

NALA
Research
Briefing
Paper



Family literacy in Ireland

This paper puts forwards findings and recommendations from NALA research on the benefits and impacts of family literacy for both adults and children. NALA believes this information will be of value to practitioners and policy makers working in the area of family literacy in Ireland and elsewhere.

September 2011

Context

The objective of this briefing paper on family literacy in Ireland¹ is to summarise the main points from recent NALA research². NALA's focus on family literacy is from the perspective of the adult learner. In *Working Together: Approaches to Family Literacy* (2004) NALA suggests that a key feature of an adult education approach to family literacy work is the recognition that literacy is a broader concept than the needs and demands of school work. The literacy learned at home and in local communities is rich in the use of local language and the expression of the experience and history of families, communities and cultures. With this in mind NALA conducted a number of research studies in settings, other than the school, where literacy takes place. Participants included in the research are:

- Parents who engaged in adult literacy courses;
- Parents who do not take part in adult literacy courses;
- Adult literacy tutors and co-ordinators; and
- School staff including home school liaison officers (HSLO's) and school principals.

Family literacy in Ireland

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

A national literacy and numeracy strategy was published in 2011. NALA made recommendations on nine areas which we believe should have been considered and included in the final plan³. Subsequent, to our submission NALA has been named as a partner with the Department of Education and Skills (DES) on two of the objectives in the finalised National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy⁴. These objectives are:

- Support a national public information campaign highlighting the role all parents and communities can play in supporting literacy and numeracy learning; and
- Provide advice and information to parents to enable them to support their children's language, literacy and numeracy development.

In addition to contributing to the national strategy NALA has updated our policy brief on family literacy (2009)⁵. In the policy brief NALA makes a number of recommendations about funding and promoting family literacy. These include:

- The establishment of a dedicated and significant funding stream for family literacy work; and
- A DEIS initiative that supports family literacy initiatives in all schools located in designated areas of disadvantage.

Summary of national and international research

What is family literacy?

The term 'family literacy' was introduced as a concept in Taylor (1983) who studied the development of literacy and language at home in the USA. Since then the term family literacy has been used to describe literacy development work that focuses on how literacy is developed at home, and education courses that support and develop this dimension of literacy development. Research in Ireland and at international level reveals

1 Family learning programmes in Ireland are provided through Vocational Education Committees and are primarily funded under the adult literacy budget.

2 Taking Care of Family Literacy (2010) and Family Literacy in Action (2011) are available to download free from NALA website.

3 NALA's submission on the draft plan is available to download from the NALA website.

4 http://www.education.ie/admin/servlet/blobServlet/lit_num_strat.pdf?language=EN&igstat=true

5 NALA Policy Brief on Family Literacy 2009 is available to download from the NALA website. Updated Policy Brief 2011 (forthcoming).

similar issues in relation to literacy, schools, children's learning and the key role of parents and carers. In particular, the research highlights the vital role played by parents, grandparents and other care-givers in children's education. According to the research parental involvement in a child's learning has more of an impact on their educational outcomes than any other demographic measure including social class or level of parental income (Desforges, 2003; Feinstein et al, 2004; EFLN 2008: NESF, 2009).

Findings from NALA research

Our findings are presented under the following headings:

- Learning in the home;
- School issues;
- Impact on home school relationship;
- Benefits to parents; and
- Recommendations from the research.

Learning in the home

- Parents described family literacy as 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;
- 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; and
- 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.

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)

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)

School issues

Analysis of the research data shows that when it comes to school issues:

- Parents felt confident about family literacy work that happens prior to formal schooling;
- Parents level of inclusion and involvement in their children's schooling was largely determined by the ethos of individual schools and the leadership provided by the school principal; and
- The degree of home school collaboration impacts on the quality of family literacy and how best to support children.

You are learning your kids before they start school. You are not teaching them in a school way but you are their teacher. (Parent)

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)

Impact on home school relationship

Our data shows that participation in family literacy programmes has:

- Helped equip parents with the coping skills to interact more effectively with school and school staff and has helped facilitate better communication between the home and school;
- Provided parents with a better understanding of the requirements of their child/ren's school work and has had positive academic outcomes for the children involved; and
- Raised recognition among many school staff of the important role family literacy performs in enhancing home school relationships and improving the behavior and academic performance of the children involved.

The main thing is the confidence. The key factor is the parents become much more involved and parental involvement is hugely important to the child doing well in school. You can see an almost immediate improvement in their [child's] concentration in the classroom, completion of homework, attendance and general overall behaviour (HSCL teacher).

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

Benefits to parents

According to parents, participation in family literacy programmes has:

- Provided them with an opportunity to socialise with other parents alongside developing their learning skills;
- Been of benefit to families in helping with their children's homework and other related school work;
- Provided all round family support that extends beyond the requirements of school work;
- Helped to alleviate some of the pressure experienced by parents with literacy difficulties; and
- The provision of a small allowance to cover additional costs, for example, childcare costs, has assisted low income families to continue in and progress in family learning programmes.

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)

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

Conclusion

Literacy development remains a crucial and pressing issue in Ireland and investment in family literacy provides a win-win scenario to policy makers. In the context of the current climate, family literacy provides a policy option that can help deliver value on several socio-economic priorities such as raising adult literacy levels, enhancing child literacy development and improving children's performance in schools.

Research has shown how family literacy work helps to overcome the barriers to learning felt by some adults and children. It is an important way of recognising and building the literacy strength of families who before have felt excluded or marginalised from the expectations of schools and society. Our research has highlighted how family literacy programmes can improve the literacy practices of family members. More importantly family literacy work offers potential opportunities to break inter-generational cycles of educational disadvantage that exist in Ireland.

Trying to teach your kids as well as trying to teach yourself is difficult which is why support is so important. (Parent)

Recommendations from the research

Policy recommendations

- National literacy policy should include an increased commitment to family literacy as a basis for improving chances of educational equality for children and adults.
- HSCCL personnel should have access to relevant adult literacy awareness training.
- Family literacy also needs to be supported and enabled with quality childcare provision and peer support opportunities.
- A NALA, DES, IVEA partnership should work with DEIS schools to make a systematic community development model of family literacy available to parents in their locality.

Practice recommendations

- Parents with literacy needs should be offered access to an intensive family literacy programme as a first stepping stone back into learning. Where necessary advice, guidance and counseling should be made available.
- When it comes to the design and delivery of family literacy programmes parents want to be consulted about the content of the programmes as their needs are complex and change according to the age and number of children.
- A menu of accredited family literacy modules should be made available to parents. 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;
 - Communicating successfully with schools;
 - Dealing with bullying; and
 - Strategies for family literacy with children who have specific learning difficulties.

Further research

- Best practice DEIS primary schools should be identified and investigated as a base for family literacy programmes with educationally disadvantaged parents.
- 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.

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