GOOD PRACTICE in Literacy Policies for Adults

The Ħilti Family Literacy Programme
Malta

[A more literate environment: Family Literacy]
# Part I. Description

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name/Title of intervention</th>
<th>Ħilti Family Literacy Programme</th>
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## 1. Abstract

The *Ħilti Family Literacy Programme* endeavours to complement and reinforce school-based teaching and learning. The Ħilti Family Literacy Programme is comprised of four core family literacy/education support programmes.

1) The Ħilti Programme is an after-school, family-oriented educational project that endeavours to complement and reinforce school-based teaching and learning.

2) The NWAR Programme is for parents of children with severe learning difficulties who require parental participation to ensure continuity between home and school-based learning.

3) The Parents-in-Education Programme and the Parent Empowerment for Family Literacy Project are two capacity-building and empowerment initiatives where parents are encouraged to embrace practical strategies that stimulate their children to learn more effectively, engage in various parent-to-parent empowerment activities, and participate as families in community-focused literacy programmes.

4) The Malta Writing Programme is a basic reading and creative writing initiative for children and their parents.

The *Ħilti Family Literacy Programme*, through its four core support programmes, has played a critical role in enhancing participant children’s social and literacy development, enhancing lifelong learning among parents, empowering parents to become significant resource persons in their community, and enhancing home-school links, increasing schools’ perceptions of the potential for parental involvement. Perhaps the most
important indicator of the project’s sustainability is manifested by the strengthened cooperation between parents and schools as well as the resultant active involvement of parents in school activities and in the education of their children. The Hilti Programme (My Ability) in particular is examined in greatest detail in this case study of the Hilti Family Literacy Programme. The Hilti Programme is implemented through school-based Hilti Clubs with assistance from professional teachers employed by the Education Division, and trained volunteer assistants. Hilti Club activities contain embedded literacy and/or numeracy concepts and skills. Each teacher/tutor is responsible for a single Hilti Club comprising on average 8 to 12 families. Host schools identify and select children in need of extra literacy training or social development assistance. The parents of participating children are obliged to attend and take part in Hilti Club activities. The schools also decide whether to focus on literacy (Maltese or English) or numeracy, in addition to other skills such as health (personal hygiene, nutrition) and inter-personal relations. However, on principle, all Hilti Club activities contain in-built literacy and/or numeracy concepts and skills.

The programme predominantly employs interactive teaching-learning methodologies such as play-to-learn approaches that involve games, drama, sports and group activities. These are supported by joint child-parent learning sessions that are mediated by the tutors, and further reinforced through repetition in the home environment. The programme relies on a number of teaching-learning materials based on key FES publications in both Maltese and English.

The Hilti Programme has been evaluated by senior FES (internal) and external professionals, with the former undertaking assessment visits on an ongoing basis. Qualitative and quantitative evaluation processes indicate that the programme has resulted in major benefits for all participating parties. These benefits include: improved psycho-social development, a strong correlation between parental participation and their children’s educational development, and beneficial social impacts such as improved parenting capabilities.
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<tr>
<td><strong>2. Nation</strong></td>
<td>Malta</td>
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<td><strong>3. Website</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://www.fes.org.mt/service/eu-projects/">http://www.fes.org.mt/service/eu-projects/</a> (listed as NWAR HSBC Fund)</td>
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<td><strong>4. Lead organisation</strong></td>
<td>Foundation for Educational Services (FES)</td>
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<td><strong>5. Main partners</strong></td>
<td>State (through the Ministry of Education), European Union and the HSBC Cares for Children Fund and selected primary centres that implement the programme in their school community</td>
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<td><strong>6. Period of activity</strong></td>
<td>2001 to present</td>
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<td><strong>7. Languages</strong></td>
<td>Maltese and English</td>
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| **8. Conceptual basis of the good practice examples** | **Synthetic Phonics**

Synthetic phonics (UK) or blended phonics (US), also known as inductive phonics, is a method of teaching reading which first teaches the letter sounds and then builds up to blending these sounds together to achieve full pronunciation of whole words.

**Multi-sensory approach**

The multisensory approach, also known as VAKT, integrates the visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, and tactile learning styles to teach all students a concept.

In learning styles theory, the educator looks at the individual student and identifies the student’s preferred styles or intelligences to learn. The educator uses a learning styles inventory to assess which learning styles and intelligences lead the student to succeed and which do not. The teacher then tries to design learning activities that integrate the student’s learning styles (Moustafa, 1990, p.5).

Additionally, NWAR tutors employ auditory training (combining sounds to form words), and decoding of sounds (identification of sounds in words) in the *Ħilti Family Literacy Programme* (Vallejo and Dooly, 2008, p.7).
| 9. Objectives | The *Ħilti Family Literacy Programme* is an after-school, family-oriented educational project that endeavours to complement and reinforce school-based teaching and learning. Its objectives are:

- to enhance both community development and parental empowerment through learning and active involvement in the learning process of children;
- to promote intergenerational, home-based, lifelong learning;
- to empower parents as co-educators, learners and parent leaders in order to promote intergenerational lifelong learning as well as to facilitate their socio-economic integration into mainstream society;
- to help children to develop literacy skills in a holistic, play-to-learn context;
- to improve parents’ literacy skills in order to enhance the provision of early childhood education; and
- to create strong links between home and school learning processes in order to promote lifelong learning.

As one of the four core programmes, the *Ħilti Programme* (My Ability) aims to:

- complement and strengthen school-based teaching and learning activities through the provision of after-school assistance to children;
- help children to develop literacy skills in a holistic, play-to-learn context;
- empower parents by equipping them to act as community leaders and effective first educators for their children;
- improve the efficiency of the education system through active parental involvement in child education;
- harness children’s eagerness to work and learn with parents in order to enhance their ability to acquire literacy skills;
- assist schools in capacity-building in order to foster a family literacy ethos and develop resources and tools (practices); and
- nurture and entrenched the development of a family-based, lifelong learning ethos within Maltese families. |
**10. Target group**
The *Ħilti Family Literacy Programme* offers its services to parents and their children. The core components (described in more details in section 15) target different groups; for instance, the *Ħilti Programme (My Ability)* is for early primary school children aged between 6 and 7 (grades 1, 2 and 3), their parents and teachers. The *Malta Writing Programme* targets children aged 8 to 13 and their parents.

**11. Number of people involved**
38 schools and communities involving 2,534 children and 2,240 parents participated in the *Ħilti Programme (My Ability)* between late 2001 and mid-2005. Currently, Ħilti Clubs operate in 26 community-based primary schools and reach around 400 children and their parents per scholastic term. In addition, more than 50 'parent leaders' from Ħilti Clubs have been selected to spearhead other Family Literacy Programme activities.

**12. Methods for recruiting participants**
Host schools are involved in identifying and selecting children in need of extra literacy training or social development assistance for the *Ħilti Programme (My Ability)*. The parents of participating children are obliged to attend and take part in Ħilti Club activities.

**13. Professionals involved**
The programme is implemented through school-based Ħilti Clubs with assistance from professional teachers employed by the Education Division and volunteer assistants who have received an equivalent level of training.

**14. Role of each professional**
Teachers and volunteer assistants act as role models to parents to help them learn the strategies that support best their child’s learning and that can be replicated at home to enhance mastery.

**15. Main activities**
To date, the FES has developed four core family literacy/education support programmes:

- The *Ħilti Programme (My Ability)*: the *Ħilti Programme* is an after-school, family-oriented educational project that endeavours to complement and reinforce school-based teaching and learning.
- The NWAR (Late Blossoms) Programme: this programme was
initiated in 2002 as a variation of the Ħilti Programme. It was designed for parents with children with severe reading and writing (learning) difficulties and, as a result, parental participation in the programme is obligatory to ensure continuity between home and school-based learning. Participation in the programme is limited to two families per tutor and lasts for a minimum of four months (or one semester). This period can, however, be extended according to the learning needs of the child. Each learner has an individual learning programme (ILP) which facilitates the provision of intensive and appropriate literacy assistance to children. The ILP is based on a multi-sensory, synthetic, phonics-based methodology in which the parent learns to emulate the teacher, repeating the strategies used in the classroom at home in order to enhance children’s mastery of literacy skills.

- The Parents-in-Education Programme (Programme Id f’ Id) and the Parent Empowerment for Family Literacy Project (PEFaL): These are parent capacity-building and empowerment initiatives. They include the following key components:

  - Parents’ Sessions in Ħilti Clubs: Parents with children participating in the Ħilti programme are encouraged to learn and use practical tools that stimulate their children to learn more effectively. They also participate in child learning activities and discuss educational strategies with teachers.

  - Parent-to-Parent Initiatives: Parents, in collaboration with FES personnel, engage in various parent-to-parent empowerment initiatives. A team of parent leaders has been set up and trained to provide, under teacher supervision and guidance, courses to other parents. This programme was short-listed for the European Parents’ Association’s Alcuin Award in both 2002 and 2003, and received a special mention.

  - Community Literacy Outreach Projects: The initiative
involves the participation of the family in community-focused literacy programmes executed in popular open-air spaces.

- The Malta Writing Programme: This is a two-month programme which endeavours to teach basic reading and creative writing skills with a view to contributing towards language learning and teaching in Malta. In addition, the programme aims to promote action-based research and lifelong learning. To achieve these goals, FES organizes separate creative training workshops for Young Writers (children aged 8 to 13) and parents, as well as collective Family Writing Clubs (FWC). Parents enrol in the FWCs so that they can learn both to nurture their children's writing skills and to develop their own reading and writing skills.

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<th><strong>16. Implementation process</strong></th>
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<td><strong>17. Resources and materials list</strong></td>
<td>The programme relies on a number of teaching-learning materials based on key FES publications in both Maltese and English. These include two bilingual reading packs targeting children aged 6-7 and 7-8, as well as a guidebook for parents which focuses on how they can base a range of activities in the home on the themes contained in the children's books. The programme predominantly employs interactive teaching-learning methodologies such as play-to-learn approaches that involve games, drama, sports and group activities. Basic reading and writing targets are set and reached through the application of specific tools such as flash cards, a word bank, poems, directions identification and sentence creation.</td>
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<td><strong>18. Financing</strong></td>
<td>The Foundation for Educational Services (FES) carries out the Hilti Family Literacy Programme. FES is largely funded by the state but receives some supplementary funding from the HSBC Cares for Children Fund and various projects.</td>
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<td><strong>19. Evaluation</strong></td>
<td>The <em>Hilti Family Literacy Programme</em> was extensively assessed in June</td>
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Four interrelated attitudinal tools were used for:

- participating parents
- participating children
- day-school teachers whose pupils participated in Ħilti Clubs
- heads of schools hosting Ħilti Clubs

Since its inception, the Ħilti Programme (My Ability) has been extensively evaluated by senior FES (internal) and external professionals, with the former undertaking assessment visits on an ongoing basis. In both cases, however, qualitative and quantitative methods were employed to assess and evaluate the participants’ (children, parents, teachers and schools) perceptions of the programme’s impact on educational development and lifelong learning. In particular, parents, Ħilti Club tutors, day-school teachers and school administration authorities were asked to evaluate criteria such as classroom participation, attainment, motivation and psycho-social development.

### 20. Results of the evaluation

The results of these evaluation processes indicate that the programme has major benefits for all participating parties. These benefits include:

- Improved psycho-social development: child assessments before and after participating in Ħilti Club activities indicate that the programme promotes holistic, psycho-social development. Children exhibited improved self-esteem, self-confidence and inter-personal (social, communication) skills after participating in the programme. Most importantly, the programme has had major benefits on children’s educational development, showing improvements in the acquisition of literacy skills, the development of creative and critical thinking skills, educational attainment and the ability to learn. For example, most children admitted during interviews that the programme has stimulated their interest in learning in order to achieve better results. These results are particularly important in view of the fact the Ħilti programme primarily aims to assist children with literacy and social
development needs.

- Impact of parental participation on children’s educational development: Evaluation results indicate a strong correlation between parental participation in their children’s education and the children’s educational progress in terms of literacy, participation in classroom activities, and personal and social skills. Data collected from day-school teachers showed statistically significant correlations (p<0.005) between a) children’s increase in literacy development and parents’ rate of participation, and b) children’s participation in the programme and improvements in their literacy, personal and social skills.

- Social Impacts: Parents and children strongly feel that participation in family literacy programmes is beneficial both for education and for the development of personal and social skills. Hence, approximately 90% of parents believe that the programme has improved their parenting capabilities as manifested by, for example, improved relations and communication with their children; an increased capacity and willingness to assist their children with their school work; and higher involvement in school affairs. According to one parent: ‘I was impressed by how the parents, including myself, worked with our children. My daughter was very happy that I was with her, helping her along. She used to wait for me to show me her work because she knows I like it that she does that.’ (http://www.fes.org.mt/programmes/h_about.html)

The programme has also had positive and enriching benefits on participating teachers and their schools, and thus the education system in general. Teachers participating in Hilti Club activities have adopted a range of teaching-learning tools and strategies to enrich their classroom practices, including: the use of phonics and individualised learning plans for students with literacy difficulties; and inter-personal and participatory methods. Additionally, these teachers are more inclined to cooperate actively with parents, thereby creating strong links between children’s school and home learning, and, by extension, opening up possibilities for
Part II. Strengths/weaknesses

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<th>23. SWOT analyses</th>
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<td>the institutionalisation of intergenerational lifelong learning in Malta. Accordingly, about 90% of school heads stated that programme is effective in terms of children’s and adults’ learning experiences and actively encouraged parental participation in the school.</td>
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## 24. Political impact and policies

As word of the positive experience for schools hosting Ħilti family literacy Clubs spread, more schools in Malta started asking the FES for this service. The initial six schools in 2002 grew to 25 in 2004, with over 60% of state primary schools having had at least one programme till December 2005. By the end of 2005, that is over a four-year period, over 2,700 families had participated in 224 Ħilti Clubs (Spiteri & Camilleri, 2013).

The NWAR programme has been included in the National Action Plan on Poverty and Social Inclusion of Malta (Vallejo and Dooly, 2008, p. 4) as one of the social exclusion prevention measures.

As word of the positive experience for schools hosting Ħilti family literacy Clubs spread, more and more schools in Malta began asking the FES for this service. The initial six schools in 2002 grew to 25 in 2004, with over 60% of state primary schools having had at least one programme up to December 2005. By the end of 2005, that is over a four-year period, over 2,700 families had participated in 224 Ħilti Clubs. However, as always happens, experience started also highlighting the limitations of provision. These were that:

- Service was effectively not available for families where parents could not participate straight after school, which was the case for most working parents;

- Families where pupils were at severe risk of educational failure because their literacy attainment was significantly below expectations needed more individual and focused attention that could be given by Ħilti Clubs;

- Although the reference was to families, in actual fact the parents that almost always attended was the mother. Indeed fathers’ participation in Ħilti Clubs is around 3%, which compares with similar proportions around the world. In the UK, for example, the figure is stated to be “well under 10%” (Hannon, 2003);
The Ħilti family literacy model was not an integral part of primary school teaching and learning, since it was held after school. Following the experience of the REAL project held among families with pre-schoolers in Sheffield between 1995 and 2002, we wanted to explore this possibility as well, but transpose it to a school context.

The FES went for a multi-pronged response to these concerns:

- **Evening service:** A pilot community-based family literacy programmes in the evening were piloted in 2005 and 2006. The response up to now is very positive; this experience is still in progress and is being assessed.

- **Service for children with severe literacy needs:** A specialized family literacy programme for families whose children had severe literacy needs was set up, called Nwar (Late Blossoms). Participation in Nwar is limited to two families per tutor, and parental participation is obligatory to ensure continued learning between sessions. Sessions are one hour long twice a week for a minimum of four months, which are extended according to the needs of the child. Each child is assessed and an individual learning programme constructed, and the family actively identifies the learning targets to be achieved. Nwar was set up in 2002, and has seven regional centres around the country, with 49 tutors working with about 180 families at any one time. To date, Nwar has worked with 418 families, 40% of which have achieved their learning targets and stopped receiving service (Spiteri & Camilleri, 2013).
References


