broad range of activities have the potential to last longer than those focusing on a specific activity.

A second finding was that semi-professionals were often responsible for parental training. In some cases, this came about because parent training was provided by mothers or fathers from the target communities, but who were somewhat better educated than the parents they supported. This may also account for the finding that semi-professionals often provided home visits since they belonged to the same communities as the parents being targeted for training.

With regard to the impact of family literacy programmes, the meta-analysis showed that there were positive effects with regard to both comprehension-related and code-related skills. It showed that the effect was the same magnitude for these two domains.

Another finding was that the type of programme did not have a differential impact on outcome. Thus, those approaches that focused on comprehension had a similar impact on code-related skills as had those centred directly on coding.

The reviewers took the view that this outcome may have been due to how the programmes were actually implemented. The basic idea guiding a programme may focus on a specific skill, but because of the nature of literacy, the parents involved may actually incorporate other features into their interaction with the children.

This raises an important point about the actual implementation of programmes. It has long been known that school curricular innovations may be implemented in quite different ways from that intended. A consistent finding has been that focusing on individual teachers resulted in short-term effects that tended to 'wash out' after a relatively short time. These findings have been reviewed by Morgan (2012) who showed that rather than attributing implementation failures to individuals, it was important to know why programmes took different directions than originally intended by the designers.

Similarly, in the case of family literacy programmes, it is especially important to examine the reasons for any deviations that occur from the set programme. There is a need to examine what happens at the level of interaction with children.

Summer reading programmes and literacy

Summer reading programmes have frequently been advocated, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. They can be either classroom-based or home-based.

As Kim & Quinn (2013) showed in their recent review of the programmes, the summer home-interventions were frequently designed to improve reading comprehension by providing access to a variety of narrative and informational texts.

Such programmes are also expected to enhance motivation to read at home as well as increasing exposure to print during the summer months. As might be expected, such programmes differ substantially from each other. Some prepare children and parents to enable children to benefit more; while others match the books involved with the level of reading of the target children.

The review by Kim and Quinn involved 41 home-based and classroom summer reading interventions in which children from kindergarten to Grade 8 participated. The main finding was that both home-based interventions, involving largely book-reading activities, as well as school-based programmes involving teacher-directed activities, showed significant improvements on a variety of reading measures.

Two other aspects of the results are of interest. Firstly, interventions that were based on activities have been shown in research to be more effective than those without such a rationale. Secondly, children from backgrounds designated as disadvantaged benefited to a relatively greater extent than those from other income backgrounds.

In explaining this difference, the authors suggested that the improvement for children from low-income families may be due to the finding that without an intervention, these children made no gains during the summer months. In contrast children from non-disadvantaged backgrounds continued to make gains in reading achievement during this time.

Picture from Europe

The research synthesis by the National Research and Development Centre (2011), was based largely on European family literacy programmes. It set out the results in the context of existing meta-analyses and included American studies.

This review was concerned with family literacy programmes and:

- the size of the beneficial effects;
- the extent to which it was possible to identify any other benefits besides achievement; and
- whether or not some families benefited to a greater extent than others.

To enhance the contribution to policy, the study involved interviews with policy makers and other stakeholders in member states. It also examined case studies in Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Romania, Turkey and the UK.

The review concluded that family literacy programmes had an impact on reading achievement in school. The NDRC review attempted to quantify the beneficial effect compared to other educational interventions. They concluded that while there were major differences between interventions in this area, many of the studies showed achievement gains that were larger than for other courses of action.

They concluded that the size of the impact for family literacy was greater than that found in:

- studies of giving homework to children; and
- studies that have examined the impact of reducing class size.

The implication was that family literacy approaches had a stronger impact than many educational interventions and a substantial capacity for improving reading scores.

The NDRC also concluded that long-term improvement in literacy was especially likely when parents received comprehensive training. This training experience should include not only the support skills that are central to literacy, but also involve guidelines in relation to social-emotional support. This outcome underlines the centrality of the holistic

nature of the acquisition of literacy – a finding that has emerged in several studies including the **Growing up in Ireland** longitudinal research.

Earlier programmes tended to be restricted to specific activities like book-reading, while the most successful programmes now give attention not only to broadly-based comprehension and language skills, but also to the motivational and emotional supportive context.

Another theme emerging in this review is the importance of the benefits that accrue to families from areas designated as disadvantaged. These benefits are likely to support long-term literacy development. The NDRC made the point that in a number of EU countries, there was evidence of enhanced empowerment for low-income and migrant parents following successful interventions. They particularly noted the important improved social and cultural capital as well as improved child and parent self-confidence.

However, the NDRC review drew attention to challenges and obstacles that were frequently found to prevent the full benefit of family literacy programmes. One difficulty was the absence of a clear policy regarding the institution/department that had prime responsibility for a family literacy programme. They noted that while there was acknowledgement that parents were the first educators, there was a practical problem for the school system in devising a way in which family literacy intervention could complement the school-based approaches to teaching literacy.

The review indicated a need for cross-departmental policy development and noted that advances had been made on this issue in the Netherlands.

In the absence of clear policies across Government Departments, the review suggested that family literacy policy and associated programmes could benefit substantially from the actions of NGOs – if these had particular interests in the area.

The review cited the benefits of NALA's support for programmes in Ireland as well as similar involvement of NGOs in Turkey, the Netherlands and the UK. This involvement resulted in these organisations serving as policy champions. The authors drew particular attention to NALA's support for family literacy programmes, which included a focus on both children's literacy development and the enhancement of parental literacy skills. The review identified the need for a coherent, overarching literacy strategy to encompass the full range of family types.

Finally, with regard to sustainability, the research of the NDRC identified four factors that increased the likelihood of programme success. These were:

- funding;
- programme quality;
- partnerships; and
- research-based evidence of success.

They also noted that media support may also be an important factor in sustaining the impetus for success.

Obviously these factors interact with each other rather than operate in isolation. Thus, reliance on short-term funding has an impact on involvement of partners, which in turn affects the quality of the programme.

A major problem for sustainability was found to be the lack of connection between various programmes resulting in a failure to sustain a coherent approach to family literacy and associated interventions.

The Irish perspective

A number of studies on family literacy have been carried out in Ireland. Three of these have been supported by NALA while a study based on the data from **Growing up in Ireland** has been concerned with the benefits of reading to young children. Each is considered in turn below as is the Clare Family Learning Project.

Family literacy study

The study of **Family Literacy Practices** (NALA, 2010) carried out by the School of Community Studies in the National College of Ireland, involved four projects in Ireland which provided family literacy services.

The focus was on families in areas that were designated 'disadvantaged' and involved both urban and rural settings. A total of 41 families were involved in the research with family size ranging from one to five or more children. The vast majority of participants rated their own literacy skills as good.

The main findings of the study concerned the frequency of various family literacy practices including technology-based activities. Of particular interest is the finding that 30% of the participants reported reading a book for pleasure on a daily basis, but that 23% never did so.

More than half (56%) of the respondents indicated that they read aloud to their children daily, but on the other hand 15% never did so.

It is of interest that this study showed quite high levels of use of computers and of the internet. Just 27% of respondents reported using computers at home on a daily basis and a further 24% did so at least once a month. The corresponding figures for the internet were slightly higher than this.

The main recommendation based on this study of family literacy practices was the need for resources for “family literacy services through a refreshed literacy strategy” (p. 59). In particular, it made the case for schools to engage with family learning and adult learning, including initiatives that were led by other stakeholders. A further recommendation was for family literacy programmes that involved multi-media and new technologies to enhance engagement with such programmes.

Study of parents’ experience

The study by Hegarty & Feeley (NALA, 2010), focused on parents’ experience of **Nurturing Language and Literacy in the Home**.

The research took the form of photo-voice workshops where parents photographed family literacy events and took part in discussions on the value and challenges of these activities. Three groups of 22 parents took part in the research with the aims of exploring their attitudes, perceptions and understanding of family literacy.

A number of important themes emerged in the research. Firstly, the parents tended to describe their accounts of family literacy as a form of care work and their “educational love labour”. This took precedence over almost everything else because of the moral imperative to foster fundamental skills in their children. This perceived duty was especially challenging for parents who are have “unmet literacy issues”.

A second major finding was around differences associated with children’s stage in school and also with differences between schools. Many parents were confident with the family literacy interaction prior to formal schooling, but felt less comfortable with their children’s learning when they entered school.

What was especially significant was that the extent to which parents perceived themselves to be involved depended on school ethos and leadership. Specifically, where schools worked closely with parents and provided guidelines for activities, they felt involved and informed. Conversely, if this did not happen, parents felt uninformed and distanced from the literacy experiences of their children.

The recommendations emerging from this study of family literacy work centred on the need for national policy to include a major commitment to family literacy on grounds of

enhancing the opportunities of both children and adults. Attention was drawn to the high level of motivation and willingness among parents to be involved in literacy activities. The report recommended the launching of suitable training programmes for parents with a focus on the needs of disadvantaged communities. The complex needs of diverse family groups was noted with a recommendation that a menu of modules be available for parents with varying needs.

Family learning study

The subsequent study **Family Learning in Action'** (NALA, 2011), presented an overview of existing family learning as it took place in local communities and focused on establishing the benefits of participation for the families involved.

Site interviews were carried out with adult literacy organisers, course tutors, local school staff as well as parents who attended the programmes. The outcomes of the research showed major perceived benefits for families. This included providing parents with the opportunity to socialise with other parents and develop their learning skills, especially for those parents who had literacy difficulties. Furthermore, there were major benefits in relation to breaking down the barriers and supporting effective communication between home and school.

The study also showed that family learning programmes promoted a recognition among teachers of the important role that family learning could have in enhancing the relationships and supporting positive academic outcomes for the children involved. The study recommended that programmes should be tailored to meet local needs and the idea that one prototype programme be delivered, was judged to be inappropriate.

Growing up in Ireland

Murray and Egan (2014) examined the benefits of reading to nine-month-old infants and the extent to which this practice was associated with higher scores on indicators of cognitive development in the **Growing up in Ireland** (GUI) study.

They found that reading to infants had a positive effect for *both problem solving and communication subscales* of the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ). However, this effect was less substantial than the effect of the informal activity of talking to an infant while doing other things. This was observed for both communication and problem-solving.

The analyses were robust to adjustment for several other factors including maternal education, gestational age, non-parental care, breastfeeding, attachment and presence of siblings.

The findings highlighted the potential of reading and talking to infants, not just for language and literacy development, but also for other aspects of cognitive development.

Clare Family Learning Project

The Clare Family Learning Project is a comprehensive and coherent programme of courses that focuses on several features of family learning. It is especially concerned with addressing inter-generational disadvantage through family learning. The courses run on a weekly basis for two hours and the priority are parents and carers who have left school at Leaving Certificate level or before.

Current courses have a broad focus and include computer skills, family health, learning Irish in the family, project maths for parents as well as helping your dyslexic child. Some of the courses have a specific focus on family members like 'Dads and Lads' and 'Family Learning classes for parents and Grandparents'. A special effort is made to make activities interesting and exciting as in the case of 'Fun Maths' and 'Fun Science'.



Theoretical underpinnings of family literacy: contributions and gaps

Important issues arise concerning the reasons why family literacy programmes can be expected to make an important contribution to children's school performance. How do family programmes link with other home and school influences? A related question concerns the factors that differentiate successful programmes from those that result in rather less learning gains. These questions are considered below.

With regard to the conceptual rationale for programmes, it is interesting that not much attention has been given in the research to this question. As evident from this review, the reason for the benefits are taken as given and most attention has been devoted to quantifying the size of the impact as in the meta-analyses summarised here. However, links can be made with findings that demonstrated the association of social background with school achievement during preschool and early years as well as during middle childhood (Feinstein & Bynner, 2004). Similarly, both mothers' and fathers' educational levels have been found to predict reading achievement as measured by teacher assessment, as well as in standardised tests (Sammons et al., 2012).

Another relevant and related empirical and theoretical tradition is concerned with understanding and addressing educational disadvantage. A variety of factors involving school, home and community have been identified as contributing to the relatively poorer performance of children from backgrounds designated as disadvantaged (Kellaghan et al., 1995). A significant body of studies have sought to design and implement interventions that can offset the negative impact on school performance and have reported substantial success (Archer & Weir, 2014).

From the present perspective, the factors that differentiate successful interventions are important since they can potentially inform guidelines for family literacy programmes. For example, Ramey & Ramey (1998) identified a number of principles of successful early intervention programmes.

These included **timing**; intervention programmes should begin early and continue to engage families for as long as possible. Furthermore, more successful interventions offer **direct provision** to a parent from a home visitor rather than indirectly through an intermediary.

Another principle is that the programmes should recognise individual differences with the result that individualisation of the programme can happen. Related to this feature is that interventions should be culturally relevant and tailored accordingly. The important implication is that the conceptual and empirical work on addressing educational disadvantage can inform the design and implementation of family literacy programmes.

Another potentially important link is between family programmes and the development of self-regulation. Self-regulation refers to goal-directed control of cognitions, emotions and behaviour. It has been shown to be important in domains including emotional control (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011); and school performance (Freeney & O'Connell, 2012).

As Zimmerman (2008) points out, unlike measures of mental ability/academic performance, self-regulation refers to the self-directive process that children use to acquire academic skills. These include setting goals, selecting and deploying strategies, as well as self-monitoring their effectiveness.

In other words, rather than focusing on the cognitive process of learning, self-regulation is concerned with contextual procedures like planning, organising and evaluating learning, but importantly the direction of these processes is in the control of the learner.

Part of the appeal of the application of self-regulation is that it has potential relevance across several domains of learning and has a foundation in some of the more advanced areas of modern psychology. These areas include social-cognitive theory and developmental psychology. Self-regulation also has strong empirical support in controlled experimental research and in qualitative studies based on experiences of teachers and parents (Morgan, 2014). A particularly interesting possibility would be to link the skills acquired in family literacy programmes with those features that are identified as being mediated through self-regulation.

Finally, an important link can be found in the holistic-interactive perspectives on children's development. As with other ideas discussed above there are no formal theoretical accounts spelled out, but rather a body of research findings that demonstrate how various aspects of development interact and have implications for family literacy programmes.

Psychological development has traditionally been partitioned into domains including cognitive development, physical development and social and emotional development. As a consequence, the research agenda has frequently involved identifying the influences that are especially important for each strand of development. This had resulted in the relative neglect of the understanding of the interaction that occurs across domains of development and between subject-areas in the curriculum. Specifically, we now know that progress, or setbacks, in one feature of development impact on other domains to a degree that has not been formally recognised.

Recent findings illustrate the emerging picture quite dramatically. There is substantial international evidence that success in one domain of development results in positive outcomes in other features (Durlak et al., 2011).

These findings are dramatically illustrated in the national longitudinal study of Irish children **Growing up in Ireland**. The study of nine-year-olds by Williams et al. (in press) showed important interactions between different domains of children's development involving the cognitive, personal and physical dimensions. What was especially significant was how social-emotional development seemed to impact on school achievement. Specifically, the ratings by teachers of socio-emotional skills and peer relationships were found to relate with achievement in core aspects of school performance including literacy.

An important question concerns the precise factors that are influential when looked at from the perspective of the features that promote emergent literacy. It is acknowledged that family literacy programmes include a broad array of activities. As noted in the review by Van Steensel et al (2011), some programmes provide instruction for parents only, while others target parents and children.

An important distinction is based on models of emergent literacy development. Theoretical accounts differ between an emphasis on code-related skills involving the abilities to decipher the written language code; and a focus on oral language skills involving semantic, syntactic and conceptual competencies. Based on this distinction the meta-analysis by Van Steensel et al. distinguished between effects of family literacy in two domains – code-related skills and comprehension related skills. However, the data suggested effects of roughly the same magnitude for both domains.

Overall, the links in the existing research between relevant conceptual issues and family literacy is tenuous. There is a major reliance on quantifying the effects of family programmes rather than linking the outcomes with other relevant research and theoretical advances. A change in emphasis would greatly benefit the research in the future.





Refinements in recent research

As evident from the literature review so far, most studies of family literacy have been concerned with:

- literacy outcomes;
- some of the features, at several levels, that contribute to their success; and
- the size of their impact.

Other studies have examined related outcomes or in some cases have examined if some children benefit to a relatively greater extent than others. With regard to these refinements, particular attention has been given to social and emotional outcomes as well as the extent to which children from backgrounds designated as disadvantaged benefit to a relatively greater extent from such programmes.

In addition, some studies have looked at the extent to which programmes initiated in school are implemented in children's homes, especially over time. There are also some studies that have examined the potential of family programmes for digital literacy. These refinements are considered here.

The work of Swain et al. (2014), involved interviewing 101 parents from 74 family literacy programmes in England around 12 weeks after they had completed their courses. The aim of these qualitative interviews was to identify the benefits, and to assess the impact of the programmes on their lives. The authors noted that many evaluations of family literacy programmes had focused exclusively on children's literacy outcomes. However, parents had the potential to make vital contributions to policy and practice, including the design of future successful programmes.

The study by Swain et al. highlighted a whole series of benefits for parents, their children, family and schools. For example, parents:

- learned to support their children's learning;
- placed greater value on education and learning;
- gained a deeper understanding of school systems;
- became more interested in developing their own literacy skills;
- formed social and supportive networks, which were maintained as their children moved through the school; and
- got opportunities for progression to further education and training.

Other studies have sought to identify the broader impact of family literacy programmes, especially in relation to social and emotional development. There is a substantial body of evidence demonstrating a positive interaction between academic skills and those that pertain to the social-emotional development.

The study by Baker (2013), involving a large American sample, was focused on the importance of the role of fathers and mothers in family literacy. In addition, the work examined the impact of the literacy programme on social and emotional development.

The results involving 5,190 children, who were close to four years' old at the time of the study, showed that mothers' involvement in literacy activities, including parent-child reading, telling stories and singing songs, had positive effects on progress in reading and mathematics achievement.

It also emerged that the fathers taking part in these same activities also had positive effects which were broadly on the same scale as that of the mothers.

With regard to the impact on social-emotional development, based on observations of children in their homes, it was found that the involvement of fathers and mothers in literacy activities resulted in a reduction of negative and challenging behaviours.

The experimental study by Lam et al. (2013), focused on preschool children in Hong Kong. Parents were required to engage in paired reading at least four times weekly for seven weeks. The results showed that the intervention group not only performed better in tests of word recognition and reading fluency than the control group, but there were also other beneficial effects. In particular, they were rated as more competent and motivated by their parents.

Furthermore, there were positive effects on parents also who had a higher sense of self-efficacy in helping their children with school work. In addition, and consistent with findings on the link with social-emotional dimensions, the parents in the experimental group reported that they had better relationships with their children following the intervention.

A critical feature of family literacy programmes concerns the extent to which children from disadvantaged communities can achieve relatively better outcomes with the assistance of such programmes. The importance of this issues is illustrated in a large-scale study by Eivers et al. (2004), who sought to establish the reading achievement of children in first, third and sixth class in schools designated by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) as disadvantaged.

It emerged that close to 30% of the children performed below the 10th percentile on a standardised test. However, in contrast, only 3% of children were in the top 10% on the same test. Furthermore, three times as many children scored in the lower category in the schools designated as disadvantaged.

An important outcome concerned the consistency over the years in school; there were few differences in the pattern of scores from first to sixth class. Two factors were especially influential in differences in reading performance. Firstly, gender differences were substantial, with girls outperforming boys at all class levels. Secondly, children whose school attendance was poor tended to do rather less well. This was especially important since some children's attendance rates were less than 50%.

The results of the study lead the authors to recommend a number of strategies to address the low levels of literacy including that literacy coordinators be appointed to help schools plan programmes and set goals. They also recommended that the time allocated to literacy should be substantially increased. These recommendations will be considered below in the context of the possible development of family literacy programmes at a national level.

The potential of family literacy in addressing disadvantage is evident in studies outside Ireland that have given particular attention to the extent to which children from disadvantaged families benefit from family literacy programmes. The recently published study by Grotluschen et al. (2016), examined the question of factors associated with low literacy proficiency based on the PIAAC data (survey of adult skills in OECD countries).

The data reveals a strong link between parental education and literacy scores in the next generation. The study concludes that the PIAAC data suggest that high-quality family learning programmes would make a major contribution to addressing this inter-generational link. Specifically, it makes the case that such programmes can enhance parental understanding of what children are learning in school while improving their own skills as well as those of their children.

Some research has focused on the extent that children from such disadvantaged backgrounds benefit to a relatively greater or lesser extent from family literacy programmes than is the case with other children. The American study by Baker (2013), of a large number of families found improvement in children from all backgrounds, including children from disadvantaged homes. Similarly, the study by Lam et al. (2013), gave particular attention to socio-economic background and found no differences, with children from all backgrounds benefiting from the family programme.

An important question concerns the extent to which implementation of a family literacy programme can be sustained in the medium to long term. A recent American study by Crosby et al. (2015), was concerned with how much a programme targeting parents to become involved through their children's school could be sustained.

The study showed that the implementation of the programme was associated with higher levels of children's achievement in basic literacy competencies and furthermore that the involvement of parents actually increased over the three years of the study. The implication is that successful approaches to family literacy provide a motivational impetus not only for children, but also for their parents.

A number of questions arise about computer use and the extent to which digital literacy can be a component of family literacy experiences. Relevant research includes data on access to computers in the home and the extent of internet use, as well as the kind of use that children make of Information and Communications Technology (ICT). There is also some limited data on the influences that can enhance digital literacy as well as the impact of use of the internet on school achievement.

The national longitudinal study **Growing up in Ireland** (GUI), examined the extent to which the national sample of nine-year-olds had access to computers and the internet among the participating 8,570 families. As might be expected the extent of access was partly dependent on social background. More than 93% of children from the highest social class group had access to a computer at home, while the corresponding figure for lower socio-economic status (SES) families was 78%. The study also showed that just over one third of the children made use of the internet for learning and close to the same percentage used the internet for fun.

The GUI study also examined the question of the association between internet use and achievement in reading. A number of interesting findings emerged. Firstly, any internet use, whether for fun or learning, resulted in higher reading scores than for children who did not use the internet. Secondly, there were specific benefits by using the internet for learning above and beyond use for fun. There was a social class difference with children from higher SES backgrounds who used the internet for learning and fun, achieving higher scores in reading achievement.

There is international evidence regarding access to digital technology and impact on literacy. A study by Newmann (2015) examined the effects of the use of touch-screen tablets on emergent literacy skills among 100 Australian pre-school children. It was found that greater access to tablets was associated with some pre-reading skills including letter-sound and name-writing skills. Furthermore, most parents believed that the tablets supported early literacy development.

Some recent studies have sought to explore how digital literacy can be enhanced in the family context. A study by Marsh et al. (2015), sought to explore the digital literacy practices in which children were involved. In this qualitative small-scale study, parents were co-researchers and recorded practices using a digital camera.

The finding suggested that children were engaged with other family members in a range of activities that enhanced their technological capabilities. However, no firm evidence was available beyond parental impressions. Furthermore, caution is needed in relation to the potential benefits of digital literacy skills, especially with regard to any presumed advantage over conventional literacy.

A study of more than 1,000 participants by van Deursen & van Dyk (2015), examined the relationship between traditional literacy (reading, writing and understanding text), internet skills and internet usage. The results indicated that traditional literacy was a pre-condition for the employment of internet skills. The outcome led them to conclude that differences in relation to traditional literacy would not easily be solved through making digital skills more accessible.





Alternatives: general parenting and school-based interventions

While family literacy programmes have received substantial attention in recent research and policy statements, other approaches to enhancing school achievement have also had strong advocates. Of particular relevance are parenting programmes that focus mainly on social-emotional and behavioural outcomes, which have been shown to be related to school achievement. Also worth attention are school interventions that focus specifically on literacy, but which have less emphasis on the home and family dimensions of influence. Since it is unlikely that all of these interventions and family literacy will be implemented at least in the short term, it is appropriate to consider the evidence relating to parenting programmes and school-based interventions.

Recent international work on parenting programmes has shown evidence of their long-term impact (Sandler et al., 2011). That review showed that there were major effects of parenting programmes not only on skills, but also through improvements in children's adaptation to stressful events – an effect that can persist into adolescence and beyond. There is also evidence that effective parenting programmes can impact on children's self-esteem and their relationship with others. These influences can have a major impact on adjustment and the prevention of substance misuse and anti-social behaviour.

In Ireland the **Incredible Years** programme has been implemented in a number of school areas including Dublin and Limerick. While there are three related components in **Incredible Years**; the parent-training programme is of special relevance here. It has been designed as a standalone intervention, which has been subject to a number of evaluations. A major evaluation of the parent and teacher components has sought to establish the potential importance of the programme for adjustment to and engagement with school (Archways, 2012). However, as shown below the implications for literacy acquisition were not established.

In an evaluation of the Incredible Years Parenting Programme carried out in Ireland by McGilloway et al. (2009), there were significant improvements in child behaviour, parenting competencies and well-being, which were still evident six months later.

A statistical analysis of scores on the main measure of programme effectiveness, (**The Child Behaviour Inventory**), indicated that there were significant differences between the intervention **Incredible Years** and the control group. The results also showed a decline in service use in the intervention group.

A study by Marcynyszyn et al. (2011), involving parents and two child-welfare agencies in New York, examined both the outcomes of the parent programme as well as the processes by which it made an impact. The study comprised interviews and surveys of parenting to examine any improvements in parenting behaviours as well as life satisfaction. The results indicated that participation in the **Incredible Years** programme was associated with:

- less parental distress;
- less dysfunctional parent-child interaction; and
- greater empathy and social support by parents.

These results taken in the context of the successful outcomes of the programme on child behaviour, indicate the holistic contribution of the parent programme not only to children, but also to family interaction and satisfaction.

The study of the long-term impact of both the parent-training programme and teacher component of **Incredible Years**, was aimed at examining the impact on childhood adjustment problems both at home and in school. It involved a follow-up after one year (Archways, 2012). The study showed that the combination of parenting features with the school-based intervention resulted in positive child outcomes among a group aged three to seven years.

It is worth noting that the actual implementation was monitored closely to ensure fidelity with the original plan and that there was a high rate of retention of participants in the project. Because of the observed positive effects on children's engagement with learning and the perceived benefits for parental competency, it could be argued that the conditions for children's learning have been enhanced. However, direct evidence on this point is lacking in the extant work.

While it is acknowledged that this lack of direct research findings is an important one from the present perspective, it should also be underlined that several studies have shown that social and emotional programmes like **Incredible Years** can enhance students' academic performance (Morgan, 2014). Part of the reason may be that children who are more self-aware and confident about their learning try harder and persist in the face of challenges. In other words, the self-discipline deriving from social/emotional learning helps children to manage obstacles so that those who are experiencing setbacks are more likely to persist.

It is also of interest that the benefits on academic achievement are found only when programmes are fully implemented. A major review by Durlak et al. (2011), indicated an average gain on achievement test scores of 11 percentile points as a result of successful implementation of programmes targeting social-emotional-behavioural domains.

While taking into account the need for further work in this area, these findings have implications for family literacy programmes, namely the interaction between school achievement and social-emotional influence. There are beneficial effects in one domain resulting in a positive impact on the other domains. This is specially the case with regard to the social-emotional dimension and school achievement.

A separate body of research is concerned with identifying the **school and teacher factors** that enhance literacy. The results of several large-scale studies of successful teachers have been synthesised in the work of Taylor et al. (2003), as well as by Kennedy (2007). They found a consistency across these studies and listed four factors that were especially important in effective literacy instruction. These are:

- reading aloud;
- shared reading;
- independent reading; and
- a range of other writing activities.

Also important was flexible classroom organisation with a balance of whole-class teaching, group work as well as individual activities with children learning to work and to regulate and monitor their own learning. An emphasis on higher-order thinking skills was another characteristic displayed by successful literacy teachers. This involved an emphasis on deep understanding of reading texts as well as writing with a variety of purposes and styles. Finally, successful literacy teachers displayed strong classroom management skills.

The study by Kennedy (2010) was based on providing multi-faceted professional development for teachers in a large disadvantaged school in Dublin. The professional development programme included:

- content knowledge in each of the essential literacy skills;
- relevant professional reading; and
- demonstration lessons and feedback on their teaching.

The results indicated that at the end of the intervention the number of children with low scores in reading, as measured by a standardised test, fell dramatically. In fact, the number of children who scored below the 10th percentile fell by three quarters while in contrast 20% of the children were now scoring about the 80th percentile. This was in contrast to the beginning of the study when none of the children had scored at this high level. In other words, the results showed that all children (moderate and good readers) benefited from the programme.



Conclusions of literature review

A number of conclusions are warranted on the basis of the research studies on family literacy considered here. It is especially striking that more than 500 studies have been carried out on this topic involving high-prestige publications. These include American, European and Australian work as well as research from Asian countries. As well as reports of original studies, a number of reviews of the extant literature have been published. These include some featuring meta-analysis, that is, the estimation of the size of the effect associated with an intervention, in this case with family literacy.

What is especially satisfactory is the degree of agreement between the original publications, reviews and meta-analyses. All of these conclude that family literacy programmes are beneficial for children in terms of their literacy achievement. While there is some level of disagreement regarding the size of the impact on literacy gains, the general consensus is that the impact is substantial and compares favourably with other interventions.

There is also agreement that family programmes are effective at all stages of development; it is especially striking that positive effects have been found for children ranging from early childhood to early adolescence.

The evidence also shows that beneficial effects are evident for all of the most central features of literacy acquisition. It is especially noteworthy that positive effects of roughly the same size have been found for comprehension-based skills as for code-related skills.

Finally, it is striking that learning gains have been observed for programmes that vary substantially in terms of organisational arrangements. For example, summer-reading programmes have been shown to have beneficial effects despite the constraints that arise from the limited time available.

What is less clear are the precise mediating factors that result in the strongest literacy gains. However, there are some clues in this regard. The evidence suggests that some kinds of literacy involvements are somewhat more effective than others. Programmes in which children have the opportunity to acquire specific literacy skills are more effective than other approaches like listening to a child read or reading to a child.

Furthermore, to the extent that the interactions between parents and children already have a rationale based on existing research, the benefits tend to be relatively greater. Thus, while book-reading can be central to a family literacy programme, it results in more benefits if this activity is a part of a broader picture of a literate environment.

As noted above the programmes might be expected to benefit from a clearer rationale and the setting out of guidelines for what works best. Remarkably, this has not been done despite the conclusion of many literature reviews that there is a need to pinpoint precisely which features are critical for success.

An important contribution is a major review by the NDRC, which sought to compare family literacy programmes with other educational interventions, while drawing on all of the published European and American research. They concluded that the impact of family literacy programmes was greater than for interventions that involved giving homework to children. More importantly, they also concluded that research showed that family literacy programmes had a stronger effect than reducing class size.

However, the NDRC report pointed to policy challenges in relation to the devising and implementing of such programmes. In particular, they noted the lack of clarity in nearly all countries with regard to the institution/department that had the main responsibility for family literacy programmes. They noted that there was a particular need to devise ways in which family programmes could link the school-based approaches to teaching literacy. As a result, there was often a reliance on short-term funding, which could impact on the quality of the programme and result in the various programmes not connecting with each other.

In more recent times, some evaluations of family literacy programmes have focused on other positive consequences, as well as literacy, and on the benefits for parents and schools. It is especially interesting that children's social and emotional development has been shown to be enhanced by family literacy programmes. The benefits to parents showed improved literacy skills and also greater confidence as parents, and in their lives beyond the programme. In particular, programmes have been shown to have positive effects on parents' self-efficacy in helping their children in a variety of ways.

Several studies have examined the extent to which children from disadvantaged backgrounds can benefit from family literacy programmes. The consensus is that children from these families benefit at least to the same extent as children from other backgrounds. This is a crucial finding given the challenges experienced by children on entering the formal school system. An encouraging finding is that family literacy activities once begun can be sustained by the families themselves for a considerable time.

The picture with regard to the possibilities of digital literacy is less clear-cut. While some small-scale studies have demonstrated the value of making digital literacy a priority, there are indications that conventional literacy skills are a prerequisite for moving on to use the internet and similar computer-based activities.

In considering various kinds of interventions, parenting programmes with an emphasis on social-emotional-behavioural dimensions have been shown to be influential. It is especially worth noting that these programmes have also been shown to have positive effects on school achievement of children, including literacy. There is also evidence that whole-school approaches to literacy involving appropriate professional development and planning can have a major impact on children's literacy performance, especially in disadvantaged schools.





Policy issues and relevant national findings

Overview

In considering policy issues related to family literacy, a number of sources are especially relevant. These include findings that indicate how Irish children and adults compare with similar populations abroad. Also relevant are the policy statements regarding approaches that might be expected to enhance the literacy performance in the educational system taking into account the various partners that are known to play an important role. Policy statements that stress how new strategies will be implemented, including those originating both in Ireland and elsewhere, also play an important role. A sample from each of these sources is considered below.

Literacy achievement in Ireland

In gauging the strengths and weaknesses of the Irish population in literacy, a particularly important source is the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). The average mean score for adult literacy in Ireland placed the country in 17th position out of the 24 countries involved. Northern Ireland had a score quite similar to this. Just 17.9% of Irish adults were at Level 1 or below. However, it was also found that adults in Ireland scoring at this low level had basic literacy skills including print vocabulary as well as the capacity to process sentences and prose passages.

It was possible to compare the PIAAC results with the outcome of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) (Morgan et al., 1997) by linking items that were in both PIAAC and IALS. In making this comparison it is important to note that among the major changes between the two surveys is the relatively greater number of the population in Ireland with a higher level of education. When IALS was carried out in Ireland, almost one quarter of the population in the relevant age group (16-65) reported that their highest level of education was at primary level; while the corresponding figure in the later survey was 10%. The fact that a comparison of the literacy in IALS and PIAAC showed no significant mean difference is therefore, a very important outcome.

In contrast to IALS and PIACC, the PIRLS study (**Progress in International Reading Literacy Study**) examined the literacy achievement of children in Ireland in fourth class in primary school and compared the outcomes with the 44 other participating countries (Eivers & Clerkin, 2012). This study is especially important since the last international study of reading literacy of primary school children in Ireland was the IEA **Reading Literacy** (Martin & Morgan, 1994). In that study nine-year-olds in Ireland ranked 12th of the 27 participating countries. While the mean score was just above the international average, Irish children were substantially below high-scoring countries like Finland.

In the PIRLS study a more positive picture emerged regarding the literacy performance of fourth-class children, with Ireland ranked 10th of the 45 participating countries. Overall, they achieved at roughly the same level as children from the highest performing countries. However, there is no room for complacency. It is striking that there were major gender differences with girls outperforming boys on the tests as a whole and also when items were considered individually. It was also noteworthy that items that required children to engage in higher-order thinking, especially interpreting and evaluating, were found to be especially challenging for Irish children.

On the basis of the PIRLS results, the authors of the study concluded that a number of learning strategies would be especially beneficial to Irish children. These included a stronger emphasis on vocabulary development and a focused use of classroom discussion to build comprehension skills. They also took the view that there would be considerable benefit in developing literacy skills throughout the curriculum as well as in English classes. Another contribution would come from developing children's metacognitive strategies so that children assessed their own comprehension skills and regulated their own cognitive processes in the course of learning.

The most recent study of literacy skills, was in 150 Irish schools and focused on second- and sixth-class pupils – the **National Assessment of English Reading** (NAER)(Educational Research Centre, 2014). What is especially important is that it is possible to compare the outcomes with similar tests and classes for 2009. In fact, assessment of English reading has been carried out on regular basis since the 1970s so that trends can be examined based on the changes over the years.

The most important outcomes of the NAER study pointed to a substantial improvement in 2014 over the scores in similar classes in 2009. This should be seen in the context of the finding that previous scores remained stable over the years, with the exception of 1972 to 1980 when an improvement was also evident, but on a smaller scale.

The finding of the positive outcomes in 2014 is important. This is because not only does it support the ideas guiding the National Literacy Strategy (considered below), but also because the literacy skills of students in primary schools had not shown much improvement in the previous 30 years. This was despite the:

- reduction in pupil-teacher ratio;
- increase in the number of learning support and resource teachers; and
- provision of greater resources for classroom teaching.

It is also of interest to note that while girls performed relatively better than boys in the literacy tests, significant differences were found for second class but not for sixth. This implied that gender differences were not as substantial as in earlier studies.

However, it is important to note that issues of educational disadvantage are of great significance in the NAER study. While the scores in reading in schools benefiting from the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) scheme, improved between 2009 and 2014, the gap between these schools in 2014 and other schools was similar to that found in 2009.

In other words, while there was an improvement in the performance of children in disadvantaged schools, their relative performance did not show any gains. The implication is that a relatively high number of children in such schools have poor literacy scores.

NESC report, Child Literacy and Social Inclusion: Implementation Issues

The 2009 National Economic and Social Council (NESC) report was concerned especially with primary school children who were living in disadvantaged communities. It took as its point of departure that a significant number of these children had serious literacy difficulties. The report concluded that the issue of literacy was not just a matter for schools, but that it should be addressed in a holistic way from childhood to adulthood. A partnership approach between the various stakeholders was advocated at both national and local level.

The core recommendations of the NESC report were that a National Literacy Policy Framework should be put in place. It should have a lifecycle emphasis, involve all relevant stakeholders and be guided by a National Steering Committee. There would be a shared vision for future action with policy coherence and integration. The report suggested that the framework would be underpinned by a strategic focus on child literacy.

The report makes a number of recommendations regarding implementation. In particular there should be an emphasis in the Framework on linking initiatives tackling educational disadvantage with literacy initiatives, because underachievement in literacy was a key factor in perpetuating the cycle of disadvantage.

Furthermore, the national strategy should have specific targets, including for families experiencing disadvantage. The NESC report also emphasised the need for an integrated approach that would bridge schools, families and communities in delivering literacy supports.

EU expert group on literacy

The report by the EU high level group of experts on literacy (EU, 2012) was concerned with several aspects of literacy at all age levels and was aimed primarily at heads of state. They were warned that they should develop their policies to take into account that large numbers of people in Europe had trouble reading and writing.

The report emphasised the importance of parents and teachers in motivating children to make the relevant activities pleasurable and to underline the relevance of literacy throughout life.

The group also recommended that the business sector should become aware of the economic gains of improving the literacy skills of their employees.

The report suggested that every citizen should realise how reading and writing:

- enhances the self-confidence of adults and children;
- gives access to the full range of learning opportunities; and
- allows active participation in society.

It is especially important to note that in making recommendations for developing the literacy skills of young people, the EU group put forward the idea that in supporting the children and their parents, family literacy programmes should be implemented. It is suggested that such programmes should be aimed at improving parents' literacy (as well as children's), and enhancing parenting skills as well as creating a culture of reading for pleasure.

There are other important recommendations that flow from this emphasis. There is a recommendation that there should be language courses for parents who do not speak the language of the school. Another suggestion is that there should be cooperation with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), businesses and family support services, which would involve engaging parents in literacy programmes as part of their interaction.

The EU group also underlined the importance of adult literacy levels. It recommended that there should be regional as well as national surveys to identify groups in need of particular attention. Specifically, attention was drawn to the importance of literacy levels of disaffected youth and of offenders, both adult and juvenile.

National Literacy Strategy (NLS)

In the light of research findings of the last 30 years and following extensive consultation, the Department of Education and Skills published a national policy statement, **National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020** (2012). It is important to note that the policy statement was published two years before the NAER study; in fact, some have suggested that the recent research has been influenced by the National Literacy Strategy (NLS).

From the perspective of literacy enhancement, a number of features of the NLS are especially relevant.

Firstly, it proposes that literacy should encompass more than reading and writing and include the capacity to read various forms of communication including broadcast and digital media.

Secondly, the policy statement draws attention to the loss to society of a failure by a significant number of individuals to develop these skills. Those who fail in this respect are more likely to:

- leave school early;
- be unemployed or in low-skill jobs; and
- have poorer emotional and physical health.

Thirdly, it emphasises the importance of literacy learning at all stages of education. The policy underlines the idea that the acquisition of basic skills at primary level is merely the foundation for further learning and needs to be continued in post-primary schools.

The policy statement draws particular attention to the importance of a partnership between schools and families, not only in the development of literacy skills, but also in mitigating the effects of educational disadvantage. The policy argues that it is crucial to convey the message to parents that parental and community involvement is essential to educational success. This would enable them to work with teachers and staff, especially in an early childhood educational context, and contribute to children's learning of literacy (as well as other skills).

The NLS notes that a broad range of family literacy initiatives have been established and that these are managed by various agencies including VECs as well as community and voluntary agencies. However, it also draws attention to the fact that such family/community initiatives need to be coordinated more effectively. In particular, it draws attention to excellent work in some areas, but which is not recognised or replicated elsewhere. It suggests that a key part of the work of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs will be to identify the programmes and strategies that are most beneficial and effective so that the interventions make a significant impact on the learning of children.

Policy implementation

A core influential factor in literacy planning, whether it is at national or community level is implementation. The NLS regards effective implementation of suitable programmes as central to progress at the national level. A number of studies cited in our review have drawn attention to the challenges in ensuring that programmes are delivered as devised. This is sometimes referred to as programme fidelity – the extent to which the actual implementation reflects the aims and methodology of the programme as originally devised. The problem arises when programmes are modified beyond recognition and the results are attributed to a failure of the programme, when in fact the problem is one of implementation.

At the national level the policy statements in **Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: the National Policy for Children and Young People, 2014-2020** (BOBF) are especially relevant in this context. This policy is relevant to issues examined here since it sets out an overarching policy framework that spans the year from birth to adulthood. It is significant that BOBF sets out a national plan to coordinate the effective implementation of the aims in order to achieve better outcomes.

Of the five national outcomes specified in BOBF the aims of achieving full potential in all areas of learning and development is especially relevant since it includes “learning from birth”, “being engaged in learning” and “achieving in education”. Also relevant is the social dimension which involves “being part of positive networks of friends, family and community”.

From the perspective of implementation, the central message in BOBF is the coordination of the efforts and energy of all relevant parties. The argument is that government departments, state agencies and NGOs should put the lives of children and young people at the core and work together in a new and integrated way to achieve better outcomes.

In line with this, the policy statement emphasises the importance of catering for **all** children and youth at the various stages of their development. Working in an integrated way is critical. The outcomes of BOBF are reliant on interagency collaboration, so various groups and committees need to be established to further the process of integration. Another feature proposal to enhance the implementation of the BOBF outcomes is the direct involvement of children and young people including the National Executive of Comhairle na nOg.

The BOBF policy statement draws particular attention to the monitoring of the implementation of the aims of the framework. There will be regular reporting on key indicators across the five national outcomes specified in BOBF. Furthermore, the Departments, agencies and partners will provide a schedule of their progress on various commitments. Currently a consultation process is underway to identify the key indicators that will allow for gauging progress in the various domains.

From the present perspective, the national aims set out in BOBF will allow for a specification of how family literacy programmes can help achieve the goal of “achieving full potential in all areas of learning and development”. Furthermore, the combining of the inter-agency collaboration with similar ideas in the NLS will provide a foundation for national policy in this area.

In considering policy implementation in relation to literacy, it is worth remembering that detailed proposals were put forward in relation to literacy and other aspects of learning in **Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education** (DES, 2000). Significantly, that paper recommended that there be a recognition of the interfaces between the different levels of educational provision. It noted especially that early home/school learning had a major influence on learners’ motivation and ability to access adult education. The paper also drew attention to the need for strategies that would counteract the barriers created by educational disadvantage. This is on the grounds that the key to an inclusive society was to target those sectors that were most at risk.

It is also significant to note that **Learning for Life** also drew attention to the need to frame educational policy in the context of inter-culturalism; in the development of programmes at all levels there should be a recognition of such diversity as the norm. This was necessary to encourage the participation of individuals from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and including Travellers and people with disabilities





General conclusion and recommendations

The recommendations put forward here are guided not only by the national and international research findings, but also by consensus regarding policy at national and local level. A strong consensus emerged regarding beneficial effects of family literacy – a positive impact that compares favourably with major educational interventions.

There is also agreement that families experiencing educational disadvantage can benefit greatly from the programmes, as least as much as children from other backgrounds. This is especially important given that the gap between schools serving disadvantaged children and other schools has remained similar. There is also evidence that conventional literacy skills can make a substantial contribution to the acquisition of digital skills.

The major policy statements (national and international) as well as the empirical research can be regarded as underpinning the development of a national programme of family literacy. While there are some indications of improvement in the standards of literacy over the years, a large number in the population (in all age-groups) experience difficulties, which have a profound impact on their lives.

Several policy statements, from the EU as well as at national level, have drawn attention to the benefits of family literacy programmes for enhancing literacy for children and adults. Furthermore, the ways of enhancing literacy have emphasised interaction of home and school.

We recommend

1. National policy framework

A national policy framework should be developed to focus on literacy. It should feature family literacy programmes as a central component.

2. Framework budget

The development of the framework should be financed by a dedicated budget.

3. Inter-agency partnerships

The planning of this policy should involve a partnership between the Department of Education and NGOs as well as other relevant agencies. Particular consideration should be given to the role of NALA in this policy formation and guidance.

4. Learn from successful programmes

When devising family literacy programmes and the policy framework, attention should be given to existing successful initiatives in Ireland and in other countries. An example, is the Clare Family Learning Project.

5. Social-emotional factors

Programmes should be informed by the findings regarding the importance of social-emotional factors in family literacy programmes. They should also take into account the particular features of the parent and school community.

6. BOBF guidelines

The implementation of the national policy programme on literacy should be guided by the principles of the BOBF guidelines, particularly its emphasis on a framework that spans birth to adulthood and involves coordinating the efforts and energies of all relevant parties.

7. Development of teachers

An understanding of the development and implementation of family literacy programmes should be central to in-career development of teachers.

8. Implementation must be monitored

Monitoring the implementation of programmes should be an intrinsic part of the planning with a view to ensuring fidelity to the aims and processes that were intended.

9. Evaluation within two years

An evaluation of the outcomes should be planned to be put in place within two years of the launch of first programmes.





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