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Responding To Needs, Driving Change

Review of Policy in Support of Literacy Development in DEIS Schools

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The importance of Literacy Skills Development

It is widely accepted at a national and international level that literacy is not simply the ability to read and write, but rather the ability to use these skills to communicate effectively in order to achieve success, further career opportunities and make a contribution to society and its economic progress. The OECD defines literacy as 'understanding, using, and reflecting on written texts, in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential and to participate in society' (OECD, 2010: 37). Literacy forms the basis for all learning and provides individuals with the skills and competencies to empower and transform their lives, improve standards of health and ability to earn higher incomes. Bialystok (2001: 152) contends that literacy matters because it has come to represent our 'ticket of entry' into society: 'the currency by which social and economic positions are waged'. As Kozol (1985) explains:

Literacy rates have served as a barometer of society such that illiteracy takes on symbolic significance, reflecting any disappointment not only with the workings of the educational system, but with the society itself. An assumption often expressed is that if educational institutions cannot manage the simple task of teaching basic decoding and encoding skills, they cannot prepare future generations to deal with more complex questions of technological change, (Kozol, 1985 cited in Cook-Gumperz, 2006: 1).

Policy support for Literacy

In his foreword address in *The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Pupils and Young People 2011-2020*, Ruairí Quinn, TD, Minister for Education and Skills stated that:

Literacy and numeracy are among the most important life skills that our schools teach. No child should leave school without having mastered these skills to the best of their abilities. Literacy and numeracy skills are crucial to a person's ability to develop fully as an individual, to live a satisfying and rewarding life and to participate fully in our society. Ensuring that all young people acquire these skills is one of the greatest contributions that we can make to achieving social justice and equity in our country, (2012: 6).

The National Literacy Strategy (NLS) broadly defines literacy to encompass “*the capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media, and digital media,*” (DES, 2011: 8). While this definition is broad, critically, it does recognise the importance of conceptualising literacy to include reading, writing, communication and oral language in both print-based and digitised formats. Literacy then is the ability to read and write but it is also about constructing meaning through the various modes of communication valued by society.

The NLS proposed a number of initiatives to enable parents and communities to support children's literacy and numeracy development. The Strategy takes a broad approach to literacy and numeracy, seeking to raise standards for all young people and involving all educational settings (early years, primary and post-primary), parents, national and local agencies. Implementation of this strategy continues up to 2020. The National Assessments of English Reading and Mathematics

(NAERM), carried out in 2014, showed the first significant improvements in reading at primary level as recorded in national assessments of reading in over 30 years. At post-primary level, the performance of Irish fifteen year-old students in reading, as seen in consecutive cycles of the Programme for International Student Assessment, including that of 2012, compares favourably with the international average. Relative to their peers internationally, low-achieving Irish students are maintaining and improving their performance levels in reading.

The NLS highlights that “*while many students in our education system achieve a very good standard of literacy and numeracy, a significant minority do not. In addition, many students acquire adequate skills but could do even better*”, (DES, 2011: 12). Despite significant improvements in recent years, reports suggest the need to address the persistent gap between the achievement of students in DEIS and non-DEIS schools.

In contrast with the performance of students within the school system, the achievements of Irish adults in literacy as seen in the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies Assessment (PIAAC, 2012), are relatively low, ranking in the lower half of countries which took part in the assessment. Consistent with international trends, the highest scoring Irish adults were in the 25-34 age bracket and the lowest were in the 55-65 age bracket.

An interim review of the NLS conducted in 2016 acknowledged that while some significant achievements have been gained, ‘a gap in achievement between those learners in schools with the highest concentration of disadvantage (DEIS Band 1 in particular), and other schools, has persisted and must also be addressed’ in the new targets outlined from 2016 - 2020.



Support initiatives currently operating in DEIS schools

As part of the DEIS Action Plan, an integrated School Support Programme (SSP) provides support to 850 primary and post-primary schools with the highest levels of disadvantage. Since 2005, the SSP has had a strong emphasis on literacy and numeracy in DEIS schools, for example literacy programmes and interventions such as *Reading Recovery*, *First Steps*, *Write Minded*, *Literacy Lift Off*, *Power Hour*, *Write to Read*, *Better Basics*, *Paired Reading*, *Peer Tutoring*, *Buddy Reading*, *Word Wizard* and *Doodle Den*, are widely used in many DEIS schools. Programme participants in SSP are entitled to a range of supports including access to additional funding, access to literacy and numeracy programmes, and assistance with school planning. School self-evaluation of literacy and numeracy is an integral part of SSP and DEIS schools are encouraged to set targets in literacy and numeracy and to measure progress towards those targets (short and medium-term), (Smyth, McCoy & Kingston, 2015).

How are programmes chosen in schools?

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) literacy policy is informed by three recent National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) research reports: *Oral Language in Early Childhood and Primary Education*; *Literacy in Early Childhood and Primary Education*, and *Towards an Integrated Language Curriculum in Early Childhood and Primary Education*, (NCCA, 2012). These three reports informed the new Language Curriculum which is now in place in all schools from Junior Infants to Second Class (NCCA/DES, 2016).

The advisory body to the DEIS review noted that the literacy programmes chosen should complement the DES policy and language curriculum and stated that '*literacy interventions chosen for piloting should be targeted, meaningful, based on research, evidence based practice be strictly time bound and subject to rigorous monitoring and evaluation,*' (DEIS, 2017).

In support of DES policy, the National Educational Psychological Service has recently been tasked with supporting literacy development in schools through its two key documents – *Effective Interventions for Struggling Readers A Good Practice Guide*, (2012) and *A Balanced Approach to Literacy Development in the Early Years*, (2016).

It is acknowledged that while there are multiple and wide ranging programmes in existence in schools to support literacy and numeracy, there is no caveat on the number or range of literacy initiatives that schools may implement. This can lead to 'fatigue' among teachers as interventions are introduced frequently, or difficulties arise in sustaining an intervention when staff members move on and the training resources provided

through DEIS/SSP leave the school.

Although schools are advised to support interventions which support and complement the DES policy, it is advised that more cohesion at policy level is required, with a greater emphasis on the Primary Language Curriculum (NCCA/DES, 2016) as the core overarching literacy framework to be implemented in tandem with parental support to increase their engagement with the school and their child's education.



Parents are key to success

It is widely recognised that families have a major overall impact on their children's education and in particular on their literacy levels in that if pupils are to maximise their potential from schooling they will need the full support of their parents. In this regard, attempts to enhance parental involvement in education continue to occupy governments, administrators, educators and parents' organisations at a national and international level. However, families differ greatly in the degree to which they can provide a supportive environment for their children's acquisition of literacy. Parental involvement includes the quality of parenting in the home as well as the extent of parental contact with the child's school. This is influenced by family social class, the mother's level of education, mental wellbeing, single parent status, poverty and to a lesser extent, family ethnicity (Abouchar, 2003).



Challenges for parental engagement

Current literacy policy as outlined earlier in this paper raises challenges for parental engagement – both school and home based involvement. These challenges have been described as the heart of effective parental engagement (Emerson et al., 2012) and are briefly described as follows: -

- (a) Parent's academic socialisation
- (b) Parental role construction
- (c) Parenting style

Parents' academic socialisation

Academic socialisation involves discussing learning strategies with children, linking school work to current events and other topics, and communicating with children about parental expectations for education and about the value and enjoyment of learning. Parents need to feel affirmed that they have the ability to provide a stimulating home learning environment and can foster their children's educational aspirations and support them in making plans for the future. Limiting parents' involvement in school based literacy activities limits their academic socialisation.

Parental role construction

Parental aspirations and expectations for their children's education have a strong relationship to academic outcomes. A parent's sense of efficacy and belief in their ability to help their children is central to whether and how they become involved with their children's schooling. Hard to reach parents may have a low sense of efficacy in their belief that they can help their child's learning. Positive role models and guided demonstration of strategies to support learning, support parental engagement and raise expectations of learning.

Parenting style

There is evidence that a *parenting style* which is positive and supportive of the child and encourages conversation between the parent and child is more conducive to emotional wellbeing during the schooling years. A supportive parenting style allows for the setting of limits and rules while making transparent the reasons behind decisions, thereby acknowledging the autonomy and self-responsibility of the child. Family literacy programmes (for example Doodle Families) include shared and enjoyable home-school activities to support learning, such as keeping a diary, visiting the library, and planning a home-school project. Such activities encourage the child's decision-making while acknowledging the need for rules and reasons for decisions. A supportive parental style allows the child to take responsibility for his own learning. A strict or 'surveillance' type parental style which is emotionally distant yet requires children to obtain high levels of academic achievement can lead to low levels of self-esteem in children, which can have a flow-through negative impact on academic achievement (Emerson et al., 2012).

A framework to guide parental involvement

Joyce Epstein (2010) summarises the range of family involvement within a classification framework system as including school-home communications, parent involvement within the school and community, home learning activities, and parents serving as decision-makers. The framework details sample practices to describe each level of involvement, the inherent challenges involved and the expected outcomes for students, parents, and teachers. This framework has also served as a template to examine school and parent partnership across many jurisdictions, (Emerson et al., 2012).

In a more recent study Harris & Robinson (2016) argue for a new framework of parental involvement and use the metaphor of “stage setting” to develop the framework, in that a good stage set allows the cast to enact the performance successfully, while a poor stage set inhibits the actor’s role to perform successfully. Similarly, parents construct and manage the social environment around their children so as to create the “stage set” conditions in which academic success is possible. Stage-setting according to Harris & Robinson has two components: (1) conveying the importance of education to a child, and (2) creating and maintaining an environment or life space in which learning can be maximised (or not compromised). Parents vary in the extent to which they can successfully convey this positive message about the importance of education and creating a positive learning space – issues such as social class and race can serve to impact significantly on parents’ ability to create a positive ‘stage set’. This ‘stage-setting framework’ differs from the traditional view of parental involvement through engaging in specific academic supporting activities and suggests that the concept of parental involvement needs to be conceptualised differently in policy and in practice.

In conclusion, it can be stated that while there exists a large corpus of research supporting the efficacy of programmes that serve to enhance parents’ ability to engage and support literacy development activities in the home, Desforges & Abouchar, (2003) conclude by advising that:

The achievement of working class pupils could be significantly enhanced if we systematically apply all that is known about parental involvement. A programme of parental involvement development initiatives taking the form of multi-dimensional intervention programmes, targeted on selected post code areas and steered by a design research process is implicated, (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003:6).

It is clear that a new focus has emerged with regard to how best to achieve equity and inclusion for all pupils in acquiring literacy skills regardless of their social background or economic status.

Parental involvement versus parental engagement

Although the terms ‘parent involvement’ and ‘parent engagement’ are often used interchangeably, there is an important distinction between the two terms. In this context, ‘Parent involvement’ is generally used to refer only to those activities that take place in the school, such as parents volunteering, meeting with teachers, attending school events and parent-teacher meetings. A more meaningful and broader concept of partnership between families, schools and communities is suggested by the term ‘parent engagement’ and defined by Muller (2009) as raising parental awareness about the benefits of becoming engaged in their children’s education, and providing parents with the skills needed to do so.

A further distinction is made in the literature between involving parents in *schooling* and involving parents in *learning* with the greatest positive impact evident from involvement in learning (Emerson et al, 2012). The Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme is an integral part of the School Support Programme for primary and post primary DEIS schools. This involves the provision of a school-based co-ordinator to liaise with parents and the community in primary and post-primary schools. The main aim of the scheme is to increase links between the school, the home and the wider community in order to promote educational engagement among students (DES, 2006). An initial evaluation of the programme indicated some positive effects, including improved parental involvement in the school and increased contact between parents and teachers; subsequent research indicated that the majority of principals and coordinators were positive about the scheme (Archer & Shortt, 2003). The recent evaluation of the DEIS scheme (DES, 2017) recommends that the role of HSCL Coordinator should be restated in order to provide clarity to teachers taking on HSCL duties. The HSCL role is currently rotated among existing staff and this can lead to a fragmenting of aspects of the role. Other service providers also need clarity on the role of HSCL in supporting transitions across the education continuum (DES 2017). There is little doubt about the positive benefits for families when parents take an active role in supporting learning. Involving parents in their child’s *learning*, and supporting the *engagement* of parents in learning in the home brings about positive changes in the child’s academic attainment (Emerson et al, 2012).

A new focus: Spreading the net to accommodate wider support

As already noted, a number of reports point towards the need for teachers, parents and children in schools designated as disadvantaged, to continue to receive even more intensive support for the remainder of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (2011-2020). The most recent study of literacy skills in 150 Irish schools focused on second and sixth class pupils using the National Assessment of English Reading (NAER), (Educational Research Centre, 2014) and compared the results from 2009 and 2014. While improvements were recorded in pupils' reading attainments in DEIS schools between 2009 and 2014, the gap between pupils in DEIS Band 1 schools and pupils in other schools persists. In addition, the same report points to the large proportion of pupils in DEIS urban schools classified as low achievers, (Shiel et al., 2014).

The National Economic and Social Council's *Report on Child Literacy and Social Inclusion* (2009) examined issues related to pupils living in communities designated as disadvantaged and concluded that the issue of literacy is not just a matter for schools and that it should be addressed in a holistic way from childhood to adulthood through a partnership approach between the various stakeholders at both national and local level. The NESCC points to the need for an integrated approach that will bridge schools, families and communities in delivering literacy supports. Examples of evidence-based practice are available through the *Prevention and Early Intervention Network* (<http://www.pein.ie>) which includes intervention projects to support children, young people and their economically disadvantaged communities.

The *Learning from the Evaluation of DEIS* (2015) conducted by the ESRI identified the continuing concentration of disadvantage in DEIS schools, especially Urban Band 1 primary schools and it highlights the need for continued supports for such schools. While the report pointed to the promotion of parental involvement in DEIS areas as a positive aspect that should be maintained, it highlights the particularly complex range of issues and challenges that exist in these areas which may require more targeted supports in order to achieve improvement.

The *Programme for a Partnership Government* (2016) states a commitment to tackling the most pressing challenges Ireland faces in areas including education, health and housing. The programme includes tackling disadvantage among its priorities for education. Objectives outlined include specific measures which encompass all areas of education which are impacted by disadvantage (p.86).

The *Action Plan for Education, 2016-2019* which aims to "significantly reduce the gap between low achieving students in literacy and numeracy in DEIS and those in non-DEIS schools" claims that at both primary and post-primary levels, it is evident that the DEIS interventions are having a modest impact overall on the achievement of students attending schools.

There is now a growing recognition in policy documents of the need to move away from school based interventions alone to adopting a wider and more inclusive approach to supporting literacy for parents and children in areas designated as disadvantaged. The *National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020 - Better Outcomes Brighter Futures* (BOBF), (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014) recognises that parents provide the key foundation for good childhood outcomes and have significant influence, particularly in the early years of children's lives. It is the 'what' of parenting that makes a difference (Sylvia et al., 2004). Therefore, supporting parents to parent confidently and positively is one of the primary, universal and most effective supports that the State can provide along the continuum of family support (p. 26). Regarding the role of parents, it notes that "...*strengthening relationships between schools, parents and communities enhances student engagement, behaviour and achievement, as well as building social capital in communities,*" (DCYA, 2017: 67).

From the perspective of implementation, the central message in BOBF is the need for coordinated effort and energy of all relevant parties to work in an integrated way to address the lack of progress in achieving positive outcomes for **all** children and youth at the various stages of their development. BOBF sets down a framework with demands for regular reporting on key indicators across five national outcomes. This represents a move away from the school-based initiatives which have been shown to have only moderate success rates and it connects to international practice in other jurisdictions where success is lauded – namely the Netherlands, Turkey and UK.

International Practice: Picture from Europe

A research synthesis conducted by the *National Research and Development Centre* (NDRC) (2011) which examined case studies in Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Romania, Turkey and the UK concluded that family literacy approaches have a stronger impact than many other educational interventions and represent a significant capacity for improving reading scores. In addition, long term improvement in literacy is most likely when parents receive comprehensive training. This points to the need for a holistic approach to supporting literacy in communities designated as disadvantaged, in that rather than parents being restricted to specific interventions in support of literacy - such as book reading etc. – there is a need to provide motivational and emotional support in order to improve parents' social and cultural capital and self-confidence, (Morgan & O' Donnell, 2016).

The NDRC report points to the fact that while there is an acknowledgement that parents are the first educators, there exists a practical problem for schools in devising a way in which family literacy interventions can complement the school-based approaches to teaching literacy.

Again, the EU Report (EU, 2012) points to the importance of supporting children and their parents, through the provision of family literacy programmes to improve literacy levels for both parents and children. In addition, the report advises that language courses be provided for parents who do not speak the language of the school. The report suggests that closer cooperation with NGOs, businesses and family support services could support parental involvement in literacy programmes.

Disconnect between policy and practice

Currently, in Ireland there exists a clear contradiction between the policy narrative and the practices that are taking place in schools. The NLS (2011-2020), stresses the importance of a partnership between schools and families, not only in the development of literacy skills but also in mitigating the effects of educational disadvantage. It states that while a broad range of interventions to support family literacy are organised by outside agencies, these initiatives need to be more effectively coordinated and connected.

However, despite the stated objectives of the above mentioned there was no brief to examine the extent of parental engagement in the *Learning from the Evaluation of DEIS* report (Smyth et al., 2015). This lack of focus on developing effective partnerships between schools and parents is again evidenced in the DEIS Plan *Delivering Equality Opportunities in Schools* (2017). While the plan sets out five key goals and details the actions required to achieve them, despite decades of research pointing to the importance of parental engagement in education, it fails to address how key partnerships between schools and parents can be fostered in support of better learning outcomes for all. In the Irish context, while the policy clearly highlights the important role of the parent in supporting their child's education, many of the interventions to support literacy such as *Reading Recovery*, *First Steps*, *Literacy Lift Off*, *Power Hour*, *Jolly Phonics*, *Paired Reading*, and *Reading Buddies*, adopt this closed door approach and exist as school-based and teacher-led initiatives. The exception to this approach is evidenced in the *Incredible Years*, *Doodle Den* and *Doodle Families* Programmes, which have a parent component included. In this regard, it is advised that



there is an urgent need to provide a national policy framework to support literacy development for both parents and pupils. As already acknowledged in the literature, parental involvement in learning is not the same as parental involvement in the child's schooling. Involving parents in their child's *learning*, and supporting the engagement of parents in learning in the home brings about positive changes in children's academic attainment, (Emerson et al., 2012).

The concept of a 'village' approach to family literacy is underpinned by a belief that the community as well as the school shares the responsibility for the holistic development of children, in all aspects of their lives, academic and non-academic. We must acknowledge that family and school relationships support all aspects of children's learning. The overlapping influences of family, school and community is widely recognised in the literature, for example Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of learning (1979), and Epstein's model (1996) describes how home, school and community work together to support learning and development.

Parent engagement can be influenced by the school and policy practices which permeate everyday life in the classroom. Engagement through a partnership approach which involves schools, parents, and national and local agencies is a priority of the Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life Strategy (2011-2020), providing opportunities for cross-learning to benefit all SSP schools, in particular, should be considered. This raises the challenge of parental engagement and the specific question of timetabling a literacy partnership such as that originally

envisioned for the Doodle Families Programme whereby parents and children could not access the programme simultaneously.

There is an obvious disconnect in the Irish context, between school based initiatives and the practices of other agencies tasked with supporting parental literacy in the community. This fractured approach is problematic and runs counter to all research and practices that are being successfully implemented in other European jurisdictions, namely Turkey, the Netherlands and the UK.

Irish government policy states that "*Schools on their own cannot tackle disadvantage and they need to be supported by wider social policies addressing socio-economic disadvantage with buy-in from families*", (DES, 2015: 41). However, the current approach being supported by the DES lacks a unified approach between the Department and NGOs charged with supporting parental empowerment and engagement in education, resulting in a failure to sustain a coherent approach to family literacy and associated interventions. In addition, this fragmented approach is at variance with the clear recommendations to engage in a 'partnership approach' as outlined in the NLS for 2011-2020.

In conclusion, it must be stated that if we are to address both children's literacy development alongside the enhancement of parental engagement in literacy, we need a coherent, overarching literacy strategy with all parties working in unison to achieve successful outcomes.



Concluding comments

It is widely acknowledged in the research literature and reflected in policy documents both nationally and internationally, that families have a major impact on their children's educational attainments and in particular on their literacy levels. However, families differ in the extent to which they can provide a supportive 'stage set' for both school and home based involvement.

While in the past the focus was on schools providing additional support, particularly, in areas designated as disadvantaged, there is now a growing recognition in policy documents of the need to move away from school based interventions alone to adopting a wider and more inclusive 'village' approach to supporting parents to parent confidently.

Currently in Ireland there exists a clear contradiction between the policy narrative and the practices that are taking place in schools. The NLS (2011-2020), stresses the importance of a partnership between schools and families and states that while a broad range of interventions to support family literacy are provided by outside agencies, these initiatives need to be more effectively coordinated and connected.

This points to the need for a holistic approach to supporting literacy in communities designated as disadvantaged with a recognition that parents need motivational and emotional support in order to improve their social and cultural capital and self-confidence.

Recommendations

It is advised that a national framework to guide and support parental engagement in education at all levels (as outlined in policy statements) be developed.

This national framework should detail how supports at a personal, family and community level will help develop and sustain parental engagement with the education system.

There is an urgent need to develop a cohesive policy to direct all additional interventions that are currently in place in support of literacy and numeracy initiatives at primary level. It is advised that the Primary Language Curriculum (NCCA/DES, 2016) and the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy objectives should serve as the guiding policy objectives to be implemented in tandem with parental support to increase their engagement with the school and their child's education.

It is acknowledged that while there are multiple and wide ranging programmes in existence in schools to support literacy and numeracy, there is no caveat on the number or range of literacy initiatives that schools may implement. This can lead to 'fatigue' among teachers as interventions are introduced frequently, or difficulties arise in sustaining an intervention when staff members move on and the training resources provided through DEIS/SSP leave the school. Initiating new programmes needs to be undertaken with a sustainability plan, and in the context of clear guidelines.

While there are multiple programmes in place at school level the involvement of parents in their child's education continues to be a priority area for both the DES and NGOs. It is advised that engagement be conceived as a partnership which involves schools, parents, national and local agencies. To this end, a more co-ordinated approach between the DES and the NGOs offering additional supports to parents and pupils needs to be developed.

The research findings and successful practices from other European jurisdictions need to be given priority focus when considering implementing national strategies and initiatives to support parental empowerment and engagement.

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This policy brief was written by Dr. Margaret O'Donnell and Dr. Therese McPhillips.





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The Area Based Childhood Programme 2013–2017

