

NALA Policy Brief on Family Literacy

September 2009



NALA

National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

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Published by: The National Adult Literacy Agency 2009

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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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Introduction

Children's literacy development remains a pressing and critical issue. Over 30% of primary school children in disadvantaged areas suffer from severe literacy problems (ERC 2004), while 1 in 10 children leave primary school with a significant literacy difficulty (National Assessment of English Reading 2000). Standards of reading in Irish schools have not changed in 20 years, and educational disadvantage is being compounded. Two-thirds of pupils in the most disadvantaged schools achieved at or below the 20th percentile on standardised tests (compared to 20% nationally), and performance declined as pupils progressed through the school (NESF 2008).

25 years of various school-based programmes designed to tackle educational disadvantage and children's performance have been described as having disappointing results (Irish Times, 20 June 2009). If standards of performance at school have not changed significantly in decades, more of the same will not change this, and there is a need for a more holistic approach to support learning in schools (Sticht 2008). Improving standards may be found in addressing other factors that impact on learning and school performance such as support for education from parents and carers, family members and communities.

Family literacy provides a win-win scenario to policy makers. Family literacy programmes improve the literacy practices of parents and other family members. This has a very significant knock on effect on school performance of children. This offers potential opportunities to break inter-generational cycles of under-achievement by working with those families who do not, or may not know how, to best support their child's learning.

Position statement

This policy brief advocates that the Department of Education and Science (DES) should take a lead role in promoting an integrated national strategy for the development of family literacy. This strategy should involve other key Government Departments. NALA recommends that a dedicated and significant funding stream be established for family literacy work, and that this should be accessed on the basis of a partnership between families, communities and schools.

What is Family Literacy?

The term family literacy describes:

- The uses of literacy and numeracy within families and communities, especially activities which involve two or more generations;
- Education programmes that help to develop literacy and numeracy learning in a family context.

The word family describes a relationship of care and support between different generations, usually over a long period. Families include children, teenagers and the people who look after them:

- parents, foster-parents, step-parents or guardians;
- grandparents; aunts and uncles;
- brothers, sisters and cousins.

Family networks may be large or small and may include wider communities. Sometimes child-minders and residential care-workers fulfil similar roles to those of parents or guardians in relation to family learning. NALA defines 'parents' as adults who are in a long-term caring relationship with children and responsible for their well-being and development.

Current policy

Family literacy programmes are primarily funded under the adult literacy budget. The adult literacy budget in 2008 was €30 million, which amounts to 0.3% of the €9.3 billion annual budget for education.

VEC adult literacy services have developed a range of courses aimed at different target groups as well as professional skills in this area. In 2008, 3,551 participants engaged in mainly short family literacy programmes in 2008, or 7% of the total number of adult literacy students.

There are few school based family learning programmes in the country, although there are a range of other type of supports such as Home School Liaison, school completion and Cuiditheoiri.

Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) - an Action Plan for Educational Inclusion - was launched in 2005 to provide a more integrated and joined up response to the issue of educational inclusion. DEIS supports are geared to benefit the most disadvantaged schools. One of its aims is to develop family literacy initiatives, and in 2009, there are 19 family literacy projects at a cost of €200,000. However, this spend can be compared with school completion projects at a cost of €30 million per annum.

The NESF Report on Early Childhood Care and Education (July 2005) stated, “All of the policy documents are agreed on the need for parental engagement in the provision of Early Childhood Development and Education. This means not only the active involvement of parents in the services that are provided for their children but also parenting education”. However, while family literacy is a key element to breaking intergenerational educational disadvantage, the actual spend on it is a tiny part of the annual education budget, and constitutes an insufficient response.

‘Working Together: Approaches to Family Literacy’ outlines NALA’s policy and guidelines and is available at www.nala.ie/common/download_file.cfm/file/working_together.pdf.

Research

The vital role played by parents in children’s education at all stages is gaining recognition. As a result, there is a growing understanding of the need to support adults who wish to improve their own literacy skills and confidence, as well as those of their children. By encouraging both informal and formal learning and by giving support to learning at home, family literacy approaches help literacy and numeracy learning for all age groups.

The European Family Learning Network www.efln.eu highlight that there is a large body of evidence that demonstrates that parental engagement has a positive affect on a child’s academic performance (Fan, X. and Chen, M., 2001) at both primary and secondary levels (Feinstein, L. and Symons, J., 1999). This results in improved school achievement, greater cognitive ability, greater problem-solving skills, increased school enjoyment and attendance, and fewer behavioural issues (Melhuish, E., Sylva, K., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I. & Taggart, B., 2001).

Research also suggests that parental involvement in a child’s learning has more of an impact on a child’s educational outcomes than any other demographic measure, including social class, level of parental education or income (Feinstein and Symons, 1999). So whilst parental background may explain parental interest, it is not the most defining factor. This offers potential opportunities to break inter-generational cycles of under-achievement by working with those families who do not, or may not know how to, best support their child’s learning.

Research in Ireland and at international level reveals similar issues in relation to literacy, schools, children’s learning and the key role of parents and carers (Desforges, 2003; Feinstein et al, 2004; EFLN 2008).

Children's literacy development remains a pressing and critical issue. Standards of reading in Irish schools have not changed in 20 years:

- Two-thirds of pupils in the most disadvantaged schools achieved at or below the 20th percentile on standardised tests (compared to 20% nationally), and performance declined as pupils progressed through the school.
- Many pupils do not progress to second level or leave prematurely. For those in school, initiatives regarding literacy and standards are not making substantial progress.
- Issues in improving school performance include how to better support basic skills development and competencies in learning to learn (National Economic and Social Council, 2008).

The NESC points out that "community initiatives that improve adult literacy or adult migrants' command of English may, indirectly but significantly, lead to improved school performances by children from the same households" (The Irish Economy in the Early 21st Century, page 237).

The June 2009 conference of the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) on children's literacy concluded that these statistics on children's literacy reveal significant social and economic cost for the individual and the State. Young people who do not learn effective literacy and numeracy at primary school are more likely to leave school early. Research studies have shown that early school-leavers are far more likely to be jobless than those who complete their education. Their difficulties with education may then affect their own children's learning. After 25 years of various school-based programmes designed to tackle these problems, the results have been disappointing and the conference advised that a medium to long term approach is required. The NESF favours a cross departmental "national literacy policy framework" under the control of the Department of Education and Science to ensure greater policy coherence in this area. (NESF, June 2009).

A KPMG (2006) report in the UK shows that children's performance in reading tests are affected by their parents' literacy (Vorhaus, 2006). This conclusion is backed up in the UK by the findings of a recent study by De Coulon et al (2008) published by the National Research and Development Centre. This was based on a longitudinal database and found that parents' literacy and numeracy had a strong effect on children's learning. The authors concluded that 'results suggest that policy aimed at increasing parents' basic skills may have large effects on children's learning. There is particular scope for policies targeted at lowly-qualified adults and young parents, from whom these effects are especially strong.'

As parents' skills improve, so do children's educational achievements (Sticht and McDonald; in Schweinhart, 2008). 'The longest long-term programme for the child is the development of the parent. I have referred to this as getting "double duty dollars" when investing in adult education. We pay for the adults' education, and we get improved education for both the adults and their children.' (Sticht, 2008).

Family literacy support programmes also help parents and carers to relate more effectively with their children's teachers and to express their views and experience. In particular, such programmes can help to build bridges with families who find schools difficult and alien places, feelings that can cause problems for children and their teachers.

Research has also identified that successful programmes are based on a response to the needs and concerns of the learners, adequate long-term funding and a commitment to strong partnership (Padak et al, 2002).

Cost benefit analysis

The link between enhanced literacy levels, basic skills and wider social and economic development is well accepted both in Ireland and internationally (Coulombe, S., J.F. Tremblay and S. Marchand, 2004).

There is also a significant body of evidence that investment in raising literacy levels of adults has the added impact of raising school performance and literacy levels of children. "Children whose parents have very low literacy levels tend to have exceptionally low child test scores in reading" (Vorhaus, 2006). This link was found to be progressively weaker as literacy levels improved, and the fact that the result was evident "even when parents' qualifications are taken into account is particularly important".

The intergenerational impact of literacy levels has been studied internationally and its effects were found to lead to higher costs of schooling and to missed economic opportunities in later life (KPMG 2006, Dugdale and Clark, 2008). Although there are no studies of aspirations and intergenerational effects in Ireland, there is an estimate of the costs and benefits of early childhood education (Chevalier et al 2006). This shows that early childhood education yields a benefit to cost ratio of between 4.6 to 1 and 7 to 1. The relevance of the study is that it highlights the value of offsetting the effects on children of low parental aspirations, and educational attainment by early (i.e. pre-school) educational intervention. The focus of the study was education rather than literacy per se but as Dorgan points out, "interventions aimed at literacy could generate a proportion of these estimated benefits" (NALA, 2009).

"Human capital is not only a function of the initial stock the individual is born with (genetic luck) but is produced over the life cycle by families, schools, and firms." (Harmon in Chevalier et al 2006). The added value that raising adult literacy levels has to human capital development by improving children's school performance is widely recognised, but an under researched area. While policy debates focus on schools as the main provider of skills, the crucial role of the parent is under resourced in the education spend. Advancing standards in schools, given the stagnation witnessed over the last two decades, may now be found in supporting family literacy programmes.

Policy development

In order to further support effective literacy learning for both adults and children, family literacy development work needs to be a key feature of both adult literacy provision and school outreach work. Family literacy programmes may be organised in conjunction with schools or in partnership with groups such as community development or training organisations, family resource centres, childcare or support for refugees, asylum seekers and migrant workers. There is a need for schools to engage with family literacy and support family learning and adult learning initiatives led by other stakeholders.

Recognising the key role of learning at home and parental support for children's learning, the Department of Education and Science has taken a lead in promoting a strategy for the development of family literacy work as part of the DEIS initiative (2006 – 2010).

Family literacy work helps to overcome the barriers to learning felt by some adults and children. This approach can recognise and build on the strengths of families and communities who feel marginalised or excluded from the expectations of school. Family literacy programmes bring new learners into adult literacy and community education and provide a key element in developing lifelong learning opportunities for all (NALA 2004; Brooks et al 1997).

As well as impacting on school performance and standards, family literacy programmes support the meeting of adult literacy targets, and can contribute to human capital development at multiple levels.

Key policy points for family literacy programmes:

- flexibility in order to respond most effectively to particular families and communities;
- programmes are most effective when they are able to respond to local strengths and needs;
- programmes must build on respect for the views and strengths of parents and carers;
- programmes and approaches build the concept of partnership between families and schools; School led initiatives should be augmented by family and community led initiatives. And
- an emphasis on learning for adults as part of family learning programmes, as well as children's learning (NALA, 2004).

Evidence that standards of performance at school have not changed significantly in decades points to the need for a more holistic approach to support learning in schools. It is possible that schools are performing at or near the optimum level in what they are doing already. Improving standards may be found in addressing other factors that impact on learning and school performance such as support for education for parents and carers, family members and communities.

Policy Recommendations

In the context of the current economic downturn, consideration of how best to align existing structures and maximise public resources available is at the heart of policy responses to social and economic issues. Family literacy provides a policy option that delivers value on several socio-economic priorities.

- It contributes to raising adult literacy levels.
 - It enhances children's performance in schools and child literacy development.
 - It has a multiplier effect as it works across the four components of human capital development.
1. NALA recommends that the Department of Education and Science (DES) should take a lead role in promoting an integrated national strategy for the development of family literacy. This strategy, building on experience to date including DEIS, should involve other key Government Departments: the Department of Health and Children, the Department of Social and Family Affairs and the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform.
 2. The DES should develop a dedicated and significant funding stream for family literacy work. NALA recommend that this should be accessed on the basis of a partnership between families, communities and schools. Providing this budget line through adult education, rather than the first or second level system, may provide for improved partnerships between families and schools.
 3. NALA advocate that family literacy would be a significant part of a refreshed national adult literacy strategy
 4. The DES should continue and expand the DEIS family literacy initiative to cover all disadvantaged families, and as a first step in this regard, support family learning initiatives in all schools in designated areas of disadvantage.

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