Taking Care of Family Literacy Work

An enquiry with parents about their experience of nurturing language and literacy in the home

Final Report

December 2010

There is nurturing in how we bring up our kids and we have a vested interest in doing the very best we can for them.

You always want better for your kids than you had.

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ISBN: 978-1-907171-14-7

Table of contents

1. Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the organisations in Dublin, the Midlands and the West that introduced us to the research participants and provided hospitality and support throughout the fieldwork period.

The researchers would like to sincerely thank all those parents who have contributed so generously of their time and experience to this study. Your reflections, insights, analysis and suggestions have been invaluable to this research project and the future of family literacy.

Finally, we acknowledge the experience, intellectual and practical support of NALA staff, in particular Tina Byrne who has managed this piece of work.

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2. Main messages

- Exploratory *photovoice* research with 22 parents from disadvantaged communities across Ireland provides evidence of a wide range of family literacy activity taking place with pre-school and school age children. Parents see this home-based learning activity as part of their primary care role. Parents recognise the value of language, literacy and numeracy development and feel a moral imperative to foster robust basic skills in their children.
- Parents use all the skills they can muster to do this family literacy work and this is particularly challenging for parents who themselves have unmet literacy issues. These parents suggest an intensive adult literacy programme as an initial step in dealing with their needs as family literacy workers.
- Parents felt fairly confident with the family literacy work that happens prior to formal schooling. They recognised that better information, knowledge and skills would allow them to be more strategic and effective in terms of encouraging language development.
- When children began school, parents felt more distanced from their learning. Parents' level of involvement and inclusion was determined by the school ethos and this in turn depended on the leadership provided by the school principal. We gathered evidence that the degree of home-school collaboration impacts on the quality of family literacy. Where schools work closely with parents there is greater clarity about how best to support children. In the best cases, schools provide family literacy materials for parents and run family literacy and numeracy sessions that help inform and guide parents.
- Parents want to be consulted about the content of family literacy programmes as their needs are complex and change according to the age and number of children. Children with specific learning difficulties/disabilities require specialised support and parents need ongoing guidance with this demanding work.

- Parents want opportunities for peer support and one group had access to this in the family room provided in their local DEIS school. The Home School Community Liaison coordinator in this school facilitated activities for parents that contributed to language, literacy and numeracy development. Family literacy training would be an important extension of this existing work.
- There is an increasing interest in digital literacies and this offers new opportunities for online family literacy work as part of NALA's interactive website www.writeon.ie.
- NALA's TV campaign approach might usefully be used to increase awareness of family literacy issues, model good practice and encourage participation in local adult and family literacy learning opportunities.
- All family literacy training needs to be supported and enabled with quality childcare provision.
- Further research that builds on this short exploratory study would provide evidence about how to create an accredited menu of family literacy modules to match diverse family needs. These would contribute to a win-win-win situation for children, schools and adults.

Items on the family literacy menu might include:

- ✓ *Intensive literacy course* – To 'keep one step ahead' and support parents with unmet literacy needs to engage in other more targeted family literacy courses and supports.
- ✓ *Understanding how learning happens* - To learn practical strategies that support the diverse learning needs and styles of children as they progress and develop.
- ✓ *Reading with children* - To develop skills and knowledge about how best to prepare, motivate and support children with reading.
- ✓ *Communicating successfully with schools* - To develop confidence and assurance in productive communication and collaboration with school.

- ✓ *Early years language development* – To develop techniques to nourish, grow and expand children's language.
- ✓ *Computer skills* –To learn digital approaches to support family literacy.
- ✓ *Fun and creativity* – To become skilled in an array of creative strategies to develop language, literacy and numeracy skills.
- ✓ *Dealing with bullying* – To develop strategies to address bullying so that its harmful effects on children, and their capacity to learn, can be eradicated.
- ✓ *Strategies to support children with learning difficulties / disabilities* - To devise a customised range of language and literacy supports for children with specific learning difficulties / disabilities.

Recommendations emerging from this study:

1. National literacy policy should include an increased commitment to family literacy as a basis for improving chances of educational equality for both children and adults. Such policy should always be grounded in an analysis of the systemic roots of literacy disadvantage as this would give added credibility, motivation and optimism to participants and practitioners.

2. Parents' willingness and motivation to do robust family literacy work should be recognised and adequately resourced, through appropriate family literacy training options, to meet the complex situations of disadvantaged families.

3. Whilst meeting the needs of adult literacy learners, family literacy programmes and resources should reflect the content and processes recommended by Aistear and the Primary School Curriculum. In the light of proposals in the Draft National Plan for Literacy and Numeracy (DES, 2010) parents need to be informed about the process of literacy assessment in primary schools. At the same time the distinction

between pedagogy and learning care work in the home should not be blurred.

4. A NALA, DES, IVEA partnership should work with DEIS schools in disadvantaged communities to access parents with unmet literacy needs and make a systematic community development model of family literacy training available to them in their locality. Fathers and mothers may initially want to learn in separate groups.

5. Best home-school collaborative practice in DEIS schools should be recorded, analysed and disseminated in areas where parents are not included meaningfully in their children's learning. The role of the successful HSCL coordinator in including adults with literacy needs should be explored. This suggests that all HSCL personnel have relevant adult literacy awareness training. Best practice DEIS primary schools should be investigated as a base for family literacy programmes with educationally disadvantaged parents.

6. A national media campaign should raise awareness of the importance of family literacy work. A series of TV programmes could model good family literacy practice, encourage participation in community-based programmes and disseminate useful support materials in an accessible format for those with unmet literacy needs.

7. Parents with literacy needs should be offered access to an ITABE-type family literacy programme as a first stepping-stone back into learning. Where necessary, access to advice, guidance and counselling should be made available.

8. A menu of (accredited) family literacy modules should be available to parents that recognises the needs of different parents and children. These modules would include: understanding how learning happens; early years language development; reading with children; fun and creativity in language, literacy and numeracy; computer skills as a

basis for a digital approach to family literacy; communicating successfully with schools; dealing with bullying (and its negative impact on learning); strategies for family literacy with children who have specific learning difficulties/disabilities.

9. NALA should explore the inclusion of family literacy in the interactive digital learning facility – www.writeon.ie

10. Family literacy programmes should be accredited through the National Qualifications Framework.

11. All family literacy programmes should provide childcare.

12. Building on the research partnerships developed in this exploratory study, further action research might usefully investigate how best to integrate family literacy into the services offered through multi-agency partnerships in areas of disadvantage. A variety of projects/outcomes are possible in such an approach:
    - ✓ A pre-school language development programme with parents who have unmet literacy needs could be designed and piloted
    - ✓ Modules of the family literacy programme suggested above could be researched, piloted and written up for dissemination
    - ✓ Accreditation for modules of family literacy could be designed and processed
    - ✓ Community-based family literacy facilitators could be trained and a programme written up for accreditation through the NQF
    - ✓ Guidelines for family literacy with disadvantaged parents might be drawn up in consultation with a group of interested parents
    - ✓ A programme for fathers; school-aged mothers; ESOL and others might be designed and piloted
    - ✓ The *photovoice* approach might be further used to gather data about family literacy with specific groups of disadvantaged parents.

3. Introduction - Family literacy in context

The term *family literacy* is used to refer to the way in which diverse families use literacy as well as the programmes designed to support intergenerational language and literacy development (NALA, 2004:19). Family literacy courses take place primarily with socially and educationally disadvantaged parents[1] and their children and may be organised in association with local pre-school or primary school provision or through community development activity. The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) promotes family literacy specifically for those adults who have themselves missed out on the benefits of schooling and so face additional challenges in supporting their children's learning. This reflects the reality that literacy and its benefits are unevenly distributed across social groups and that educational disadvantage runs alongside wider social, cultural, political and affective inequalities (O'Toole, 2003; Baker et al, 2004; 2009; NESF, 2009; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009).

Family literacy programmes initially grew from an understanding of the vital importance of early, pre-school years in a child's development and recognition of the diverse literacy practices within families (Taylor, 1983). Several decades later the same arguments and incentive for family literacy remain pertinent. A recent nationwide study in the UK found that by the age of three, children from disadvantaged backgrounds were already a year behind their more privileged peers in using the language of school (Centre for Longitudinal Studies, 2007). Contemporary US figures set the language and literacy gap between privilege and disadvantage at one and half years in the life of a five

[1] Parents includes mothers, fathers, other parental figures and significant family caregivers.

or six year-old child[2]. The correlated role of parents in supporting children's learning is well researched and the links are clearly made between parents' own culture, capabilities and capitals and their capacity to support their children (Allat, 1993; Reay, 1998; 2000; O'Brien, 2005; 2007).

Quality pre-school provision may offer a solution to early language and literacy gaps. All children, irrespective of class, ethnicity or other identity factors, are shown to benefit from quality pre-school provision and yet such provision varies greatly. The most recent report on childcare by UNICEF (2008) shows that only a small number of countries give optimal childcare supports and Ireland is amongst the poorest performers. In the US, the High/Scope Perry pre-school programme longitudinal research took a sample of 123 children almost half of which had quality pre-school provision while the remainder in the control group did not. The research cohort was followed over an extended period. Those who benefitted from early years education significantly outperformed their peers in the control group both academically and in wider measures of achievement. Programme benefits reached beyond school performance. By the age of 40 years men in the study were more likely to be homeowners, employed and involved in raising their children. They were less likely to have been arrested or to be substance abusers. High/Scope Perry pre-school programmes emphasise quality teacher training, low teacher-pupil ratios and strong parental involvement in all aspects of the child's development.[3]

Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) make the rationale behind the family literacy movement particularly explicit:

> Essential for early learning is a stimulating social environment. Babies and young children need to be in caring, responsive environments. They need to be talked to, loved and interacted with. They need opportunities to play, talk and explore their world, and they need to be encouraged within safe limits, rather than restricted in their activities or punished. All of these things are harder for parents and other care-

[2] Irish Times, Wednesday 29 September 2010 Page 3: Children from poorer backgrounds over a year behind in language skills, study finds: Discrepancy in exposure to reading and writing - by Alison Healy.
[3] Irish Times Health Plus, 9 November 2010, page 3: Pre-school can dramatically change quality of adult life – by Alison Healy

> givers to provide when they are poor, or stressed or unsupported. (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009:111)

Whilst wishing to avoid a deficit discourse, most family literacy programmes, therefore, attempt to redress some parental inequalities and as such implicitly accept the injustice of such disparities. Family literacy may be delivered to parents with a view to expanding their own literacy skills and thereby their capacity to participate in their children's formal and informal learning. Some initiatives focus on parents and children learning together while yet others combine both of these elements (National Literacy Trust, 2008).

Defining 'family' and 'literacy'

Both *family* and *literacy* are dynamic concepts that shift and change over time and in relation to culture and ethnicity. 'Family' is understood in this study as:

a unit of people bound together by special affective relationships; these may be multi-generational, historic and rooted in biological bonds or lifetime commitments of love, care and solidarity.

The family, in whatever form, remains the recognised unit for the nurture and development of children and so is deeply concerned with all aspects of learning, informal and formal.

The narrow view of literacy as merely a set of rigid, mechanical skills that includes reading, writing and spelling has been generally overtaken by an awareness of the complex and socially diverse situations in which literacy is now shaped, learned and used. These different social contexts, which include school and family, reshape language and literacy and the way it is constructed and used. This view is reflected in much of the literature where the term *literacy* has now been replaced by *literacies*. Proponents of New Literacy Studies (NLS) suggest that there are now multiple literacies including those that are emerging as a result of rapid developments in technological means of communication (Tett et al, 2006; Kress, 2003; Lankshear and Knobel, 2003). So family literacy now needs to be understood as a socially situated practice that increasingly has digital dimensions and that has its own distinct literacy events and uses. The relationship between family and school literacies is also of particular interest here.

Respect for family diversity

The centrality of the family unit in language and literacy development and use is recognised and accepted in a globally and diversely situated view of literacy:

> People acquire and apply literacy for different purposes in different situations, all of which are shaped by culture, history, language, religion and socio-economic conditions … literacy is not uniform, but instead culturally, linguistically and even temporally diverse. It is shaped by social as well as educational institutions: the family, community, workplace, religious establishments and the state. (UNESCO, 2004)

So, family literacy should not be about homogenising the language codes and practices used in different kinds of families but rather about appropriately supporting language and literacy development across a range of families. The literature cautions against a form of family literacy that devalues existing language and literacy use and seeks to replace it with a privileged form of literacy favoured in the education system (Heath, 1983; National Literacy Trust, 2008).

NALA respects the diversity of family groups and the range of intergenerational learning that takes place between parents, grandparents, children and other significant care figures. At the same time NALA wishes to support parents with the considerable demands of their role in children's formal schooling. The principle of a parent's right, both to privacy and to be consulted about how best to support a child's learning underpins NALA's approach to family learning. Consequently, family literacy is viewed as learning that begins with the lived reality of parents and carers and:

- ✓ Supports the learning that happens in the home and in communities;
- ✓ Breaks down barriers between learning in different contexts;
- ✓ Gives vital support to parents whose own education has been limited for various reasons; and
- ✓ Develops both children's and adults' literacy learning (NALA, 2004: 9).

Researching family literacy

With these values and principles in mind, the participatory research described in this report has focused on uncovering the understanding, uses and needs

of family literacy with parents from some of the areas of highest disadvantage in Ireland. The focus has been on accessing parents through communities rather than schools in the understanding that those accessible through the school have already overcome many cultural and institutional barriers that others have yet to surmount.

Sometimes it is assumed that most learning takes place in school and the vital learning work at home remains unrecognised, under-valued and under-resourced. At the same time, less privileged parents can readily be held responsible for children's lack of progress in language and literacy and the common ground between parents and schools in supporting children remains largely unexploited. Neither parents nor teachers feel resourced to work cooperatively and so vital elements of a partnership approach to language and literacy are wasted. NALA's goal in commissioning this study is to ensure that family literacy policy and programmes match the authentic literacy practices and needs of those who will use them. This will help attract new family learners and ensure that programmes support the real uses of language and literacy within families, communities and the schools that provide for children's formal learning needs.

4. Aims of the Research

The aims of the research as defined by NALA are:

To explore with parents their attitudes, perceptions, knowledge and understanding of family literacy

To investigate parents views and understanding of their role as primary educator of their children

To identify where, when and how they initiate this role

To examine their views on what would be helpful to them in carrying out this role and any barriers they experience in carrying out this role in everyday life

To identify any perceived benefits and value of engaging in a family literacy programme[4]

Limitations of the research

This research project took place over a period of three months. There is a sensitivity required in recruiting parents from areas of extreme disadvantage to discuss with complete strangers what are essentially private family matters. The rich data that is required for qualitative research is dependent on the time to develop relationships of trust. For that reason, this has been a relatively small scale, albeit in-depth study. Nevertheless some excellent research relationships have emerged from this study and these could undoubtedly be further developed in the future.

Report outline

[4] NALA: Invitation to tender for research project exploring parents' knowledge and understanding of family literacy.

The report that follows has a number of elements. First a literature review looks at the relevant policy and practice and briefly explores some theoretical issues raised by a study of family literacy. This is followed by a description of the research design and methodology. A visual ethnography or *photovoice* research method (Wang et al, 2000) was chosen to ensure that parents from some of Ireland's most disadvantaged communities were central to the entire process. Then the research findings are presented and finally we draw conclusions, and make recommendations for the future of family literacy provision in Ireland. Some future directions for family literacy research are also suggested.

5. Policy, practice and theory in family literacy work

Caring is better understood… as helping individuals to meet their basic needs and to develop and sustain those basic or innate capabilities necessary for survival and basic functioning in society, including the ability to sense, feel, move about, speak, reason, imagine, affiliate with others, and in most societies today, read, write, and perform basic math. (Daniel Engster, 2005)

Engster describes the extensive care role of parents that includes language and literacy development. Here care is not just an attitude but also a set of actions, a form of work that requires time, energy and skill if it is to be effective. The support of language and literacy development in families is therefore part of a wider, nurturing context that prepares children for life in general, and so that they may reap maximum benefit from the significant time spent in formal education. It is from this affective perspective that we explore the family learning context.

Family literacy - policy and practice

Irish family literacy practice emerges from a large body of locally relevant research that suggests that work with families can make significant difference to children's later learning experiences and outcomes (DES, 2000; OECD, 2000; NALA, 2004; ERC, 2004; NESF, 2009). In particular, studies have shown that interventions that support parents in the development of language and literacy skills and with constructing a positive home learning environment, can have a marked impact on their confidence as learning facilitators and on children's achievement (Archer and Shortt, 2003; Archer and Weir, 2004).

One example of policy in practice is the Home, School, Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL). Established in 1990, the HSCL scheme is an initiative aimed at reducing some of the impacts of educational disadvantage including low

child literacy levels. A closer partnership is facilitated between home and school through the agency of the HSCL coordinator whose role is to mediate the various aspects of home-school relationships. Parents report that schools have become more open places and that they feel more assured about their role in their child's education. Nevertheless the degree to which power has been shared in the home-school partnership varies from school to school and not all are satisfied with the extent to which the system has, to date, been transformed (Mulkerrins, 2007). Whatever the level of satisfaction with the relational side of schooling, a less significant impact is reported on the measured outcomes in relation to children's improved literacy and so work remains to be done (Conaty, 2002). The White Paper on Adult Education – *Learning for life* (2000) emphasised the important links that could be made between the HSCL initiative and family literacy to the advantage of both childhood and adult literacy learning.

Not all parents are equally equipped to support their children's learning. Studies of measured literacy difficulties at Irish primary and secondary levels make definitive links to socio-economic disadvantage generally and the specific pivotal role of parents' contribution to children's learning (Archer and Weir, 2004; Eivers et al, 2004; Eivers et al, 2005a). Eivers et al (2004: 2) remark that not all children come from a 'literacy-rich' home, nor are they accustomed to an environment where books and newspapers are present and where reading is modelled. Only 29% of 6th class pupils in Irish disadvantaged area schools take a positive view of their own reading achievement and there is a measureable 'literacy gap' established before the end of the primary cycle (Ibid).

Language and literacy at home and school

A sociolinguistic study of language variation explored the different language use that accompanies social class, and the subsequent impact on children's acquisition of literacy (Cregan, 2007). The study found that middle-class, 'literate' style patterns of language use were linked to success in school and that where there was a poor linguistic fit between school, home and community then children were inevitably disadvantaged (Ibid. 2007: 5). This is recognised in terms of ethnicity but not class.

Cregan describes a form of cultural imperialism; a mono-cultural education system for a multicultural society where working class and other minority group children are expected to assimilate into school language patterns rather than schools adjusting to community needs. This means that schools demand of all children something that they expect but do not teach and that in turn disadvantages those whose vernacular use of language is at odds with the dominant educational culture. From this perspective, children from disadvantaged backgrounds begin school with what is viewed as a 'significant oral language deficit' (DES, 2005: 25). The perceived oracy challenge rapidly impacts on the facility with which literacy is acquired and is unsurprisingly evident in lower levels of literacy in disadvantaged schools.

Cregan's empirical study was carried out in four Irish primary schools where she examined the language patterns of children, the perceptions and practice of teachers and the attitudes and behaviours of parents. Three schools were designated disadvantaged and one was described as advantaged. Children in disadvantaged schools were less able to use 'school language' or 'literate language patterns' than were their middle class, advantaged peers. Cregan found that teachers in disadvantaged schools did not rigorously support oral language development but rather saw the root of language and literacy difficulties as located in the home. The gap in 'literate' language facility between advantaged and disadvantaged children was observed to increase with age and a need to systematically address language variation was suggested. This is problematic in that it requires that some children (and their parents) become proficient in the use of a second pattern of language with an implicit devaluation of their primary language code. Nevertheless it is seen as vital that they do so for literacy development and for general success in school and beyond.

Parental role in supporting language and literacy

In a second volume (Cregan, 2008), the findings about 'parental perceptions' of their role in family learning were presented. This did not consider adult literacy issues but is nonetheless relevant here. Cregan (2007; 2008) found that all parents, irrespective of class, were interested and supportive of their children's learning although they were often unclear about how they might

most usefully carry out their role. Some disadvantaged parents felt unconfident about their capacity to support their children's learning and this anxiety increased as the complexity of the work increased. Cregan concludes that:

> Adequate resources need to be put in place in schools to facilitate the development of communication between the school and the home; to put support systems in place that will develop the capacity of parents to empower their children in terms of learning; and to develop programmes to stimulate and maximise parental support for children. (Cregan, 2008: 33)

Cregan is critical of the gap between Government rhetoric in terms of support for home-school partnership (Cregan, 2007) and disappointing progress in implementation. She calls on schools to be more proactive in power-sharing with parents, especially those who are socially and educationally disadvantaged. Cregan suggests that addressing childhood literacy inequalities is first and foremost about bridging the language gap that currently works against those who are less familiar with the 'literate' language style privileged throughout the education system.

Parents in partnership

The Primary School Curriculum (1999: 21) recognises parents as 'the child's primary educators' and confirms the 'potent' influence of the home on child development and learning. The Curriculum also suggests the importance of regular consultation with parents about a child's progress and the benefits that accrue from a positive partnership between parents and school. Research suggests positive outcomes from greater parental involvement in the child's school yet a Department of Education and Science (DES) (2005) evaluation of literacy and numeracy in disadvantaged schools found that parental presence was negligible and decreased as children moved up the school.

Empirical research with parents of children in a primary school in the disadvantaged areas scheme in Ireland revealed that parents felt excluded from meaningful participation in the school for a number of reasons (Hannafin and Lynch, 2002). Working class parents felt there was a chasm between the culture of the school and the values and concerns of families. The experience of parent-school relationships for the parents was one of communication

rather than consultation. Parents found this particularly irksome when such decisions, for example in the case of a uniform change, lead to extra expenditure for parents and showed a lack of awareness and empathy for their restricted means. Working class parents also felt that any presence on school decision-making bodies was largely cosmetic. They suggested that, in reality, decisions were made by the school principal and that they had no real power in relation to choices about their children's schooling (Ibid.).

Many parents, particularly those with unmet literacy needs, are uncomfortable with school structures that recall their own unsatisfactory learning experiences. They are reluctant to visit the school and when they do, possibly because of time pressures, they find teachers are often unable to speak to them. Consequently, they feel unwelcome and despite rhetoric to the contrary, they are ultimately excluded (Ibid.).

DEIS

In May 2005 the government launched the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) action plan for educational inclusion (DES, 2005). The central goal was to address widespread educational disadvantage across the sectors for young people between 3-18 years. One of the main objectives of DEIS was to build on the successful work of HSCL over 15 years and to extend the inclusion of parents and communities in actions that would resolve educational inequalities. The context for the programme was the rising concerns about educational disparities between social groupings and in particular falling reading literacy levels in disadvantaged areas. DEIS set out to instigate a more strategic, cohesive educational approach to tackling the impacts of wider disadvantage on schooling and the subsequent unequal outcomes of schooling in terms of employment and earnings.

Although it focuses on the primary and secondary sector, DEIS included provision for expanded family literacy programmes and recognition of the vital role of the home and community in children's learning experience and outcomes. Picking up on NALA's recommendations in relation to inter-agency partnerships in the National Adult Literacy and Numeracy Programme Implementation Plan (NALIP) (NALA, 2004), DEIS lays the foundation for

family literacy programmes based on a partnership approach. Partners would include the HSCL coordinators, the VEC adult literacy services and NALA.

A Working Group to develop the family literacy project was set up under DEIS. In 2007, funding of €140,000 was provided for seven projects and in 2008 that sum was increased to €200,000 and a further 12 projects across the country were approved for funding making 19 in all. DEIS affirmed the ongoing work of the Vocational Education Committee (VEC) adult literacy services and NALA in promoting and delivering family literacy programmes and acknowledged the potential for more partnership work between adult literacy and HSCL services in this regard (Ibid.) making this a reality is a resource issue.

The target of DEIS and of the subsequent National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016 is to reduce the proportion of pupils with serious literacy difficulties to less than 15% by 2016 (DES, 2005; Government of Ireland, 2007). An evaluation of the DEIS initiative has not yet been published however trends across the EU and elsewhere show literacy levels falling, especially for boys (CEC, 2008; Canadian Council of Ministers of Education, 2007; Canadian Council on Learning (CCL), 2009). Canadian research particularly highlighted the role of parents in child literacy development.

In Ireland the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF, 2009) reported on the progress made to date in improving child literacy and social inclusion. The NESF carried out case study research in a number of urban and rural DEIS schools and commissioned a study of child literacy practice outside school, including community-based family literacy initiatives. The general findings were that the delivery on DEIS objectives in schools has been delayed and patchy yet much good practice exists in the community sector and in the area of family literacy. NESF (2009) recommends greater cooperation between home, school and community in tackling the literacy gap and specifically mentions NALA's role in facilitating interagency literacy partnerships. The recommendations include:

> Strong parental involvement and participation at all levels from literacy policy development to delivery, including support for their own learning. (NESF, 2009: XXV)

The NESF (2009) report calls for a cohesive National Literacy Strategy across the generations from childhood to adulthood that should be adequately resourced and collaboratively managed for optimum impact. In a period of economic recession this logically becomes an imperative part of immediate action for long-term recovery.

A draft national plan to improve literacy and numeracy in schools

In November 2010 the government launched a consultative document dealing with the challenges posed by falling standards in school and youth literacy and numeracy (DES, 2010). These lower standards are confirmed in PISA, 2009 (OECD, 2010). The draft national plan arises from concerns that despite a number of initiatives, the literacy skills of Irish students have not improved over thirty years. Furthermore, within already poor literacy results, those in disadvantaged communities give particular cause for concern.

The plan is critical of teachers' current level of initial training and continuing professional development in literacy and numeracy. It recommends that all childcare, primary, secondary and Youthreach teaching staff become skilled at facilitating and assessing progress in language, literacy and numeracy. The plan proposes rigorous target setting against national standards and testing at frequent points throughout the primary and secondary sectors. The good practice that has emerged from some DEIS schools is to be more widely disseminated so that it can be replicated throughout the system, albeit without the same staffing concessions.

Given that children spend only 15% of their time at school, the new national plan recognises the key role of parents in supporting language, literacy and numeracy and aims to:

> Enable parents and communities to support their children's literacy and numeracy development through involving parents in their children's learning, through supporting parents in understanding the progress that their children are making, and through raising awareness throughout

> the community of the role that community, family and school can play in promoting successful learning. (DES, 2010: 14)

Parents' and communities' role in promoting literacy and numeracy will be the focus of an awareness campaign that will include NALA's website www.writeon.ie, the endorsement of public figures and the existing adult literacy promotional campaigns. Strategic support with language, literacy and numeracy development will be designed and offered through leaflets and resource packs, particularly to disadvantaged parents. Again this will be done through the adult literacy services. [5]

In recognition of the need for closer partnerships between parents and schools, early childcare provision and schools will be expected to include parents more meaningfully in their children's schooling. Parents should be welcomed, engaged in all aspects of the child's learning programme and supported in learning the best ways to support the work done in school. The plan suggests that partnerships between home, school and adult learning providers should become a feature of all schools and factored into the school plan. Finally, the plan recommends that family literacy projects funded through DEIS should be continued with priority given to those that have been successfully evaluated and shown to be effective.

National and International practice

There is a growing range of empirical evidence gathered about family literacy across the international arena (Wagner and Venezky, 1999; Literacy Assistance Centre, 2003; NRDC, 2008; NALA, 2009; NIACE, 2009; UNESCO, 2009; St Clair, 2010). However there are mixed messages about the nature, objectives and outcomes of such learning programmes. An early review of US family literacy confirmed 'that parental literacy is one of the prime predictors of the children's school achievement' (Wagner and Venezky, 1999: 24) and therefore merits investment. The researchers suggested that the success of family literacy may well be due to the fact that the holistic approach taken responds to a wider range of adult learners' life needs than mainstream literacy, particularly in relation to access, childcare and welfare. Programme

[5] A number of these proposals had already emerged as recommendations from this study when the Draft National plan was published.

success may be as much to do with redressing resource inequalities as providing pedagogical support and it must be asked what happens if these supports are withdrawn when family literacy programmes end.

Canadian research and commentary collated by the Literacy Assistance Centre (2003) looks critically at family literacy practice in a range of contexts. These include the challenges of engaging fathers (Green, 2003), the mounting pressures on disadvantaged mothers (Smythe and Isserlis, 2003) and the hope located in digital opportunities for families learning together (Nudelman and Huder, 2003). Finally, Elsa Auerbach examines the different ideological stances taken in family literacy provision. These range from a deficit model of families, the need for assimilation of excluded groups into the mainstream and a 'social change' perspective that takes unequal social contexts into account. She argues for programmes to be developed with participants to include culturally specific, empowering work that meets socially situated learning needs (Auerbach, 2003).

A number of UK policy and programme reviews evaluate progress in local and national family literacy provision (NRDC, 2005; NRDC, 2008; NIACE, 2009). These highlight difficulties encountered in relation to short-term funding, the need for specific resources and robust staff development. The benefits of specialised family literacy consultants in promoting, expanding and developing locally-based learning provision were positively reported (NRDC, 2005). More recent research (NIACE, 2009) establishes that Wider Family Learning programmes may be effective for children and provide stepping-stones for some parents towards more specific adult literacy work. There is global evidence (from Uganda, Nepal, the US, Europe, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and Turkey) that recognising where literacy comes in families' hierarchy of priorities is important. The gendered nature of family literacy emerges from the international literature as a major concern as does the need for school literacy to reflect community realities rather than disregard them (NRDC, 2008).

St Clair suggests that we need to distinguish between parents' *incidental* and *intentional* interventions in children's learning of literacy (St Clair, 2010). Incidental literacy learning is heavily influenced by parental literacy practices whereas intentional efforts at encouraging language and literacy may be learned and used even by those who have unmet literacy needs of their own. It is necessary also to distinguish here between school literacies and home literacies in reflecting about what actually takes place between children and parents in terms of learning language and literacy. As Heath (1983) found, children from educationally privileged backgrounds may learn literacy by osmosis and this may correspond closely to the literacy used in school. This is not the case for those whose use of English does not mirror that of the school. The question remains as to how schools, working closely with less educationally privileged families, can bridge the gap between vernacular language and literacy use and the work done in school.

UNESCO (2009) usefully distils the common essential elements from a range of successful family literacy programmes from both the northern and southern hemisphere. These reflect a social practice literacy ethos and an empowering community development approach to programme design and delivery. They set out ten core factors in good family literacy practice and suggest it should be:

1. **Intergenerational** work with parents and children, directly or indirectly, to establish an intergenerational cycle of literacy achievement.
2. **Collaborative** in that it is developed, delivered, and continually improved with participant and community input.
3. **Built on strengths** and literacy behaviours already present in families, and introduce additional strategies to help further enrich literacy activities in the home.
4. **Responsive** and flexible to the needs and interests of the families who participate in them.
5. **Culturally sensitive** and use resources that are appropriate for specific participant groups.

Furthermore The UNESCO report stresses that:

6. **The essence of family literacy** should be about celebrating and

emphasising the joy of learning.

7. **Sound methods** should result in educational practices appropriate for the literacy development of children and adults. Practitioners should select from a variety of research-based approaches according to the needs of each group.
8. **Staff qualifications** should be appropriate to the educational needs of both children and adults and appropriate to specific roles and responsibilities within a particular delivery model.
9. **Access** should be ensured by family literacy taking place in welcoming locations. Support should be given to overcome barriers to participation, such as lack of childcare.
10. **Evaluation** should be ongoing with manageable evaluation processes that produce information useful for program development and accountability.

Online family literacy

As mentioned above, the new draft national literacy and numeracy plan recognises the NALA www.writeon.ie website as having potential to raise awareness about family literacy issues. This reinforces the fact that family literacy needs to be understood in the context of rapid technological development and many sites do now exploit the potential of a digital approach to family literacy. **Learndirect** is an online UK initiative primarily aimed at employment related skills development. It has a strong focus on literacy and numeracy for work but also recognises the wider implications of learning for the family. A series of interactive, online books specifically designed to build measured literacy and numeracy levels are available for parents to explore with their children[6]. The UK site www.ukparentslounge.com is a forum that has a literacy zone with links to free printable literacy sheets for families and links to UK and Irish sites for parents of pre-school and primary school children.[7] The attraction of an online, gaming approach to language and

[6] http://www.wherediditherivergo.co.uk/how/
[7] http://www.scoil.net.com; http://www.childrenbooksireland.ie; http://www.primarytimes.net

literacy development has considerable potential for the field of family literacy learning although the resource demands of this approach for disadvantaged families need to be taken into account.

Family literacy - some theoretical issues

Alongside the policy and practice context, some normative assumptions that underpin the family literacy concept merit closer scrutiny. As a basis for understanding the empirical work on family literacy presented here we focus on just two of these issues. Firstly, we examine the 'disadvantaged' social context that accompanies unmet adult literacy needs and within which many family literacy programmes are designed and delivered. Then assertions about the parent's role, that can unproblematically conflate the tasks of 'educator' and 'nurturer', are examined more closely. This shift in emphasis from parent to 'primary educator' has lead to some parents finding themselves with additional burdens of responsibility for which they are not resourced in terms of time or skill. We reflect, however briefly, on these issues so that any interventions with already over-stretched parents are as positive and realistic as possible.

Who misses out on literacy?

It is not just in Ireland that literacy issues shadow disadvantage. Literacy distribution mirrors widening regional and global inequalities and marks out those who have merited the right to share in even the most basic educational goods from those who have not. One billion people worldwide are deprived of the right to any education and these worsening global figures conceal further gendered inequalities with evidence showing that women have a lower literacy rate than men in many societies.

Literacy levels, like levels of equality, are not always improving. At the beginning of the new millennium there were 30 million more people without literacy in Latin America than twenty years previously (Chomsky, 2001;

Instituto del Terco Mundo, 2003; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 2002, Table 22). Recent school-based studies show Irish literacy levels are also disimproving as we slip from 5th position in PISA 2000 (OECD, 2000) to 17th place in the PISA 2009 study carried out amongst 39 OECD countries (OECD, 2010). This marks the sharpest decline in all the countries surveyed and is viewed by some as indicative of complacency and lack of investment in Irish education. Ireland ranks 30th out of 33 OECD countries in terms of overall spending on education[8].

Where underfunding is part of a wider context of inequality, measured literacy disparaties are also evidence that not all families are equally resourced to carry out family literacy work.

Learning care

In a consideration of family literacy issues it is useful to focus on evidence in the literature about elements of what we will term *learning care*[9]. The term is coined here to denote the attitudes and the actions, both paid and unpaid, that dynamically influence individuals and groups in learning literacy. Drawing initially on the work of Lynch and McLaughlin (1995), *literacy learning care* may be seen as part of primary love relationships, where support for learning is part of a more general (unpaid) interest in the wellbeing of a child or loved one and an integral aspect of the related 'love labour' (Lynch et al, 2009; Feely, 2010). Learning care may also be a commodified (paid) facet of a relationship of care work in a childcare, pre-school or formal education setting (Lynch and McLaughlin, 1995: 250). Noddings (2007), like Engster (2005), argues that we all know intuitively about the pivotal importance of such care in learning but that it becomes obscured by other agendas and is rarely considered a significant issue in educational philosophy. Learning care is therefore the impetus or motivational context within which family literacy work

[8] 'Shattering the myth of a world-class education system' – Sean Flynn, Irish Times 8 December 2010.

[9] The concept of *learning care* and *learning care labour* is based on the ideas of Lynch and McLaughlin (1995) in '*Caring Labour and Love Labour'* where they distinguish between types of emotional work and the extent to which both may be motivated by solidary intent.

is situated.

In adulthood also, learning care may be located in a loving relationship that transcends the barriers created by poor schooling. It may be the positive caring approach experienced as part of an adult literacy scheme or personal development programme or a solidary community family literacy group. As well as involving effort, learning care is also about intent and attitude. It describes a desire to support an individual or group to develop their literacy capability that is conveyed in attentiveness, responsiveness and respect in all aspects of the learning care work (Engster, 2005; Feeley, 2009). Successful adult literacy stories are full of evidence of the power of such love, care, support and solidarity that override earlier affective and educational ommisions.

A dynamic cycle links inequality, learning care and literacy

As well as being emotional, to be useful, caring in the context of learning literacy also involves agency. It is not enough to feel care but rather it has to be acted upon. If actions are to effective, this in turn requires human resources of time, health and knowledge and material and environmental resources of place, toys, books and increasingly, technological learning aids. Financial capital underpins and determines all of these goods. Unequal access to the resources that enable *learning care labour* has a knock-on effect on the capacity of individuals and groups to reap the benefits of literacy learning. As the High/Scope study (mentioned in the introduction) highlights, those who access only impoverished early learning care, whether in the public or private sphere, cannot match the learning and life outcomes of those to whom quality affective support is readily available. Conversely, at the negative end of the care continuum, those for whom learning care labour is altogether lacking are unequally challenged to achieve and retain even basic levels of literacy (Feeley, 2009; 2010).

The resource advantage that financial security gives to young learners means plentiful supplies of educational toys, books and technological learning aids in the home. In addition to these material resources, economic privilege increases the human and temporal (time) investment parents are free to make

in their children's future. In privileged circumstances, mothers' and fathers' costly and time-consuming learning care labour inculcates children into the education culture and supports them to learn and to value the importance of 'literate language' and credentialised capital (Heath, 1983; Allat, 1993; O'Brien, 2005; Noddings, 2007). Conversely, those who are economically disadvantaged possess less human, material, temporal and corporal resources and correspondingly less accrued cultural capital to invest in young learners. Children from more privileged backgrounds learn to read, write, use language, and understand the world and how to take their place in it. Economically, culturally, politically and affectively, they are provided with choices because their families have already an established stake in these structures and can work them to their advantage (Allat, 1993; Standing, 1999). All parents want the best for their children but not all are enabled to make those aspirations a reality.

An uneven playing field

Both international research and local studies affirm that as a result of learning care in the home, many children can already read, or are well disposed to learning by the time they reach primary school (Heath, 1983; ERC, 2004; DES, 2005; Eivers et al, 2005b; NESF, 2009). Literacy inequalities are therefore already established in the first days of primary school (Lee and Burkham, 2002) and accelerate as perceptions of 'fast' and 'slow' readers emerge and begin to influence determinations of ability and learners' self esteem. The main determinant of these early educational inequalities lies in inequalities of economic and cultural capitals that in turn restrict the capacities to provide early learning care. Solutions to this are increasingly framed by 'family literacy', or more often 'good mothering' discourses. In the absence of a willingness to change the underlying, decisive resource issues, the focus rests on increasing family pedagogical resources and this is arguably problematic.

> The practice of targeting family literacy policies towards those who are often most marginalised from the school system is another way in which families with the least resources and representation in the school

> system are encouraged to 'take responsibility' for their situation. (Smythe and Isserlis, 2003: 15)

Having put down roots in early childhood, in adulthood the cycle of disadvantage becomes evermore complex. The causal and consequential chain of links between poverty, learning care and literacy become clear in studies of family life on a low income. Where parents have unmet literacy needs, involvement in their children's learning, in both the public and private spheres, becomes an additional emotional pressure on top of already burdensome lives (O'Neill, 1992; Daly and Leonard, 2002; Northern Ireland Civic Forum, 2002; Smythe and Isserlis, 2003; NALA, 2009; NESF, 2009). Parents who described themselves as 'hardly [able to] read and write' reported conflicting emotions about their children's education (Daly and Leonard, 2002: 86). They recognised learning as a way of breaking out of the vicious cycle of disadvantage and wished for their children to do well at school in order to improve their future life chances. At the same time they felt powerless about supporting and assisting in many aspects of that process.

Pressure on mothers

Whereas '*parents*' generally are cast as pedagogues, in reality, it is primarily the mother that is pressured to become literacy teacher for her children. This new duty adds to the already complex nature of parenting, particularly for women who have had difficult childhoods themselves and who may live, as do many women and girls, with the reality or legacy of violence in their adult life (Horsman, 1999; 2000; 2004). Horsman argues that without adequate supports, the moral imperative to be literacy tutor to her children can bring competing priorities into play and arouse conflicts for mothers who may already be struggling to prioritise their own learning needs.

Central in these dominant mothering discourses are assumptions about the 'normal' family where the mother is present as nurturer and literacy tutor and ultimately held responsible for the child's success in public education. Smythe and Isserlis (2003) argue that such discourses can create gendered, cultural inequalities in literacy care labour where notions of the ideal mother fail to reflect the harsh reality of many women's lives. They cite Jane Mace's (1998)

historical study of the links between mothering and literacy to suggest that the relatively recent emphatic connection between parent and teacher roles is arbitrary, and rooted more in a socio-economic agenda than in the natural role of mother as teacher. Maces' study of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shows how women with little access to literacy in their own lives, nonetheless reared literate children. Their essential contribution was to establish a solid affective base that enabled literacy learning in school rather than being able themselves to directly address literacy issues. This suggests that nurture and care are indeed pivotal in supporting literacy development but that parents' role as 'teacher' need not become as burdensome as is sometimes suggested. In reality, parents' nurturing role and schools' pedagogical practice are both crucial ingredients in the facilitation of children's successful learning profile and family literacy needs to carefully support and include both elements of this partnership.

Generational learning patterns

Teaching and learning are relational activities and function around a complex web of relationships and connections. For a child, the caring relationship with parents and the informal learning that takes place in the family are vital foundations for other, later learning activity. Attitudes are developed and a sense of self is rooted in the very early years before formal schooling begins. Parents' own experience of learning, in addition to shaping the course of their own life chances, will be key in determining the future of subsequent generations. An adult with unhappy memories of school may determine that this will not be repeated in her/his own child's life and struggle for this to be the case. The opposite may equally be true and someone who has been damaged by unpleasant school events may feel powerless in supporting their child's transition into formal schooling and their future learning (Standing, 1999; Reay, 2000; O'Brien, 2005). The determinants of this dynamic are complex and unpredictable but the potential for harm is clearly located in learning structures and not in the badly-served citizens and groups. The earlier supportive interventions can occur, the better. By the time the parents' relationship to the school becomes significant, many suggest that the die is

already definitively cast for the new generation of learner (Reay, 1998; Lee and Burkham, 2002; NICF, 2001).

Home – school partnership

Pressures on families are not just centred on literacy itself but on mediating the wider relationships that maintain and support the entire schooling process. Expectations are traditionally focussed on families fitting in with the school culture rather than on the school shifting and changing and this seems unhelpful. Management of the relationship between child and school requires time and know-how that is intricately linked with and determined by having adequate resources. Parental privilege and time allows mediation between the school and the child in a manner that the low-paid, double-jobbing, educationally disadvantaged and often solitary parent finds more problematic (Standing, 1999; Reay, 2000; O'Brien, 2005). Anticipating Cregan's findings about parental involvement in schools, earlier Irish research (Hannafin and Lynch, 2002) suggests that working class parents are less included, both formally and informally, in school structures than are middle class parents whose values, language and behaviours correspond more closely to the institutionalised ethos of the school. Resources, power and culture therefore layer advantage upon advantage for those from better off backgrounds and are pivotal in underpinning many of the factors that determine success in literacy learning and use. Long before they enter formal schooling, the inequalities of condition, that mean some children will fail to realise their literacy potential, have already made an indelible impression. The literacy gap is already firmly established.

Conclusions about family literacy issues

Dominant literacy discourses invest considerable effort in maintaining a focus on failing schools, falling standards, dysfunctional families, communities and identities. This deficit manner of framing literacy issues obfuscates the real root cause of educational inequalities and the locus of power and responsibility to bring about change. The question of responsibility is interesting. Can a parent who has not received adequate basic education be held responsible for her/his children's poor educational outcomes? The

absence of State early years' provision and quality childcare for working parents means that a substantial class-based learning gap is already in place before primary schooling begins. This does not mean, as Heckman and Masterov (2004) suggest, that economically disadvantaged parents care less about their children. Rather it indicates that they have less financial, material, cultural, temporal and corporal resources to draw upon in carrying out an increasingly demanding learning support role.

Family literacy policy, research and practice are clear about the pivotal role of parents in the development of children's language and literacy. Parents prepare children for formal learning, support them through schooling and reinforce much formal education. They watch over and advocate for children and they are also directly involved in day-to-day family-based learning facilitation. Exploiting the potential, rich collaborative relationship between home and school roles in relation to language and literacy is clearly important and needs further exploration with disadvantaged parents.

At the same time the concept of family literacy is rooted in an implicit acknowledgement that not all parents are equally resourced to prepare and support their children with learning. Without addressing the generative structural issues, family literacy risks becoming a sticking plaster over the chasm between privilege and generational disadvantage. Adopting a socially situated view of family literacy requires close collaboration with parents about what language and literacy learning practices take place outside school and what real time issues arise for parents in doing this work. In the absence of structural equality what supports might family literacy programmes usefully provide?

Parents are the experts in their own children. Their holistic nurturing role allows them to see the child learner in an intimately detailed manner to which the school does not have access. In a just society parents should be the best placed to nurture language and literacy development and prepare children for a formal schooling. In areas of great disadvantage, parents may be less well provided with the time, energy and skill to do family literacy work and so their considerable expertise can be underutilised. Furthermore developing school

language and literacy skills may mean a move from the vernacular language of the home and community that requires a considerable cultural shift. In the contemporary Irish context, this study aims to articulate disadvantaged parents' views on their current family literacy practices and establish what meaningful supports might be designed to respond to their unmet needs in the work of nurturing their own and their family's language and literacy potential.

6. Research design and methodology

Our approach to this study was embedded in a research model that sought to be egalitarian, participatory and emancipatory. An ethic of care was central to this process. As such we sought to build opportunities for democratic dialogue and employed a methodology which values and places participant's own voices and experience at the centre of the research process. Devising accessible, inclusive and care-full methods were central to this endeavour. We recognised that such an approach would require an extended research encounter that would allow time for relationships of trust and respect to develop.

Photovoice

Photography was used to actively involve and engage participants in the research study. *Photovoice* is a flexible and participative action research strategy and has been used internationally with many disadvantaged individuals and groups including a needs assessment with village women in Yunnan, China (Wu et al, 1995), homeless men and women in Michigan (Wang et al, 2000) and with pregnant teenage schoolgirls in the US (Luttrell, 2003). The individual and collective elements of this research method are represented by the acronym VOICE, *voicing our individual and collective experience*. It is a qualitative methodology designed by Wang and Burris (1997) to give voice to those who might not otherwise have the opportunity to express their views or experiences (Wang, 1999).

The *Photovoice* is informed by the problem-posing education work of Friere (1972), feminist education scholars and activists (Lather, 1986; hooks, 2000; 2003), and a participatory approach to documentary photography (Wang et al,

2000). It supports participants to name their world through the critical analysis of photographs they have taken of their everyday lives.

Working in groups, participants use their photographs to prompt reflection and discussion. Consequently, rich and multiple meanings can emerge from this process. The photographs are contextualised through storytelling and these recorded narratives are then codified through the identification of issues, themes and theories.

Photovoice is rooted in a trust and belief in grassroots wisdom and the ability and insight that people bring to defining and articulating their subjective reality. Through individual and collective reflection participants can generate new meanings and understandings of the dominating social systems and structures that affect their lives. This critical reflection has within it the seeds of planning for actions to change and equalise such systems.

Table 1: Chronology of research activity

Timescale	**Research activity**
Mid - September	Meeting with NALA to agree research plan List of possible research partners agreed with NALA Desk and NALA library research for literature review Three research workshops designed Phone contact established with proposed research partners Project information leaflet designed and disseminated
October / November	Initial face to face contact with representatives of research partner groups Agreement on dates and locations of research workshops Seven research workshops facilitated in three research sites Interim report November 19th
November/December	Five in-depth interviews conducted Data transcribed, coded and analysed using MAXqDA

	Draft report completed and presented to NALA for discussion in December 2010 Report finalised by January 2011

Identification of research partners

For the purposes of this research NALA was particularly interested in consulting with parents who were not engaged in formal literacy schemes and who lived in some of the most disadvantaged areas of the country. Using the Combat Poverty deprivation map[10] as a guide, three possible research sites were identified. These included a Dublin inner city area, a rural town in the Midlands and a location in the West of the country.

The research sample

Despite enormous social and economic challenges, all the parents in the research sample were conscious of the need for home stability as a basis for learning and they worked extremely hard to make the best possible environment for their children. The detail below is not intended to suggest that families were in any way dysfunctional but rather to illustrate some of the inequalities against which parents struggle in order to give their children a chance of achieving their language and literacy potential.

One group was made up of individual parents recruited by the HSCL coordinator in a DEIS primary school. A second group were parents from a housing estate who were recruited through the agency of a community development group that had established a relationship of trust with individual parents and invited them to come together for the purposes of the research project. Although some of the parents in each of these groups knew each other they had never participated in a group together before. The third group were women lone parents who met weekly in a Midlands women's centre for

[10] Appendix A: CPA map of disadvantage

peer support and a range of social and developmental activities designed to respond to their expressed needs.

Table 2: Research sample profile

No.	Gender	Age	Location	Place of origin	Parenting	Paid work	Age of children	Age leaving school	Education level
1.	Female	42	Inner city	Ireland	Alone	No	20; 17; 11; 9	13	FETAC
2.	Female	28	Inner city	Ireland	Co-parent	No	5	16	Primary
3.	Female	34	Inner city	Ireland	Alone	No	13; 7; 5; 2	13	Junior
4.	Male	44	Inner city	Ireland	Co-parent	No	11; 5	18	Leaving
5.	Female	46	Inner city	Ireland	Co-parent	No	15; 11	14	Junior
6.	Male	40	Inner city	Ireland	Co-parent	No	19; 12	13	Group
7.	Female	23	Midlands	Ireland	Alone	Yes	4; 2	13	PLC
8.	Female	32	Midlands	Ireland	Alone	Yes	15; 14; 7	13	PLC
9.	Female	36	Midlands	China	Alone	No	11; 10	16	2nd Grade
10.	Female	46	Midlands	USA	Alone	Yes	10	18	PLC
11.	Female	28	Midlands	Africa	Alone	No	9; 6; 5; 4; 2; 1	16	FETAC
12.	Female	42	Midlands	Ireland	Alone	No	28; 18	14	Primary
13.	Female	40	Midlands	Ireland	Alone	No	22; 19; 8	14	Junior
14.	Female	30	Midlands	Ireland	Alone	Yes	10	16	PLC
15.	Female	28	Midlands	Ireland	Alone	No	5	16	Junior
16.	Female	35	Midlands	Ireland	Alone	No	10	14	Primary
17.	Female	26	West	Ireland	Co-parent	Yes	8; 7	17	PLC

18.	Female	36	West	Ireland	Co-parent	Yes	6; 5	18	PLC
19.	Female	43	West	Ireland	Co-parent	Yes	21; 19; 14	18	Leaving
20.	Female	22	West	UK	Alone	No	4; 3	16	Junior
21.	Female	36	West	Ireland	Alone	No	17; 16; 14; 13; 12; 9; 5	14	Primary
22.	Female	38	West	Ireland	Co-parent	No	24; 9; 8; 7; 6	14	Primary

The parents

Twenty women and two men participated in the research sessions (n=22). Those living in an inner city or urban location accounted for 55% of the sample (n=12) while the remaining 45% were from a rural location (n=10). A substantial proportion of the sample – 64%, was parenting alone (n=14) while 36% shared parenting with a partner (n=8). The majority of the parents were Irish (n=18) with a small number – 18%, having a place of origin outside Ireland (n=4). Of those who attended school in Ireland (n=18) 61% left school early (n=11). One father and two mothers had completed the Leaving Certificate (n=3) while a number of people in each group spoke of concerns about their own literacy level. The majority of the sample – 68%, was not in paid employment (n=15) and of those in paid employment, 3 worked in part-time childcare and 4 in community development.

One parent was an Irish Traveller and two women had a mother tongue other than English. One parent was living in a homeless hostel having lost her home through fire. Two parents spoke about recovery from alcohol and drug addiction. One parent had two children addicted to heroin while others had a history with the criminal justice system. Although the focus of the groups was family literacy, a number of references were made to sexual and domestic violence, premature or violent death of a child or partner, separation, divorce and estrangement from other family members. A number of families included children from a previous partnership and one parent only had only occasional custody of a school-aged child. A number of families included several generations either because of care responsibilities for older family members or the requirement to share accommodation.

The children

Between them the research participants had 58 children aged between one year and 28 years old. The average age was 11. Amongst the parents there were 82% with children in the primary sector (n=18) and 50% with children in first class or below (n=11). All of those with pre-school children had access to childcare and a range of early intervention programmes. Two children attended a Gaelscoil, which presented an additional challenge for parents who were not themselves literate in the Irish language.

A proportion of the children - 36%, had recognised learning difficulties or disabilities (n=8) and in all of the three research groups, several parents made reference to children with ADHD either statemented or assumed. Parents discussed the use of the drug Ritallin, at the suggestion of the school, with children as young as five years of age who were perceived to have ADHD.

Many of the parents spoke positively of their experiences with school resource teachers and additional supports with their children's language and literacy. During our time in one group a parent received a phone call to say that her six year-old was excluded from school because of her refusal to be withdrawn from class for reading support.

Bullying was a major issue for some parents (n=8). Five children had been withheld from school by their parents because of bullying. One parent had changed her son's school because of the high level of concern about his physical and emotional safety.

The locations

The assurance of anonymity and confidentiality prevents detailed elaboration on the research locations. They were working class areas with diverse levels of social housing ranging from a recently regenerated community to an abjectly rundown estate with bricked up houses and visible signs of dilapidation. In the midlands, parents came from diverse rural towns and villages and their bond was lone parenthood rather than geographic community.

Preliminary relationship building

Byrne and Lentin (2000) stress the importance of building good relationships with research partners. The features of such effective partnerships include taking time to get to know people; creating opportunities for mutual self-disclosure and questioning; designing a process that ensures that there is the possibility for comments and feedback throughout the research process; being clear about the purpose of the research with participants and the avoidance of a controlling list of topics to be discussed. These were all central tenets of this research project.

Prior networks were used to contact potential research partner groups in each of the geographical areas identified. The purpose and process of the project was outlined during detailed phone conversations. This was followed by the dissemination of an information leaflet to each research site[11].

An information-sharing visit was made to the first research site in a town in the midlands, *Midlands Women's Centre*[12]. This group had been working together, one evening a week, over a number of years on a variety of programmes. Initial concerns expressed by the group included the use and ownership of photographs, the possible intrusion into the private environment of the home and the ultimate merits for participants of being involved in research work.

During a visit to the second research site, a community development centre in an inner city area, it was suggested that parents from the local primary school might be interested in participating in the research. Contact with the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) teacher was made and a number of individual parents were recruited to the project. This group, *Inner City Parents*[13], included two fathers.

A family support worker in the west of the country recruited the third group, *West Community Development*[14]. A date for an initial session was organised with parents who had children attending a breakfast club, but had never worked together as a group before. When we arrived at the local school, no parents turned up for the session. After some discussion and clarification of the project goals it was agreed that we would visit a local community development centre and we were introduced to the area where many of the parents lived.

The family support worker suggested that she would make renewed efforts to recruit a group of parents to meet with us. She advised that one half-day session followed by lunch would be most appropriate for the group who might

[11] Appendix B: Project information leaflet
[12] Psuedonym
[13] Pseudonym
[14] Pseudonym

have difficulty committing to three sessions. Given a range of sensitive issues, it was agreed that the photography aspect of the research should be omitted in this case.

This relationship building with organisations, though costly in terms of temporal resources, was vital to the engagement of research participants who were well informed and clear about the purpose and process of the research project.

Research workshops

Three two-hour workshops[15] were designed to facilitate the gathering of data from *Midlands Women's Centre* and *Inner City Parents*. The first workshop focussed on further building the research relationship with participants and defining a shared understanding of the research study and of family literacy. During this session there was some initial practice in taking photographs with disposable cameras and a discussion of the ethics involved in using photographs for research. Participants supported one another in planning to illustrate literacy learning moments and events as they might occur in their families.

Photographs were taken with disposable cameras and, with the support of the local host organisation, they were processed in time for the second research workshop. During this session participants reviewed photographs and selected those that most accurately represented family literacy learning for them. These photographs formed the basis of rich discussion and in-depth individual and collective analysis of parents' strengths and challenges in undertaking literacy learning work in the home and in the wider community context.

The third and final session focussed on identifying the supports needed to do this learning care work and certificates were presented to participants in recognition of their invaluable contribution to the research project. All transcripts from the research conversations were returned to research

[15] Appendix C: Outline of the three workshops

partners to allow for comment. Furthermore a copy of the final report was circulated to the groups for feedback. No amendments were requested.

One extended research conversation was planned for the *West Community Development* group.

Ethical considerations and Photovoice

Wang and Redwood-Jones (2001) stress that the same ethic of care for research partners that is used in more 'traditional' research approaches must be employed when using photography. The research team were conscious of the importance of informed consent and the right to safety of research participants. It was clarified with participants from the outset that all photographs taken were their sole property. During the workshops, issues in relation to consent to be photographed were also discussed and it was agreed that those appearing in photographs would be consulted prior to any 'clicking'.

At the end of one workshop a participant volunteered some images and a consent form for publication was designed and signed to ensure that permission for pictures to be published was agreed.

A snapshot of the research journey

This research project was a journey into new territory for the researchers. We had some experience of using photography as a reflection and writing prompt with literacy learners but this was the first time for us to use photography as a research tool.

We found it to be a highly participative and powerful method. There was immediacy to the visual images that prompted lively discussion and reflection. Research participants were engaged and inspired by the storytelling that surrounded their photographs. Participants described feeling affirmed and validated for the care-full literacy work they were already doing with their children. They reported an experience of being really listened to by the group and the researchers.

Emancipatory research

Our approach to this research had at its heart, the hope that research participants would gain useful insights about family literacy from their involvement in the process. Research as praxis is characterised by negotiation, reciprocity and empowerment (Friere, 1972: Friere and Macedo, 1987) and these values guided this research.

Opportunities for reflection and the sharing of new learning were integral to the research workshops. During evaluations participants told us that they had a much clearer understanding of the range and depth of family literacy events they were involved in. Parents described a heightened 'noticing' of literacy learning during their involvement in the research. It affirmed for many the good practice they had intuitively developed and for others it bolstered their determination to continue to develop their skills in this important work. All of the groups expressed a desire to complete a family literacy course as a result of participation in the study.

Challenges

NALA was keen, in this research project, to access the voices of parents who might otherwise go unheard. The target group were parents and families who lived in some of the most disadvantaged areas in the country and were not already involved in literacy courses. Engaging already overstretched parents from disadvantaged areas in an extended research process is a challenging task and makes a considerable demand on already busy lives. Generously resourcing the early relationship-building phase of this project was key to research participants feeling the project was relevant and worthwhile.

Time, care and sensitivity are required to bring new groups together and to support them to work collectively. The combination of developing a safe and secure reflective environment with the discussion of an issue so intimately related to the private sphere of the family can result in disclosures about violence, hurt and harm. Additionally, researchers need to be aware that photographs and visual images can give rise to deeply emotional responses. Ensuring that there is adequate follow on support for participants is vital if the research relationship is to do no harm to those who give generously of their

time and efforts to research projects. In each of the research sites there was a support worker who had an existing and ongoing relationship with participants and this was key both in accessing individuals and to the continued support for those involved in the project.

8. Findings

Introduction

The findings from the empirical research are presented in response to four questions suggested by NALA's aims.

a. *What are parent's views about family literacy?*
b. *How do parents describe their own family literacy practice?*
c. *What challenges do parents face in doing family literacy?*
d. *Would a family literacy programme be beneficial and what content and method of delivery would match parents' needs?*

Although all of the participants came from areas of disadvantage, there was nonetheless, diversity within the total group of twenty-two parents. This was true in terms of their immediate social situation, their own experience of learning literacy and their family literacy practices. Some parents began with carefully considered views of family literacy while others became more aware through the reflective aspect of the research process. Relationships between parents and the school also varied between and within groups with experience ranging from a sense of negative judgement and exclusion to one of total partnership, support and inclusion in all aspects of the school. Some parents had additional challenges arising both from their particular social circumstances and the specific learning needs of their children. Irrespective of these differences, the parents were unanimously agreed on the value of language and literacy development for their children's immediate and long-term wellbeing and were open to opportunities for discussing and learning more about the practice of family literacy.

The evidence below has emerged from a series of in-depth discussions with each of the three parent groups and their voices are therefore at the core of the findings. There is inevitable overlap in the themes that arise in response to the 4 research questions where specific issues may recur with different emphases. This section (8) presents a description of the evidence offered by parents about family literacy. Conclusions and recommendations about these findings form the basis of the discussion in the following section (9).

8a What are parent's views about family literacy?

The answer to this question raises issues of care work, resources, cultural perspectives and power. Parents intuitively described a socially situated view of family literacy that involved the developmental speech, reading and writing (and sometimes numeracy) events that took place in the home and the wider community. Family literacy was what happened outside school. This learning activity was seen to be located within the wider nurturing work of the family and to have care, resource and skill implications. When discussing the notion that they are their child's 'first teacher' there was some ambivalence about the concept of 'teacher' that helps illustrate parents view of their role as located in the affective domain.

> You are learning your kids before they start school. You are not teaching them in a school way but you are their teacher. *(Parent aged 22 with two children)*
>
> The word teacher is a bit cold to me. There is an air of someone bossing you and being in charge of you. I would see myself as my child's teacher but not in a clinical way; not in the sense of a schoolteacher. *(Parent aged 43 with three children)*

Views of family literacy were clearly rooted in parents' own experience of nurture and how they had processed this in adulthood. There were frequent references to their own childhood experiences of learning at home and school. In some cases they replicated their own family literacy experience. In others they consciously decided to create a new pattern.

> There are games like hopscotch, giant steps, snakes and ladders … number games that help with counting. You nearly do it without thinking about it because your parents did it with you. *(Parent aged 28 with one child)*
>
> In my childhood I have been on the other side where no-one is there and you just have to pick things up as best you can through what you haven't got. That's why I will get involved now. (*Parent aged 40 with two children)*
>
> I read to my kids because my parents did it with me. *(Parent aged 44 with two children)*

With school-age children, for the most part family literacy becomes viewed as less playful and spontaneous and more closely related to supporting the work

done in formal schooling. Some parents described power over literacy (and to some extent their children) being handed over to the education system and in some cases the value of the parent's expert role becoming diminished accordingly.

> Teachers of small children are almost like adoptive parents. These children are leaving home and they are almost owned by their teachers. *(Parent aged 28 with six children)*

Views of family literacy in the data are therefore interrelated with the parent's relationship to the child's school and the level of cooperation and partnership that exists between home and school.

Family literacy as 'love labour'

The parents in the study repeatedly construed family literacy as an integral part of the care work that they did as parents. It involved both *caring for* and *caring about* how children were getting on with language and literacy. It was a concern for the child's learning in the immediate moment and for the long-term stability of their life in which literacy was seen as a corner stone. Like all care work, this primary learning care was both burdensome and rewarding, a source of pressure and of pride. Parents did this 'love labour' because of a view that education offered the best chance they could give their children to change a cycle of disadvantage. Particularly those who had missed out on literacy at school became increasingly aware of the depth of that deficit in their own life.

> My kids are doing great now. My young one is in college. I only ever saw college on the television. My daughter is going to be an accountant. I have changed the cycle. *(Parent aged 40 with two children)*

Family literacy work was seen to have many facets all of which are rooted in care and affection. These include prioritising the learning needs of each individual child, being encouraging and attentive to them, mediating and advocating for them with teachers. As one parent put it, family literacy is about generally making every effort to ensure that they 'blossom'. All of this labour is grounded in parental concern and often literacy and demonstrations of care happen simultaneously.

> There should be a bit of love has to go in there too. Actually when I am doing homework with the young fellow he is kind of sitting up and kind of leaning against me as if to say – I am well supported here. He feels safe. So I think love should go in there. When they come in from school they come to me for a hug and the same before they leave in the morning. That is their support. *(Parent aged 42 with four children)*

Reading in particular is often associated with physical closeness. In their research photographs there were similar examples of parents reading to a number of children who were cuddled up together on a sofa. They were surprised by this and made a connection between family reading and bonding between family members.

> I have always read to him even when he was a baby. It's a comfort thing really. He'd sit in my lap and I'd read to him or maybe he would be in bed or we'd be sitting together. Sometimes we do these things but we won't think of it as teaching or even as work but I think that being a mother is one of the hardest jobs in the world. *(Parent aged 32 with three children)*

Examples of the entanglement of care and work in the process of family literacy recur throughout the data. Conversely some parents remarked that doing extra literacy work was often used as a punishment in school when other privileges were withdrawn. This was seen to give contradictory messages to children.

Communication

Parents spoke of building individual and family bonds with children around learning, paying attention to their concerns and bolstering their learning identity. They talked about heaping praise on their children's efforts and achievements and creating spaces when, as a family, they could talk and listen to each other.

> If they are watching telly or playing their computer games they are not talking to each other or to us. Even if playing board games together ends in an argument, it is real. You get them to do something and not just vegetate in front of the television. *(Parent aged 44 with two children)*

With pre-school children there is an emphasis on listening as they experiment with language, modelling pronunciation and answering interminable questions. Whereas conversation was seen as directly contributing to

language development with younger children, once formal schooling began an open system of communication became a means of keeping in touch with how children were progressing and how they felt about school. Parents monitored when children were struggling with some aspect of learning and tried to help. They mediated between the child and the teacher if they felt that was required. Eight out of twenty-two parents (36%) were directly concerned about bullying incidents at the time when the fieldwork was taking place. For all parents, a sizeable part of the work that they did was to ensure that school-aged children were happy and so able to absorb the new learning on offer.

> I always say to mine that if there is anything on your mind or if anyone has done something to you, you can always come and talk to me. Every so often I repeat it to them. I tell them I will always listen to them. I often burnt the dinner listening to them. *(Parent aged 42 with four children)*

A number of parents spoke of their child's distress about leaving class for individual help with reading. Some children did not like being singled out where for others there was added anxiety about what was being missed. Part of parent's care work was to uncover the detail of how school was going for a child and support their individual children who were getting distressed.

> I have two children – one seven and the other eight. One loves school and the other hates it. He has to go out for special reading and he hates it. When we were doing his maths last night he just started to cry. He's behind now with his maths because he has to go out with the resource teacher. He can't catch up. The others have been told how to do them and he has missed it. *(Parent aged 26 with two children)*

Parents' total commitment to their children's wellbeing was very much bound up with their language and literacy development both at home and in formal schooling. Their capacity to attend to family literacy was closely linked to a series of personal, temporal and economic resources.

Resourcing family literacy

Parents from disadvantaged areas are conscious of the role of various material, temporal and personal resources in supporting language and literacy learning. Several parents raised the issue of money in relation to the cost of pre-school and school resources but only one parent discussed the fact that

additional learning opportunities, or grinds were accessible only in the domain of the economically privileged.

> If you have money it makes it easier to pay for your kids education because education does cost a lot of money. The 1:1 support for reading is very important especially when they are young. If you have money you can pay for it. Otherwise you are dependent on the school and there are a lot of kids who need it who don't get it at school. *(Parent aged 34 with four children)*

Every member of the research cohort had a history of economic and educational disadvantage and it is possible that the notion of paying for additional learning opportunities for children was unfamiliar. Time demands, on the other hand were a conscious pressure on all parents.

Time

Each research group emphasised the overwhelming time demand associated with supporting children's learning at different stages. Before formal schooling parenting is a fulltime job and aspects of language development are a constant task that also implies patience.

> My daughter started talking early and I had to listen and give her lots of time. *(Parent aged 35 with one child)*

Then there is time involved in preparing for school, the travel to and from school, time spent listening to what has happened at school and physically and emotionally accompanying children as they do their homework. For many there was additional time spent playing games, counting, learning songs and rhymes and reading bedtime stories. When parents have a number of children the complexity and pressure of time demands increases. For the most part, especially where resources prevent buying in support, time also implies physical presence and many had learned of the importance of time and presence through their own negative experience.

> It's all about time. It's a big word. You have to have time to sit down with kids and give them help with homework. When I was growing up I never had much time from my mother because there were eighteen of us. What time can you give then? I learned from that that if I had children I was going to give them time. What I missed out on I am giving to my kids at the moment. *(Parent aged 42 with four children)*

Some parents structured the time spent on family literacy more than others and implemented a model of family literacy and numeracy that was more intentional than incidental or learned by cultural osmosis.

> She is in first class and she is in junior infants. At holidays and weekends and times like that I set aside time and they get to do their alphabet and numbers and things like that. The older ones get to do their multiplication tables and maths and their spellings. I photocopy things from school so I work on it with them at home as well. *(Parent aged 28 with six children)*

Siblings

Interesting evidence emerged through the research conversations about the valued role played by siblings in the whole process of family literacy. Family literacy traditionally does not acknowledge the role of other children as literacy facilitators and yet the three research groups of parents highlighted the central role they play. They identified how important this made it to 'get things right' with the oldest child.

> I find the children are quick at picking things up. They learn quicker from one another than they do from us. They kind of mimic one another. The younger ones copy the older ones. *(Parent aged 32 with three children)*

There is rich evidence that family literacy is about tapping the resources that children bring to the business of learning at home.

> My son could read before he started school. When I was doing the bedtime stories, his sisters read to him. The whole family would be doing it. *(Parent aged 38 with five children)*

One parent took a photograph of the back of her kitchen door and explained how a poster provided by the school has become part of a family tradition.

> This is a picture of my daughter and she is pointing at the letters and she is trying to do her sounds and her letters so that she can actually learn the words for homework. This is a poster that I am going to keep on my door. Even the baby is starting to do some of the sounds. It is amazing how one child copies off the other child. They imitate each other. My daughter copied from her older brother and now the baby is imitating her. It is like a family tradition now. *(Parent aged 34 with four children)*

As well as learning by example, some children were actively recruited by parents to support siblings. One mother spoke of letting her son correct her

daughter's pronunciation of some words in a way that was less challenging for her than if an adult had intervened. Another woman relied on her eldest child to supplement her literacy gaps.

> I'm not good at spellings and they know that at home and if they get stuck they know they have to get help from the eldest. *(Parent aged 42 with four children)*

> I am crap at maths. I haven't a notion about maths and I have to tell you that my eleven year-old daughter is able to teach me. I was never good at maths but she is able to teach me now. There are opportunities to learn from your child as well. It is not a one-way street. *(Parent aged 42 with four children)*

Parents also talked about how family literacy was a two-way street that meant they recognised they were in a reciprocal learning relationship with their children. New methods of doing maths, punctuation, spelling and technology were all areas where parents got help from children in an incidental manner.

Parental resources

Parents saw family literacy as located within a wider family context of parenting. Their parenting style and the general management of children's behaviour overlapped with the specific issues raised by family learning. Motivation was a case in point.

> If they don't want to do something they will drag at it and do everything possible not to do it. But if they want to do something they will try their best. They will make an effort if they really want to. If they don't want to you can move hell or high water and they won't do it. *(Parent aged 40 with three children)*

Inevitably parent's confidence with supporting language and literacy was strongly influenced by their own learning experience. This had not always been positive for many of those in the research groups and some were conscious of the challenge posed by their own unmet learning needs.

> Trying to teach your kids as well as trying to teach yourself is difficult which is why support is so important. *(Parent aged 34 with four children)*

> I tell my son when I can't spell something. I tell him to look in the dictionary or something but I hate saying it. It's a horrible feeling when you can't spell it for your own child or when they are asking you to read

> something or when they ask you what does that mean and you can't answer. *(Parent aged 40 with two children)*

Disadvantage played a role in some parents not learning literacy. With hindsight they could see that social class was an issue in their treatment at school. One woman told about feeling that she was treated differently from others in her class at school. She was told publically to borrow items of school uniform from the lost property and sent home for refusing. She delayed there and only returned when the school day was almost over. She felt she was always singled out by teachers and left school forever as soon as she could.

Most of those who had missed out on learning were determined to ensure that their children had a different pattern of experiences. They had learned by default the value of having robust basic skills and consequently placed a high value on every aspect of learning, including at home. They described the self-esteem that comes from encouragement and the difference this makes to learning outcomes.

> He loves the attention and the praise. He thinks he's great. There's no one like him. But that's what I love because I never had confidence like that when I was growing up. I'd always be at the back of the class. He will keep on at something until he gets it. *(Parent aged 28 with one child)*

There was a reward for parents too in their children's success, particularly when their own learning had been pitted with disappointment.

> It's a boost for you too in yourself, isn't it? What you never done, he is doing. It's another chance for you too. I was an early school leaver too. I never went to secondary but I have my second boy on his Leaving Cert now. *(Parent aged 42 with four children)*

Although they were eager to do the best for their children, the majority of parents felt ill-prepared for the tasks involved in family literacy. They would like better time management skills, a strategic approach to literacy and numeracy tasks and specific advice to meet language and literacy challenges presented by individual children. They gleaned advice from other parents, health visitors and special needs assistants and from community-based initiatives for parents and children at risk. Some used the resources around them in the community and emulated the activities done in local clubs and

projects. They measured their performance against that of others and used considerable ingenuity to amass greater skills and confidence.

> You know if you are doing something at home and they come back and they've done the same kind of thing somewhere else … then you know that you are doing the right thing. It gives you confidence. *(Mother aged 34 with four children)*

Parents coped as best they could with the demands of family literacy and because they valued their children's educational development they deployed whatever resources and skills they could muster for the task.

Views on the value of family literacy

Just as literacy is located in a social context from which it derives much of its meaning, so also family literacy was seen by parents in a context of wider learning for life. Parents spoke of their responsibility in developing their children's moral parameters, their personality, their self-esteem and their capacity to deal with relationships and school life. In general, parents wanted the best they could get for their children and education was perhaps the most highly valued gift they could bestow. In a time of economic recession and austerity this concern deepened.

> It's a big bad world out there and you need your parents. Especially at the moment you would be frightened for them. I was only looking at my kids last night and thinking what's there for them? What are we struggling for? There is only one thing there we can help them with and that is education. *(Parent aged 40 with two children)*

With a belief in the transformational power of learning came responsibility and this was a recurring theme in all groups. Parents realised that they established the value of literacy by their behaviour and actions at home.

> You are the role model… the leader of the pack. You are showing that you value it. *(Parent aged 42 with four children)*

> Children are like your mirror image. What you do, they do as well. *(Parent aged 32 with three children)*

Age-related issue

Some parents expressed the view that family literacy activities could be a pressure on children. There was reluctance on the part of some to put what they saw as an excessive burden on very young children. One mother

remarked that she thought 'babies should be allowed to be babies' but then went on to speak appreciatively of the pre-literacy work done in the crèche. Despite her views about early interventions she saw the value of the work in the crèche.

> Even in the crèche they were getting ready for school! We had to buy workbooks for them. They were great at teaching them stuff. Even before the kids started big school they were preparing them. They knew how to count and their *abc's* and so on. I didn't have to do that work. They did it all in the crèche. *(Parent aged 23 with two children)*

The same parent complained about something she had seen advertised on the television for teaching reading to children aged two years old. The DVD accompanied by flash cards was designed to accelerate reading attainment. She felt this was unfair to a child and that literacy should evolve as part of natural development and not be forced.

> I wouldn't force my little girl of two to go and read books at this stage. I'd rather she'd be a child and play. She is already learning from her older brother anyway. *(Parent aged 23 with two children)*

The early, pre-school years were seen by other parents as the time when building blocks were put in place for children; when their attitudes and approach to learning were established. Values like curiosity, patience, tenacity, and problem solving that are learned through play were identified as vital generic learning skills. One mother felt that she had learned from the mistakes that she had made with her first child and that home-based literacy was important as a support for the work done in school.

> When she was small I wouldn't have been doing the words and stuff like that; spelling out the words and that. I'd have expected her to know words. I'd say, 'you should know this. The teacher told you this already!' I made some mistakes with her but as time goes by you learn. *(Parent aged 34 with four children)*

Parents with a number of children spoke of the value of recognising the diversity of learning styles and the need to match language and literacy support to each child's needs.

Gender

The traditionally gendered nature of family literacy was challenged in one group that included two fathers. One man saw the gendered nature of care as being outdated and both men were ardent advocates for family literacy work.

> I think that there are still some men out there who think that family literacy is women's work but it has to be a two-way street. You have to give. In my father's generation it was women's work and the fathers had to work and they didn't do anything with the kids. *(Parent aged 44 with two children)*

Gender issues also emerged in the photos that parents took. One example included a boy using literacy and numeracy while he was cooking and his parent explained that she didn't want him to be bound by gender stereotypes now or when he was older.

Expectations

There is much in the data about parents' determination to lay solid foundations for their children's future and language and literacy are seen as integral to this. They marvel at their children's capacity to learn and at the same time they empathise with their struggles and long to support them. Unlike some middle class parents who have a sense of entitlement from the education system, the parents in this research project are constantly surprised by their children's attainment. Their achievement, even in the everyday learning tasks, surpasses parents' expectations. One woman 'nearly died' and 'bawled crying' when her son presented her with his junior cert passes. Another woman is 'amazed' by the ease with which her son is coping with school. A parent with unmet literacy needs takes pleasure in watching his son solve a problem. He took one photo of his son with his tongue sticking out, concentrating on a homework problem. Seconds later he took another photo of him smiling with satisfaction when he had solved the problem.

> I love watching him getting it. It's really good. It's a long structure. It begins long before they start school. He comes in after school straight away now and takes the books out and gets it done. *(Parent 40 with two children)*

Conscious of the groundwork that he has done to foster his son's success this parent is nonetheless still relatively new to the business of family literacy. Like

for others in the research cohort, this is a story of first generation literacy. It is full of commitment and hope but none of the certainty of high expectations that are seen by some as a vital ingredient of educational success.

Families and schools sharing power

Families do not exist in a vacuum and the views that parents expressed about family literacy often described a shared role with others. In the early years there were welcome interventions from extended family, health visitors, family support services and community childcare facilities. Some parents' narratives were about receiving crucial advice about language development from those who made routine visits to their homes in relation to child development. Those with younger children had recent experience of early intervention programmes, which they felt replicated what they did at home. Those whose children attended crèche were appreciative of the strategic manner in which language and literacy were approached and surprised by the progress that their children were able to make.

When formal schooling began, some parents felt much more distanced from their children's learning while others found themselves in a supportive partnership with their child's school. The family literacy practice of those who had a poor experience of collaboration with the school was more burdensome and lacked the clarity of those who had direction from the class teacher. A HSCL coordinator recruited one of the research groups and the experience of these parents was extremely positive. The school held an induction for parents at the beginning of each year and explained what children would be doing and how best to support that work. It was clear that parents understood what went on in this school.

> The way they do it [reading] in the boy's school is great. They do sounds first and then the letters. They give them books. He's in junior infants and he's already reading. I never thought he'd be able to read a book or put a sentence together. It's great. I love that school. *(Parent aged 28 with one child)*

Some parents remembered a less welcoming culture in the same school in previous years and were able to describe the difference it meant to feel comfortable and welcomed in the school. An open door policy operated and a

parents' room was available so that there was a space and opportunity for parents to meet together, learn from each other and attend courses. The school provides activities for parents and children to learn literacy and numeracy together and these new techniques can be replicated at home.

> On a Wednesday, every now and again, they have maths for fun. You go into the child's class for an hour and a half and they have all these different games to do with maths and counting. The parents and the kids and the teachers all work on it together. We have story times too that we can come to. *(Parent aged 28 with one child)*

The Inner City HSCL coordinator was actively involved in all the initiatives that brought parents and school into closer cooperation. She had been working in three local schools for nine years and attributed the progressive work there to the resources provided by DEIS and the commitment and leadership of the school principal.

One school referred to in the West also had a policy of including parents and an awareness of parent's diverse levels of literacy.

> We get a newsletter of every single class telling you what each class is doing. If you can't read they will bring you in and talk with you. It's all on first names there in that school and the principal knows the quieter parents and keeps an eye out for them and he'd say why don't you come in and we'll chat. He's really communicative with all the parents. He really picks out the people who don't talk. *(Parent aged 35 with two children)*

In the Midlands' group children attended a number of different schools. There was no overt culture of cooperation as described in the Inner City group and the onus was left to parents to instigate a cooperative relationship with schools. Inevitably some did this with greater ease than others depending on levels of self-esteem, parent's own literacy skills and the openness of individual teachers.

The data suggest that schools might do more to harness parents' interest in a more strategic sense than is currently the case. Parents are keen to do focussed family literacy work with school-aged children but often lack direction and feel excluded.

> Sometimes I think there is a divide between the teachers and the parents. Parents should be informed about the curriculum and they

> should be told how they can help their children learn but there seems to be an attitude there that we are the teachers and you are only the parents. It's a bit top down. There is only negative communication between the school and the parents. *(Parent aged 36 with seven children)*

Having a say

All parents monitored their child's development, watched for signs of difficulties and some checked with the teacher about reversed letters or difficulties remembering spellings. There were numerous accounts of parents feeling that they were not listened to when they warned that a child was struggling with some aspect of learning.

> Whenever you let the school know your child is struggling… because you are the parent and you know them so well… you are not listened to. Often what is said is that it is home life that is affecting the child. *(Parent aged 32 with three children)*

When parents (in the Midlands and West) did not feel their knowledge and expertise was valued or respected this was frustrating and disempowering. At the same time, when their prediction proved accurate they were made to feel that the difficulty stemmed from the home environment. Others had experience of diverse school cultures and were clear that sometimes it was the school rather than parents that needed to change.

> Sometimes it is the school that has to move. Some schools are living like 30 years ago in schools that are more like institutions. It's to do with the principal really. They have to look at it in a different way than they did years ago. The teachers have to do that too. In the other school you can be rushed out. He doesn't have any time for you. He just has not the time for the parents. Sometimes he would just walk by you and he wouldn't even say good morning to you. The principal here has great time for the kids. *(Parent aged 42 with four children)*

The leadership role of the principal and its impact on the teachers arose a number of times in the data. One woman changed her son's school because of serious bullying that had interrupted his reading development.

> The new principal has a whole different attitude and the teachers have relaxed as well. He [6 year old son] is actually beginning to sound out his words around the house now. I bought the jolly phonics book for him. If I'm making the dinner now I say go in and ask them what they want for dinner and he has a little notebook and he pretends he is a

> waiter. It just shows the difference the school makes. *(Parent aged 36 with two children)*

Other parents had experienced more authoritarian and confrontational systems. An Irish Traveller had tried to warn the school that her son (aged 14) was 'ready to explode' because of name-calling. She felt her voice was not heard and her son (and she) was perceived to be at fault. She experienced the manner in which the school principal dealt with the issue as overbearing rather than supportive.

> When I came in she would have three teachers on one side of her and two on the other and I was boxed in by them all. They said there was something wrong at home. I said he is my son and I am the only support he has. I said I didn't like being confronted with all the teachers. There was no need for that. *(Parent aged 32 with three children)*

Both in the literature and the data, the relationship between the school and the home is key to a child's successful experience of language and literacy development. The level of collaboration with the school also influences the experience of family literacy practice for parents with school-aged children. Particularly with disadvantaged parents and those who lack confidence in their own basic skills, the data suggests that schools have learning to do and changes to make in terms of their role in the learning partnership. Parents are keen to do this work and so the school has an important role to play in reflecting about how best they share power with parents so as to maximise the potential in the home-school partnership.

Box 1

Case study: Mary

Age: 23

2 Children: 4; 2

Mary is bringing up two sons on her own and without any family support. Mary's childhood was turbulent and she left school early without feeling confident about her literacy skills. Her children attend pre-school provision where she feels that she is negatively judged and shunned by both teachers

and other parents. She feels this may be because she is a very young parent or because of her obvious lack of resources.

One of her sons has a speech issue that requires daily therapeutic exercises and she enjoys creating rhymes that include the sounds on which he is focusing at a given moment. She buys taped stories and nursery rhymes for her children and says that she herself is learning from following along with these books. She is conscious of the need to support her children's learning and struggles in difficult circumstances to find the resources to do this work. Mary is anxious that she improves her literacy 'one step ahead' of her children so that she is able to give them the support that she missed.

Photo: Mary selected a photo taken by her older child that shows her sharing a picture book with her youngest boy. The photo shows how sharing books with children is also about sharing time, giving attention and affection.

Needs from a family literacy course: Mary wants a course that addresses her own literacy needs and allows her to cope with her children's learning level. She would like to be in a group of similar parents so that she has the camaraderie and support of that group as well as the targeted literacy development. She would like a community-based course that has childcare provision, is informal and delivered by someone 'down to earth'.

8b How do parents describe their own family literacy practice?

This section presents data gathered from the research conversations in relation to the pro-active nurturing of family literacy by parents. Parents were clear that the work undertaken to support their children's language and literacy development began from the moment they were born and continued throughout the pre-school and school years. This language and literacy work takes place throughout the home and in the wider community. Parents told us it was knitted into the fabric of family life. It happens in the kitchen; at bedtime; during family conversations; in the car or on bus journeys; outside in the park; during sports; in the garden.

Just as there was a diversity of parents in the groups, so there was a range of approaches and practice in supporting children with their language and literacy development.

Pro-active nurturing of family literacy and language

Giving 'a good start' to children was of high priority to the parents we spoke to during this research project. Many believed that it required intentional effort on their part.

> When it comes to learning I can be pretty determined. I just think the kids just have to learn. When they grow up in life they need it for when they are older so that they can stand up on their own two feet and face the world. *(Parent aged 34 with four children)*

> I want to give the kids a good start for whatever good it will do them. I think you have to get involved with the kids. You have to. There's no point in having them otherwise. Sometimes they can wreck your head and you feel like hanging them out the window but they're your flesh and blood. So you have to try and do the best you can. (*Parent aged 40 with two children)*

Parents described many practical actions designed to support their children's language and literacy development. These actions were underpinned by a deep understanding of the uniqueness of each child and the need to develop different support strategies for them. Spending time with children, really listening to them, giving attention to them and closely accompanying them on their learning and developmental journey were all highly valued by parents. Investing in these strategies was believed to be of particular importance in the early years. This early work was, parents believed, an investment in a hopeful future for their children.

Learning through fun, creativity and play

A strong theme, which emerged from the research conversations, was the importance of the role of fun, creativity and play in developing early language and literacy skills.

> When they are toddlers and you play games like hide and seek they learn how to look for certain things. They play with building blocks and they learn the colours from them. They learn hand / eye coordination. *(Parent aged 40 with three children)*

From the earliest days with their young babies parents described reciting nursery rhymes and the singing of lullabies as informal and spontaneous learning activities. Using resources such as play mats, mobiles, building blocks and jigsaws were all believed to be stimulating for children's development.

> Do you know what I love doing with mine is jigsaws. I started with Carol when she was about one and a half. Now she is on bigger ones. They learn matching and colours and shapes from them. *(Parent aged 36 with seven children)*

A majority of those we spoke to told us that they had regularly sat with young toddlers drawing and painting with them.

> My kids were into art and colouring and that all the time. Pages of colouring and lots of pencils and crayons helped them prepare for school. It was something they loved. *(Parent aged 40 with two children)*

A range of activities such as music, dance and imaginative role-plays were described by parents as fundamental to the building of the confidence and self- belief that they saw as core to the successful acquisition and development of language and literacy.

Language development

Whilst some parents worked consciously to support and develop their children's language acquisition, others acted intuitively. Nursery rhymes, word games such as spotting signs, 'eye spy' and singing were all believed by parents to help young children in the acquisition of language. Investing resources in responding to the natural curiosity of children was highlighted by parents as time well spent. They used toys and books as props to support this work.

> When he is playing with the blocks I am constantly saying "Oh that's a sheep. What does the sheep do? The sheep says, 'Baa'." So it keeps their language skills going and you are all the time extending what they are doing. It keeps them occupied as well and trying to keep their attention going. *(Parent aged 34 with four children)*

> I find fun when you go into a bookshop and you pick up a story book and there's a CD with it. You can use it by pausing it and you can use it to get the kids to guess what the woman is saying on the CD and you can point out the words in the book and say 'Did she say that or that?'

> You can make it fun like. It helps the child to pronounce the words better than I would. (*Parent aged 22 with two children)*

Numeracy

The methods described by parents in supporting their children's numeracy development were notably more informal than approaches to either reading or language support. All references in the data in relation to numeracy stress the importance of integrating fun into learning about numbers. Rhymes and singing featured during the discussion of early years support. As children got older activities such as hopscotch, giant steps, snakes and ladders and cookery were cited by parents as helping children in developing numeracy.

For older children board games such as monopoly and bingo were also described as informal and fun ways of supporting children.

> This one is of my son on a mobile phone. He has only got it so he is dug into it to find out how to use it. He's never had his own phone before so he is learning numbers and how to ring his Da. Memorising things and stuff like that. I never really thought of that like learning. *(Parent aged 28 with one child)*

Developing reading

Words such as fun, enjoyment, great times, and confidence are peppered throughout the data in relation to supporting children to develop their reading skills. Parents told us they bought books for young babies, toddlers and pre-school children. Many set out to build regular bedtime stories into the routine of family life.

> Michael learns mostly from reading. He loves stories and when he goes to bed at night he has to have a story. He reads his books that he gets from school. You know his readers and little story books - he reads those. So I say to him, 'What story have you got for me tonight?' and he loves reading to me. He holds the book up to me and says 'look at this picture'. He just loves anything to do with books. He'll sit beside me and say, 'I am going to read you a story' and if he can read it he will. If he gets stuck he stumbles a bit but he doesn't like to say he doesn't know it. He'd rather get it himself. *(Parent aged 30 with one child)*

> We normally read before they go to bed to try and calm them down. We have a routine. There is time and planning involved in supporting them. *(Parent aged 44 with two children)*

Some parents told us that they consciously set out to prepare their children for school by working on letter and sound recognition.

> I got one (a book) that had all the sounds and that you know A for apple and things like that. She knew it before she went to school. She'd be lying on the bed and she'd say come on mam. I'd be exhausted from her. *(Parent aged 46 with one child)*

One parent was closely involved with a reading support project with the National College of Ireland. Volunteers called to her house on a regular basis and read to the children. They demonstrated different ways of progressing reading and language development strategies through a range of activities.

> They come into the house and they sit down and they read books with the kids. It's not that they read in fact. Kids wouldn't understand the words. They point out pictures and they say 'This is a yellow duck' and 'This is a blue ball.' The child kind of takes an interest. The very first book that the girl brought out for my son was Brown Bear, Brown Bear what do you see? It's keeping the language skill going*. (Parent aged 34 with four children)*

Once children began school much of parental practice in relation to reading focused less on reading for fun and more on supporting children with reading for homework. During this period working on phonics became a regular activity for parents. Whilst this was 'a new thing' for some of the parents we spoke with it is fair to say that with induction and support from the school, the majority of parents felt that the phonic approach was a positive and user friendly way of supporting children with reading.

Homework practice

A more focussed and formalised approach to language and literacy support work emerged when children began school. The time resources and organisational skills needed to support children's homework was again highlighted in the data. One parent of six children memorably described her busy schedule thus,

> I have six children from the ages of nine to one year. Everybody goes to school at 9.30 in the morning but they come back at different times. My two year old and my one year old come back at 12.30. My four year old and my five year old come back at 2.10pm. My nine year old and my six year old come back at 3.10. So when it is 12.30 I go to pick up the little ones. We come home and get the lunch ready. So when it is 2.10 I need to go and pick up my four year old and my five year old and

> we stay in the car to wait for the nine and six year old. I bring a pencil sharpener and rubber and all we might need with me. While we are waiting I use the time to do the homework with the four year old, the senior infant and the junior infant. So that gives me time in the house for the 4th class and the 1st class children. *(Parent aged 28 with six children)*

Parents described efforts to make homework interesting and fun when they could. Rewards such as food treats, television and playtime were all regularly used to motivate children to complete their homework.

For parents with more than one child additional planning and effort went into creating a routine that allowed for varying needs and demands to be met. Some parents had rules about working individually with children whilst others believed that a collective family approach provided opportunities to model good practice to younger children and enhance learning possibilities.

> My son is in junior infants and he has been doing paired reading and she is copying what we do when we do that. *(Parent aged 34 with four children)*

Homework support for parents

A number of parents of older children told us they not only made efforts to support children with current homework but that they purposefully worked ahead of the curriculum in order to keep children prepared for subsequent learning. This required ongoing communication and a close working relationship with teachers.

> Even though I am trying my absolute best in the house I might not know. So I personally work with the teachers of each of my children. I know their teachers so I get to know where they are lapsing in school and what I need to do. We kind of like work together to help them. *(Parent aged 28 with six children)*

A small number of parents found the internet a useful tool in supporting homework. One parent used *youtube* with their child to work on multiplication tables and others used it to do research for school projects.

Furthermore, in their commitment to 'doing the job well' we found that parents were engaged in a range of courses such as Fun with Maths, Shared Reading Techniques, The Incredible Years Programme and Parenting Skills. Parents commented on the usefulness of such courses for informal learning through

discussion and the sharing of tips and experience and observing the practice of other parents.

Homework clubs were highly regarded by parents. They relieved stress and removed pressures associated with homework.

> Some nights I'd be really drained from doing it with him and the two of us would start fighting and that. The homework club in the school stops all that. I just have to check that he has it done and sign it. It's all built around play and adventure there. It helps them with their words. They really make it fun. It makes it amazing for him really. *(Parent aged 28 with one child)*

Homework routine

Parents told us that providing a calm space for homework requires forethought and planning. Alongside this an environment that included routine and discipline was described as highly valuable.

> This is a photo of Liam doing his homework. He comes in and does it automatically. I started him off like that from when he was four. He's eleven now. He does it straight away because if you leave it too late it's too hard. He's been doing it like this a long time. *(Parent aged 44 with two children)*

> The minute Cara comes home she is out with the school bag and the one little piece of paper and when she is finished I read a book with her. I read it to her first and then she reads it. Then it's her homework done. She's only five. I do her colours with her and she likes that. *(Parent aged 36 with seven children)*

Embedding a familiar homework pattern during the early school years was believed to be crucially important in nurturing a supportive structure for children.

Box 2

Case study: Peter

Age: 40

2 Children: 19; 12

Peter left school early with unmet literacy needs and has struggled in life because of his educational disadvantage. He is now a committed, voluntary youth and community worker who would like to get some recognition and accreditation for his skills. He feels that he is prevented from getting paid work because of his lack of literacy and the way that proficiency is related to qualifications rather than practice. Both Peter and his partner have literacy issues and have worked hard to ensure that their children have every support in their schooling. His daughter is studying accountancy. He recounts that he has to tell his younger child (12) that he cannot help with spelling but uses this as a way of motivating him to ensure his literacy skills are strong. Peter feels passionately that children are supported by care and having the time and attention of an interested parent.

Photo: Peter selected a photo of his son playing the guitar to illustrate how he has learned a lot of literacy through his interest in music. This has encouraged him to read not only text in the words of songs but also music. He has developed a routine of daily practice and now teaches younger children in his primary school. His interest and application have spilled over into other aspects of his schooling. The photo also demonstrates the need for parents to create a calm, uncluttered learning environment so that children learn to focus on the task before them without distraction.

Needs from a family literacy course: Peter would like an initial intensive literacy course to address his own literacy needs. He would happily attend a course in the local school with other parents who were in a similar situation. They should have 1:1 support initially and then be formed as a group. He thinks that a family literacy course that includes both fathers and mothers may benefit from having gender discreet elements built in so that men's specific issues can surface in the company of other fathers. Peter thinks that parents

who have experience and training should deliver family literacy courses but they should never work in their own locality, as this would be too intrusive.

8c *What challenges do parents face in doing family literacy?*

Time management and the vast territory of power sharing between home and school have been discussed in relation to parents' views of family literacy (8a). The detail in relation to family literacy practice has also been discussed (8b). A number of other issues located in the cultural domain are explored now including the way in which these are challenging for the disadvantaged parents in the research groups. Parents talked with enthusiasm about the joys and trials of managing their children and the central place that literacy, and learning in general, occupied in the wider hard work of nurturing their family. Against a backdrop of multiple disadvantages and often alone, the mothers and fathers we spoke with related a host of hurdles they faced in doing family literacy work. Not least amongst these difficulties was the fact that parenting was an enormous undertaking for which parents are largely unprepared either by school or their own childhood patterns of nurture. There are increasingly high expectations of parents for which they have little specific preparation.

> It's a big job for parents. They don't tell you that. They don't come with a book. There is no manual. *(Parent aged 30 with one child)*

These parents face challenges with the practicalities of parenting that are common to all involved in childcare work. They face additional challenges with family literacy if they have little positive experience with the education system and have some degree of unmet literacy needs. Furthermore, parents describe an experience of formal education that is at variance with the language, values and culture of home.

Preparation for family literacy

There was unanimous agreement about the complexity of being a parent and certain aspects of the 'primary educator' role were more stressful than others. It was clear that although pre-school children were demanding of time and energy, parents felt reasonably confident with the management of pre-school

activity in the home. This was described (in 8b) as largely free, unstructured play. All parents are conscious that reading stories and talking to children is an important part of language development. They talked about learning colours and counting, learning to concentrate, creativity and hand-eye coordination. At the same time the majority were largely unaware of modelling, or preparing children for the 'literate' language code of school. Things then became more problematic for parents with the move from the private to the public sphere, when children began formal schooling and comparisons and a standardised code of language came into play. How children measured up to their peers and the teacher's expectations inevitably was associated with the home. Many parents simultaneously felt a loss of power, increased negative judgement of their values as reflected in their children and a lack of information about what their newly formulated role now contained. For the most part this role shift was one for which they were relatively unprepared. Much of this new anxiety was encapsulated in the data around the completion of homework (see 8b). Now below we focus on the challenging (as opposed to the practice) aspects of that task.

Homework

Parent's role in supervising and assisting with homework was widely discussed in the data and closely linked to issues of time management and family literacy practice discussed above. Many lacked confidence in dealing with the detail of literacy and maths and all of the many subjects where literacy is an integral requirement. The introduction of phonics has left some parents in unfamiliar territory even with the most introductory aspects of learning to read.

> They all do phonics at school. Words are all sounds … but that is a new thing for us. That's not how we learned. They still do the full alphabet but it's the way that they do it. They don't start with 'a'. *(Parent aged 28 with one child)*

In addition parents are often uncertain about the use of technology and Irish in the primary curriculum. More often than not children take the lead in technological matters but the majority of parents, including those with children

at Irish-medium schools found the literacy aspects of Irish challenging. This serves as an articulate metaphor for wider language and literacy challenges.

> I find the Irish and other languages hard. I never did those things myself. Sometimes the homework is in Irish and I just have to stand looking down at it because I don't know any of it. I couldn't even pronounce it because I didn't know what it meant. *(Parent aged 34 with four children)*

Similarly, parents cited a range of shortcomings in their capacity to help children with core primary subjects in the way that they would have liked and their own literacy and numeracy level was pivotal in this regard.

> I am not a good speller. I used to feel horrible for my kids and like you're the mammy and you don't know how to spell this. *(Parent aged 42 with four children)*

> My biggest mistake was leaving school early. My kids come home with maths and I just can't help them. I tell the teacher I just can't do them. Last year I done a PIPS course – it was all about personal and interpersonal skills. This year I am doing maths but I tell the teacher 'I just can't get it'. It's as simple as that. The kids come home and you just can't do it. *(Parent aged 36 with seven children)*

Parents were willing and eager to take on new learning for themselves but it was not always possible for them to make up the lost ground sufficiently rapidly to match their children's needs. This situation was made worse when a number of children were involved and multiple levels of skills became an issue. This parent left school with unmet literacy needs,

> I find it hard doing the homework now because it's harder for me. It isn't the way it was when we were younger. The homework is completely different. They all want to do it at the same time and they are all at different levels of reading and writing and you are trying to listen and you can't get it. There are times when I am stressed out now sitting trying to do it. *(Parent aged 34 with four children)*

Learning difficulties and disabilities

All aspects of family literacy were complicated when children had learning difficulties or disabilities. A mother of seven children said that all of her children (aged between 5 and 17) 'down through the years had learning disabilities with the reading and writing'. One lone parent of three children had a child who was partially hearing and another who had ADHD. Both struggled with literacy although the deaf child was gifted at maths. Another mother's son

aged 5 was being tested for ADHD and she was anxious that he would be 'labelled' merely because he was lively and interested in a whole range of things at once. Several parents spoke of very young children being prescribed medication for ADHD and as an alternative to being excluded from school for disruptive behaviour. One woman spoke of her struggle with the school to resist medicating her five year-old while another found great relief in the decrease in daily phone calls from the school since her son (aged 9) began to take Ritalin. Both ADHD and dyslexia were frequently mentioned in each research group to explain children's struggle with school language and literacy.

Family circumstances

We spoke to parents from a range of families and where there was disruption at home there was an inevitable impact on learning. A woman from a violent relationship explained how all her children had struggled with literacy in school because of the tensions at home. A number of lone parents were dealing with the unsettling nature of their children's contact with an estranged parent. Children who were upset or fearful were unable to learn either at home or at school and this often presented as language or literacy difficulties.

Community initiatives played a positive role in supporting parents with childcare, crèche facilities, after-schools and homework clubs. One community provided a mediation service between parents and the school in response to local demand. Disadvantaged communities also had negative aspects. In an extreme case where an entire community was in the grip of a violent gang feud, parents recalled taking refuge from gunfire as they brought their children to primary school. An underwriting background of disadvantage did, in some cases, result in a greater number of educational supports. In others it meant poor housing and infrastructure, community degeneration, social exclusion and a challenge for parents to remain hopeful about the future for themselves and their children. In such cases the divide between school and home could seem even wider and a family's disadvantaged circumstances could become another deficit factor in the school's perception of the parent (and the child).

A lone parent related how she wept when the school principal consulted with her about having her ten year-old son psychologically tested. She felt misrecognised and harshly judged.

> The principal was really nice… but really too nice… false nice. I could read between the lines that she thought there was something wrong at home and I was made to feel like a failure. I ended up in tears. You are going in and out on your own for years and not taken seriously and telling them what is wrong and you are not taken seriously until it is too late and the situation is beyond repair. *(Parent aged 30 with one child)*

Cultural difference

Many of the challenges families experience in supporting their children's language and literacy are couched in a context of cultural inequalities. Class, ethnicity, age, lone parenthood, parents own level of literacy and for children in Gaelscoileanna, whether or not a parent was an Irish speaker, were all cited as reasons why families felt undervalued and disrespected in their dealings with their child's school. In one group this was clearly identified as a wider equality issue.

> I am sick and tired of preaching that equality is what is lacking in this country. There is none and the way things are going there never will be. Even amongst the parents there is a class attitude and some parents are looked down on. It's not only in school. It is doctors and lawyers and all forms of authority. *(Parent aged 32 with three children)*

Culture clash

Where the ethos of the school was one of openness and inclusion there was cohesion between home and school in the task of supporting children's language and literacy development. In the Inner City group parents were encouraged to call at the school at any time. The principal was available to talk to them and parents were welcome to use school facilities. The school provided informal computer support for parents and the family room contained a wide range of educational games that parents could take home for use with their children. The HSCL coordinator organised sessions about play, language, literacy and numeracy so that parents were confident in using these games with their children. In this group there was no reference to unequal treatment or a clash of culture between home and school. Being on first name

terms with the principal and teachers was indicative of a more equal home-school relationship.

Other groups spoke of being conscious of a home and school divide. Some families felt patronised or disregarded while others dreaded going to collect their children because they felt shunned by other parents and staff at the school. Parents said they were intimidated when schools had a more formal ethos and others described a sense of teachers 'hiding in the staff room with their coffee' rather than being available to talk to parents. Generally they felt unimportant in the business of their child's learning and a lack of willingness on the part of teachers to include them. One woman said she got lots of leaflets from the school but they were all about fundraising and none were about the curriculum.

For a number of research participants the difference in culture between home and school was reflected in 'a whole different language at school'. One woman spoke of 'sailing two different ships' in terms of home and school English and yet her priority was to maintain clear communication rather than forgo her cultural position. Her implicit assertion here was that children are able to acquire the necessary language skills to cope with vernacular and school language use as long as these are not in competition one with the other.

> When my kids are at home they speak my English. I live near the school and I am sometimes nearby when they are at school and I can hear them and I know that the way they talk at school is different to the way they talk in the house. The way they speak is different and we are sailing two different ships. I am aware of this but I stick to my own guns. I make sure they understand me and I listen carefully to them so that I will hear what they are saying and that helps and we are on the same page. *(Parent aged 28 with six children)*

Others also felt that school values should not override those of the family. They perceived a challenge in sustaining the integrity of home culture rather than all emphases being on the assimilation of families into the education system.

> Some things are about fitting in at school but some are about fitting in at home and being part of a family. *(Parent aged 46 with one child)*

The theme of schools and teachers needing to change to recognise, respect and collaborate more equally with working class parents recurred repeatedly throughout the data.

Box 3

Case study: Dagan

Age: 28

Six children: 9; 6; 5; 4; 2; 1

Dagan is a young Nigerian woman living, and studying childcare in an urban location. She is separated from her partner and parents her six children alone. She has completed FETAC Level 5 in Childcare and is currently doing Level 6. She places a great deal of emphasis on education and has a strict routine for homework and educational activities. She collects two children from the local playgroup at 12.30, takes them home for lunch and plays with them until 2pm when she has to drive to pick up two children from school. She brings writing equipment and they do homework in the car for the hour that they have to wait for the final two children to finish school. The children are encouraged to help each other as she does not always have time to help each one individually.

Photo: Dagan selected a photo that showed two small hands poised over a book for practising the formation of numerals. She explained that her four year old was having difficulty writing the number '2' and she was aware that this issue needed to be resolved. She purchased a bag of marshmallows and promised that everyone could have a share only when all learning tasks were satisfactorily completed. Her five year old was eagerly helping her sister overcome her problem with an eye on the final (sweet) prize.

Needs from a family literacy course: Dagan wants a course that will help her become familiar with the cultural aspects of Irish schooling. She particularly wants to learn the methods used for doing maths that are different to those she learned in Africa. She would like a course that is delivered in her children's school so that she can combine it with one of her journeys to the school. The content of the course should depend on the parents and match

the needs of different age groups of children. Dagan thinks that the family literacy course should be delivered by someone with a passion for language, literacy and numeracy who will inspire learners with enthusiasm for learning.

8d *Would a family literacy programme be beneficial and what content and method of delivery would match parents' needs?*

It could show you what you have to do to get your kid prepared for school and that it's not going to be that hard on you. Showing parents that they are able to do it. Giving them confidence by laying out the steps. (Parent aged 28 with one child)

A family literacy programme – the benefits

The parents we spoke with were trying to do the best for their children in all aspects of their lives. They wanted to be able to support their children in every way they could. A high value was placed on education by parents and much love, thought, time and effort were invested in supporting their children to do well in school. Parents were keenly aware that the approaches and strategies used in school could be quite divergent from the practice in the home and that a support programme could help bridge such a divide.

> It would show you the right way to do it. You could be doing something wrong and then when they go into school they could be doing it another way. *(Parent aged 36 with seven children)*

Parents told us they did not always have the confidence or skills to do this work on their own and they were universally interested in the idea of a broad programme to support them to help their children.

> It would help you with knowing the right way to do it. It would give you confidence as a parent. *(Parent aged 36 with two children)*

Having time and space to learn from and with other parents was very attractive to many parents. It would break down the isolation often felt and would provide opportunities for affirmation and reassurance for them in their role. Furthermore useful strategies and approaches for supporting children's literacy development could be learned locally.

> It would be a great idea to have a course like that for parents down in this area. *(Parent aged 44 with two children)*

There was general agreement in the three groups that baby and toddler brains were 'like sponges' and parents knew that there were opportunities there to capitalise on this by providing a stimulating environment. Family literacy courses could help them by providing ideas, strategies and activities that might gently boost development.

During discussions on the content of such courses it became clear that there was interest in general parenting skills and that supporting the development of children's language and literacy was seen to be one element of that wider context. For parents with unmet literacy needs the groups suggested that separate and intensive courses be provided to…

> …help you get up to speed on the reading and writing stuff. *(Parent aged 34 with four children)*

Such a course could initially be run before or alongside a broader family literacy course. This, some parents believed, would reduce any embarrassment or stigma parents might feel when working with their children.

> Maybe there is a time down the line when parents and children can do the learning together but first run the programme so that the parents can learn to read and write themselves and learn how to help their kids. Then move on to the one for parents and kids together where parents learn how to help kids with their homework and school work. *(Parent aged 32 with three children)*

On the other hand some parents told us they had no problem saying to their children (or anyone else) that they had difficulties with their literacy and they would be happy to work alongside them on a family literacy programme.

> I wouldn't have a problem going to something like that or telling you that I can't spell this or that. We are all different. There are a lot of people out there who didn't go to school. The lid needs to be blown off it. We are silenced by embarrassment. *(Parent aged 40 with two children)*

Consultation

Research participants suggested that family literacy programmes should be developed through a partnership between school, community and parents. This would allow for the development of good working relationships that would in turn underpin any joint work.

Parents in this study had a strong belief that deep and ongoing consultation with parents needed to be core to any programme.

> You would need to sit down and talk to parents about coming to courses. Ask them how they would feel about it. *(Parent aged 42 with four children)*
>
> It has to suit the people in the room otherwise you lose interest. I don't think it should be too structured in advance. There should be a group and somebody who can respond to the group needs. *(Parent aged 40 with two children)*

Programmes also need to be responsive, and mindful of the evolving needs of parents as children's age and school work becomes more complex and demanding.

Process

It is clear from the data that parents have strong views on how programmes should be delivered. Programmes need to allow time for parents to share and build upon their own experience in a non-judgemental and relaxed learning environment. A key concern was that no parent with unmet literacy needs should be made to feel ashamed or embarrassed on such a programme. Parents told us that the values at the core of any such programme should include equality, participation and empowerment and indeed these values are at the heart of any successful community development intervention.

Content

Parents suggested a number of modules to support them in their role.

- *Intensive literacy course* – This course was suggested as a pre-cursor to other family literacy modules. It would facilitate parents to 'keep one step ahead' and give them the necessary confidence to engage in other programmes.
- *Understanding how learning happens*

  Parents were interested in deepening their understanding of how learning happens. They were conscious of the different learning styles and preferences of their children and wanted a range of strategies to match those needs.

- *Reading with children*

  All of the parents were interested in developing skills and knowledge in how best to prepare, motivate and support children with reading.

- *Communicating successfully with schools*

  Confidence is needed to communicate with school and parents told us a specific module on this aspect of communication would be useful. It was suggested that a related module on developing communication skills with school for new communities could be included in this.

- *Early years language development*

  There was particular interest from parents in the role of fun and creativity in developing language, literacy and numeracy skills. They were keen to find out what other parents are doing in this area through the pooling of ideas and experience. There was also interest in what 'experts' in using fun and creativity in language and literacy development had to contribute to their practice.

- *Computer skills*

  Many parents believed that ICT is a key literacy and one that could be used to support their children in their learning. The internet allowed parents to instantly find solutions to problems they couldn't answer. They were interested in programmes that would help develop their literacy and language capacities and those of their children.

- *Dealing with bullying*

  Bullying and its harmful effects on children's language and literacy learning were of intense interest to them. It was suggested that a module that would support parents in successfully dealing with this issue would be beneficial.

- *Strategies to support children with learning difficulties / disabilities*

  Parents of children with specific learning difficulties such as ADHD or dyslexia and parents of children with disabilities were hungry for information and strategies to support their children with their language and literacy development.

Recruitment

A number of suggestions were made by research participants in relation to the recruitment of parents to family literacy programmes. One parent suggested that there be a national campaign to attract those parents with unmet literacy needs. The subsequent course would be an intensive learning programme with a focus on building parents confidence in themselves as successful learners. This could be followed by a programme such as the one outlined above.

Participants suggested that a particular strategy be devised to attract men to family literacy programmes. They told us that men might initially be reluctant to join a group with women. A preparatory course for men only, might help to overcome any reticence or embarrassment men might feel in terms of their own literacy capacities.

In order to attract men to such a course one participant suggested that there needed to be some element of reward for participation. This parent gave the example of a successful men's health course that had been run in the local community in association with a well known Scottish football club.

> There was a cooking class once a week and because it was part of the course they stayed there for the cooking and they learned an awful lot about what was healthy. Then they'd bring it over to the house and the kids would eat it. So it was great. And there was a trip to Scotland and you met the players and all that. So if you throw something else in with the idea. You know you need to throw other things in along with it. *(Parent aged 40 with two children)*

Parents suggested that a number of different courses be advertised. The focus here would be on targeting parents of children at different stages. Specific courses could focus on the needs of parents in relation to babies, toddlers or children during the early school years.

Adult only?

A number of different views were expressed in relation to whether children should be included in family literacy courses. Some people thought that it would be best to make courses adult only. In particular this would mean that parents with unmet literacy needs would get an opportunity to work on these without having to worry about how their children might view them. Once parents felt confident enough in their skills it was suggested that there could be joint work with children. This, parents suggested could help strengthen family bonds.

Others thought that it might be useful for parents to attend programmes without their children. This would provide them with an adult environment and the space and time to work out their own strategies in relation to supporting children with language and literacy development.

Who should deliver the course?

Parents had particular ideas about who should facilitate family literacy programmes. The majority of those we spoke with suggested that parents with an understanding of the issues and the pressures on parents would be best suited to delivering courses.

> Someone who has made the journey herself will be able to do the best job. A parent who has had literacy difficulties herself. This understanding is the crucial factor. Parents need to be able to relate to the person. It's a bit like the X Factor, you vote for someone you can relate to. It has to be someone who has gone through the process. *(Parent aged 28 with six children)*

Parents did not want someone from their own local community, as this would raise concerns about confidentiality. Inputs from people with particular expertise would be welcomed in workshop style settings. However it was stressed by parents that any programmes should involve practical and active learning.

One parent felt that it would be essential that the person delivering the course should have a passion for learning and for helping others to know how learning language and literacy best happens.

Delivery details: When and where should courses take place?

A number of suggestions were made by research participants about the best time for courses to be delivered. One parent believed that the earlier the support for parents the more useful it would be. Thus a course during pregnancy was suggested. It could be a short 'taster' course and run alongside pre-natal check ups.

Others thought that it would be important to make courses available to parents of pre school children.

> It would be good to get them before their kids ever get near school and that way they would have the time to be one step ahead. *(Parent aged 32 with three children)*

The summer of the term before children begin school was suggested as a prime time for attracting parents to such courses. This would mean that they could be 'one step ahead' of their children and this in turn would promote and nourish their confidence in parenting.

Courses could also usefully be delivered once children began school and parents suggested that courses would best be delivered in the school itself. This would cut down on unnecessary travel for already busy parents and would have the added benefit of familiarising parents with the school and its staff.

> I think that parents spend a lot of time going to and from school. So school would be a good place for family literacy. Maybe after parents have dropped their kids off in the morning they could have a room in the school for their own learning. It would make it easier for the parents and the teachers to communicate. *Parent aged 28 with six children)*

Other locations for family literacy programmes included adult literacy centres where parents were already comfortably working on their literacy skills.

The provision of childcare would be an important factor in attracting parents to any family literacy programmes.

Box 4

Case study: Sinead

Age: 34

4 Children: 13; 7; 5; 2

Sinead is mostly parenting alone as her partner has had to move overseas to get work. She left school early without any qualifications and has attended some courses in a local adult literacy centre. Sinead has also participated in local mother and toddler groups where she learned to emulate the approach to language and pre-literacy of childcare workers and other parents. She takes a structured approach to supporting her children's learning and supervising homework. She works with each child in turn and finds that her children learn from each other as well as from their parents. One of Sinead's children has learning difficulties and she has had to learn how best to deal with the different learning styles and paces of each of her children. When her second child was small, a language and literacy development project in her area meant that volunteers made weekly visits to her home and read stories and played games with her children. She was required to participate and learned from the techniques of the project worker. Knowing some ways to encourage language development made life a lot easier and Sinead would like to learn more.

Photo: Sinead selected a photo of her youngest child – aged 2 – reading his favourite story to her, his brother and sisters. She wanted to show that the children were really having fun. He wanted everyone to listen to him as he went through the motions of turning the pages and telling the story. He was proud to be able to do something that he knew was valued in the home.

Needs from a family literacy course: Sinead would like to further develop her own literacy so that as her children progress she is able to keep in step with their learning support needs. She is interested in learning about the best ways to read to children and to support writing skills. A family literacy course run by parents, for parents, would be best for sharing information and advice but she would also like 'some separate education type course' that would

address language and literacy development in some detail. She would attend a course in the local school and would require childcare.

The next section will draw conclusions from these findings and make recommendations for policy and implementation.

9 Conclusions and recommendations

This empirical study of family literacy practices has been carried out with parents in some of the areas of greatest disadvantage in the East, West and Midlands of Ireland. It is set in the context of growing concern about falling standards of literacy amongst primary and secondary school students (DES, 2005; NESF, 2009; OECD, 2010) and continued awareness of the number of adults who have yet to be enabled to fulfil their literacy potential (NALA, 2007). The figures suggest that cycles of educational disadvantage continue to blight Irish society and risk doing so for generations to come.

Government response to literacy inequalities in Irish schools has been centred around the DEIS initiative that has invested increased material and human resources to targeted schools. DEIS schools benefit from reduced class sizes, focussed links with parents, communities and local VEC adult literacy provision. The best examples of DEIS schools are reportedly making a positive impact on child literacy levels but the evaluation of the overall programme has yet to be published (NESF, 2009). Some DEIS schools are also succeeding in creating better partnerships between schools, families and the VEC and the HSCL coordinators have a strategic role in this regard.

A further draft policy turn has recently been launched for consultation in the draft *National Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools* (DES, 2010). The plan suggests an overhaul of teacher training, enhanced leadership skills for principals, increased systematic literacy testing in schools and a continued focus on vital family and adult literacy work with parents in areas of disadvantage. The root causes of disadvantage remain unexplored in the draft national plan and that arguably dilutes the optimism with which it might otherwise have been welcomed.

Study aims and design

This exploratory research project was begun at the end of September 2010 and so has been completed in the intervening three months. The aims of the research as defined by NALA are:

To explore with parents their attitudes, perceptions, knowledge and understanding of family literacy

To investigate parents views and understanding of their role as primary educator of their children

To identify where, when and how they initiate this role

To examine their views on what would be helpful to them in carrying out this role and any barriers they experience in carrying out this role in everyday life

To identify any perceived benefits and value of engaging in a family literacy programme[16]

NALA wished to explore family literacy practices in disadvantaged communities in order to (evidentially) dispel the notion that learning only takes place in school. In so doing, NALA wants to acknowledge, recognise and value the learning that happens in the home. This is not a commentary on parenting in the general sense although that is undoubtedly an element of the wider context in which family literacy occurs. This is exploratory research designed to raise awareness of the non-curriculum learning that happens in the home and so provide evidence of what working-class/disadvantaged families contribute to the learning process.

The empirical work has primarily taken the form of a series of *photovoice* workshops and in-depth discussions with each of three parent groups. Using the *photovoice* method, parents photographed family literacy events and brought their photos to a round table discussion. Parents also took part in deep discussions where they reflected on their practice and the challenges that face them doing this work. The research groups were all contacted through local community development or family service groups who introduced the researchers to a total of twenty-two parents willing to participate in the research. Two of the groups met for three sessions based around the *photovoice* approach to data collection (see 6.) while the third found one half day of in-depth discussion better suited their circumstances.

[16] NALA: Invitation to tender for research project exploring parents' knowledge and understanding of family literacy (2010).

Data collected in each group was recorded, transcribed, coded and analysed using MAXQDA – a computer assisted qualitative data analysis tool. A detailed profile of the research group is included in the Research Design section (6) and four case studies are threaded through the Findings (8: Boxes 1- 4).

Conclusions

The study revealed that all the parents were intricately involved in a range of family literacy practice both intentionally and incidentally. Many were surprised, in the research conversations, at the extent of their family literacy work that hitherto they had done relatively instinctively. Others planned family literacy work strategically, allocating time to games, creative play and language, literacy and numeracy development with individual children and as a family unit. Through the research process an understanding of family literacy emerged as…

> *…the reciprocal learning care work carried on in families between parents and children that encourages early language, literacy and numeracy, provides opportunities to practice and expand skills and supports and shares in the formal work of the school.*

Family literacy as care work

All parents in the research cohort described proactive involvement in family literacy work with children in every sector of education although here we focus on the early years and primary sector. They consistently framed their accounts of family literacy activity in the context of ongoing care for their children and so we conclude that family literacy is a form of primary care work or 'love labour' (Lynch et al. 2009). Families were committed to each child's holistic development and conscious of the value and importance of language and literacy both in the immediate and longer term. Parents assumed responsibility for supporting the child's educational progress and this was repeatedly expressed as an inalienable moral imperative. There is no doubt that all parents felt they should enable their children's learning in whatever way they could. Their educational love labour takes precedence over almost everything else and like all care work it can be both burdensome and joyful.

Those parents with unmet literacy needs experienced shame and low self-esteem because of their difficulty in responding to children's specific literacy and numeracy support requirements. This was despite the fact that they had often successfully encouraged and motivated their children to become successful literacy learners.

Skilled work

In addition to its care context, family literacy emerged from the research conversations as skilled work and this inevitably requires resources, knowledge and practice. In the pre-school years, parents in the research were conscious of the complexity of the stages of language and literacy development and eager for any advice and support they could garner. They saw themselves as activating learning in a whole host of contexts in the home and community. They were hopeful and well intentioned in this regard but at the same time they were conscious of their limitations. Parents own educational experience, their knowledge and the language and literacy resources upon which they could draw influenced the extent to which families were able to fulfil this role.

With school-aged children, some parents lacked information (and know-how) about the school curriculum and about the methods used for example in a phonic approach to reading or in certain mathematical approaches. Some schools satisfied the information gap with induction programmes and an open door policy that keep parents in touch with what children were doing at different stages. Alongside this type of cooperation, there was an expressed need for a range of supports with family literacy work that matched children's language and literacy developmental stages. This suggests that the early childhood curriculum framework (Aistear[17]) and Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999) should be linked into these family literacy programmes. The evidence in the data suggests that when parents (including those with unmet literacy needs) were given a chance to acquire the skills they needed to do specific family literacy work this resulted in a win-win-win situation for parent, child and school.

[17] Detail of Aistear and useful Tips Sheets for Parents can be viewed and downloaded at www.ncca.ie/aistear

Family literacy practice

Even without the benefit of training, the data revealed a wide range of family literacy activity happening in all the families with which we spoke. Parents were aware of the fundamentals of early years practice. They knew it was important to encourage language development but needed guidance with the more precise detail of how to do this. They had absorbed the importance of play to develop physical and cognitive dexterity, spatial awareness and other learning 'building blocks' and were happy with their capacity to manage unstructured play of this kind. Only a few parents mentioned play in the context of pre-literacy skills and those whose children did early literacy work in crèche were amazed at what they could learn. It was clear that the ways that parents can facilitate literacy development merits more attention. When parent's role in family literacy moved more into the public domain, any fun and enjoyment was replaced with anxiety and this was especially true for parents with unmet literacy needs.

Benefits of family literacy programmes

Every parent in the research would value and welcome the opportunity to attend a family literacy support programme. To some extent, because of the positive response to the research process, parents wanted more opportunities to talk to their peers and gather encouragement from these shared experiences and challenges. Consulting with parents was seen to be the best way to establish the precise content of any family literacy initiative because of the changing range of learning contexts in which parents operate.

The data suggests an initial, intensive literacy course so that parents could 'keep one step ahead' of their children. This (ITABE[18]-type course for family literacy) was seen to be an essential foundation for other more targeted family literacy courses and supports. Other parents, with literacy awareness, were seen by many as the best people to facilitate family literacy training and development. Parents described a community development model of family literacy where all programmes were negotiated with parent groups and contained 'menu items' that matched their needs and interests.

[18] Intensive tuition in adult basic education

The specific areas of interest for the parents we consulted included: understanding how learning happens; early years language development; reading with children; fun and creativity in language, literacy and numeracy; computer skills as a basis for a digital approach to family literacy; communicating successfully with schools; dealing with bullying (and its impact on learning); strategies for family literacy with children who have specific learning difficulties/disabilities.

Home school relations

We had an opportunity to discuss family literacy practice with parents who were in a flourishing partnership with their children's primary school and those who felt excluded and disrespected by the school. At the same time it was clear that all parents have a responsibility and a right to be part of every aspect of their child's learning. The research participants' willingness to support their children required them to have a share in what was the traditional preserve of the school and in more cases than not, this level of cooperation was not really evident. Unless a school consciously reached out to them, parents who lacked confidence in their own level of literacy felt particularly excluded and disempowered by a system that has 'literate' language and practices at the core of its existence. For the most part, the cultural imperialism of schools left disadvantaged parents (literate or not) feeling alienated and redundant. Evidence of best practice in this study showed clearly that there is a feasible and practicable approach to creating equal learning partnerships between families and schools when school skilful leadership promotes this.

Impact of disadvantage

To a large extent the conclusions above hold true for all parents involved in learning care work. What is pivotal in this study is what it reveals about the practice of family literacy when the social context is one of extreme and multiple disadvantage. In a just society, all families should be able to have equal expectations of their children's life chances and more specifically of their language and literacy achievement. This is the expressed goal of the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) initiative. Nonetheless, a socially situated view of literacy means that the context is integral to the

practice and this needs to be at the forefront of our understanding of literacy inequalities for children and adults.

Generational cycles of disadvantage meant that some parents felt that they needed some type of counselling as a first step into being better able to do family literacy. They needed to process their own home pattern of learning care and their destructive experiences of learning (or not learning) literacy as a prelude to more positively taking on family literacy in their own homes. In other families, poverty, abandonment, homelessness, violence and the daily struggles on the social margins meant that family literacy could be competing with other pressing priorities. These greater pressures require that additional home-based, community and school initiatives support families in coping with children's learning support needs. Yet it is not all about getting others to do something *for* disadvantaged parents. All these families expressed the desire to be included with dignity in the business of their own family literacy work. This suggests the need for family literacy programmes that enable parents' own literacy skills so that they can, in turn, be meaningfully involved in one of the most central aspects of their children's lives.

Recommendations

1. National literacy policy should include an increased commitment to family literacy as a basis for improving chances of educational equality for both children and adults. Such policy should always be grounded in an analysis of the systemic roots of literacy disadvantage as this would give added credibility, motivation and optimism to participants and practitioners.

2. Parents' willingness and motivation to do robust family literacy work should be recognised and adequately resourced, through appropriate family literacy training options, to meet the complex situations of disadvantaged families.

3. Whilst meeting the needs of adult literacy learners, family literacy programmes and resources should reflect the content and

processes recommended by Aistear and the Primary School Curriculum. In the light of proposals in the Draft National Plan for Literacy and Numeracy (DES, 2010) parents need to be informed about the process of literacy assessment in primary schools. At the same time the distinction between pedagogy and learning care work in the home should not be blurred.

4. A NALA, DES, IVEA partnership should work with DEIS schools in disadvantaged communities to access parents with unmet literacy needs and make a systematic community development model of family literacy training available to them in their locality. Fathers and mothers may initially want to learn in separate groups.

5. Best home-school collaborative practice in DEIS schools should be recorded, analysed and disseminated in areas where parents are not included meaningfully in their children's learning. The role of the successful HSCL coordinator in including adults with literacy needs should be explored. This suggests that all HSCL personnel have relevant adult literacy awareness training. Best practice DEIS primary schools should be investigated as a base for family literacy programmes with educationally disadvantaged parents.

6. A national media campaign should raise awareness of the importance of family literacy work. A series of TV programmes could model good family literacy practice, encourage participation in community-based programmes and disseminate useful support materials in an accessible format for those with unmet literacy needs.

7. Parents with literacy needs should be offered access to an ITABE-type family literacy programme as a first stepping-stone back into learning. Where necessary, access to advice, guidance and counselling should be made available.

8. A menu of (accredited) family literacy modules should be available to parents that recognises the needs of different parents and children. These modules would include: understanding how learning happens; early years language development; reading with children; fun and creativity in language, literacy and numeracy; computer skills as a basis for a digital approach to family literacy; communicating successfully with schools; dealing with bullying (and its negative impact on learning); strategies for family literacy with children who have specific learning difficulties/disabilities.

9. NALA should explore the inclusion of family literacy in the interactive digital learning facility – www.writeon.ie

10. Family literacy programmes should be accredited through the National Qualifications Framework.

11. All family literacy programmes should provide childcare.

12. Building on the research partnerships developed in this exploratory study, further action research might usefully investigate how best to integrate family literacy into the services offered through multi-agency partnerships in areas of disadvantage. A variety of projects/outcomes are possible in such an approach:
    - ✓ A pre-school language development programme with parents who have unmet literacy needs could be designed and piloted
    - ✓ Modules of the family literacy programme suggested above could be researched, piloted and written up for dissemination
    - ✓ Accreditation for modules of family literacy could be designed and processed
    - ✓ Community-based family literacy facilitators could be trained and a programme written up for accreditation through the NQF

- ✓ Guidelines for family literacy with disadvantaged parents might be drawn up in consultation with a group of interested parents
- ✓ A programme for fathers; school-aged mothers; ESOL and others might be designed and piloted.
- ✓ The *photovoice* approach might be further used to gather data about family literacy with specific groups of disadvantaged parents.

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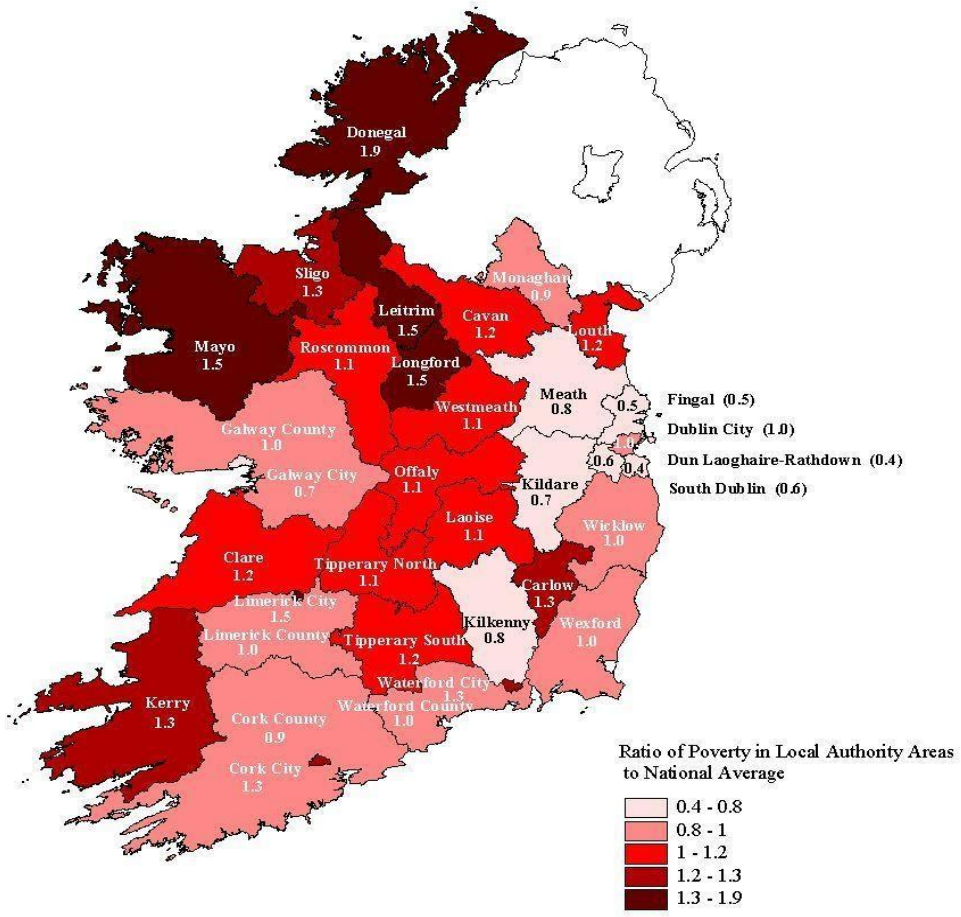
11. Appendices

Appendix A: Combat Poverty map of disadvantage

Disparities in Income Poverty & Deprivation of Basic Necessities by Local Authority Area



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The darkest areas are those of greatest disadvantage.

Appendix B: Project Information Leaflet

NALA
National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

Taking care of family learning project

What is this all about?

NALA (The National Adult Literacy Agency) wants to know more about how parents and families are taking care of learning at home. They want to discover what parents and families think about this important work, what is working well for parents and families and what is challenging about it.

NALA hopes that the information gathered from the project will help them to develop effective and sensitive strategies that will match the needs of parents and families and will contribute to a greater understanding of family literacy and learning.

Who are we?

ACTRaD has been commissioned by NALA to undertake this consultation. ACTRaD is a small training and research organisation. It combines the skills and experience of Ann Hegarty and Maggie Feeley. We work on projects in the fields of adult literacy, gender, adult education and community development.

Together we have a range of experience in supporting and evaluating innovative projects and carrying out research in areas of social and educational disadvantage.

What we propose to do

We would like to work with a group of eight parents to discover what they think about family learning and literacy. We would like to discuss what their experience of it is and what recommendations they would make to NALA to develop and strengthen their work in this area.

This work would be over a timeframe of three one and a half hour sessions and would include reflection, discussion, photography and creative exercises. All participants will receive a certificate outlining their contributions to the research.

What will participants gain?

- ✓ Experience of being in a group
- ✓ Confidence
- ✓ Photography skills
- ✓ Tips about family learning
- ✓ Certificate with record of FETAC learning outcomes

What will participants need to do?

- ✓ Participate in all three sessions
- ✓ Share their expertise and experience about family learning

What will a centre gain?

- ✓ 3 consultative sessions
- ✓ A motivated group
- ✓ Inclusion in NALA research report
- ✓ Opportunity to attract new learners

What will a centre need to do?

- ✓ Identify and recruit participants
- ✓ Provide a working space
- ✓ Get photographs printed (funded by research budget)
- ✓ Supply tea and coffee!

What will NALA gain?

- ✓ Research informed by experts in Family Learning
- ✓ Information upon which to base future Family Learning development
- ✓ New research partners

What the researchers will do

- ✓ Plan and facilitate 3 one and a half hour sessions
- ✓ Provide materials
- ✓ Design and present certificates of participation
- ✓ Provide relevant information to participants

Appendix C: Outline of Three Research Workshops

Workshop 1

What does family literacy learning mean to us?

When does it happen?

Where does it happen?

Taking photos – Do's and Don'ts

Camera practice

Workshop 2

Our experience of thinking about family literacy learning

Reading photos

Our photos – our experience

Naming what our photos mean; what they tell us about family literacy learning

What is easy/going well and what the challenges are

Workshop 3

Gathering up our learning

Our recommendations to NALA about family literacy learning programmes and strategies

Presentation of certificates and celebration of the work

Appendix D: Participant Profile Questionnaire

NALA Taking Care of Family Literacy Work Research 2010

Participant Profile

NALA (The National Adult Literacy Agency) wants to know more about how parents and families are taking care of learning at home. They want to discover what parents think about this important work, what is challenging about it and what is working well for parents and families.

NALA hopes that the information gathered from the project will help them to develop effective and sensitive strategies that will match the needs of parents and families and will contribute to a greater understanding of family literacy and learning.

This **anonymous** questionnaire seeks to gather general information to provide a 'snapshot' of those who have participated in the research project.

Please tick the relevant boxes

1. Male ❑ Female ❑
2. Age
3. Country of origin
4. Living in

   Country ❑

   Village ❑

   Town ❑

   City ❑
5. Co-parenting ❑

Parenting alone ❑ Other
6. Work outside the home **Yes** ❑ **No** ❑
7. Number of children Age of children
8. What age were you when you left school?
9. Which of these formal educational qualifications have you completed? a. Primary Cert ❑ b. Junior / Inter cert ❑ c. Leaving cert ❑ d. FETAC / Post leaving Cert Course (PLC) ❑ e. Other

Thank you for completing this profile!

Ann Hegarty and Maggie Feeley

Appendix E: Certificate of participation

National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

Taking Care of Family Literacy Work 2010

Certificate of Participation

_____

participated in three research workshops planned and facilitated on behalf of NALA by ACTRaD.

The workshops included in-depth reflection, discussion and analysis on the topic of family literacy. Participants planned and photographed family literacy 'moments' and made recommendations to NALA based on individual and group experience.

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ACTRaD (Adult and Community Training, Research and Development)