

Good practice in family literacy

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Overview

- Brief overview of different types of family literacy programmes
- Features of successful programmes
- Discuss policy obstacles to the development and sustainability of effective programmes
- Discuss possible ways of overcoming those obstacles

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Practices, programmes and policies

- Family literacy **practices**
 - Home Learning Environment
 - Parents as first teachers (and modellers)
- Family literacy **programmes** work with parents* and their children to improve skills and practices
- **Policies** facilitate the development, maintenance and ongoing improvement of programmes (we hope)

Different types of family literacy programmes

Range of objectives. Programmes generally seek to improve:

- young children's literacy/language development
- parents' ability and motivation to support child literacy/language development

Some programmes explicitly seek to improve the literacy skills of children *and* parents ('dual track')

Wide range of programme types

For example:

- Book-gifting programmes, e.g. **Bookstart**
- Interventions carried out through primary schools, e.g. **FLY in Hamburg**
 - Active involvement of parents in the class
 - Parent-teacher meetings
 - Joint activities with parents and children
 - Approximately 25 sessions over a year

Some programmes have a **tight focus** on literacy or language

- Others take a more **holistic** approach, e.g. adding an emphasis on non-literacy-specific parenting practices, e.g. effective discipline or parent-child bonding

Different types of family literacy programmes

Programmes may involve different policy and programme actors, e.g.

- School-based programmes such as **Hamburg's FLY**
- Health services and libraries are central programmes such as **Bookstart** and **Nati per Legere**
 - Joined-up policy making
- Pedagogical objectives are programme- and age-group dependent

Features of successful programmes

- Provide **information** for parents about the importance of reading to their children
 - Not just information but **support**
- Typically emphasise the importance of **reading for pleasure**
 - Focus on practices, not just skills
- Emphasise the strengthening of **parent-child bonds** through shared reading

Features of successful programmes

- May offer specialised **support for migrant families**, e.g. language courses for migrant parents
- Strong working **partnerships** across a number of policy areas, e.g. health care. Reaching out to families through a broad range of family services
- Commitment of **policymakers**

Declaration of European Citizens' Right to Literacy

1. Young children are encouraged at home in their literacy acquisition
2. Parents receive support in helping their children's literacy acquisition

How can policy support the realisation of these rights?
How can we develop and sustain effective programmes?

Policy obstacles and challenges

- Family literacy is on the **margins** of policy, not in the mainstream
- Often there are **projects** but not systematic, sustained policy
- Often falls '**between stools**', with no clear policy ownership, either across departments or w/in a single department
- Joined-up, **cross-departmental/ministerial** policymaking is very difficult – a 21st century policy challenge
 - Health services may struggle to justify literacy-focused activities, esp. in times of austerity
 - Experts in adult learning may have little expertise of children, and vice-versa
- Thoughts on how to succeed at joined-up policymaking?

Policy obstacles and challenges

Even **within a department/ministry**, FL may be marginalised

- How central is Family Literacy to that department's work?
- Department/Ministry of Education is typically staffed with people whose expertise is **schools**
 - They may have limited expertise/interest in families/parents
 - Civil servants are very busy people, struggling to cope with their workloads already

Thoughts on how to improve this situation?

(Some evidence of positive impact (though the evidence is not clear-cut), but FL isn't the sort of silver bullet that policymakers love/fantasize about.)

Policy obstacles and challenges

- Do programme evaluations accurately capture programme benefits?
- Is evaluation science still a bit too primitive when applied to programmes aimed at improving skills and practices?
 - Tend to focus on short-term outcomes (Turkey's MOCEP is an impressive exception)
 - 'Tyranny of effect size' (Hamburg FLY)
 - How do we investigate and capture impacts such as improved parental practices?

Discussion

How can policy support the realisation of these rights to literacy?

1. *Young children are encouraged at home in their literacy acquisition*
2. *Parents receive support in helping their children's literacy acquisition*

What policy **obstacles** do you see?

How can we **overcome** these obstacles?

If time...

Policy obstacles and challenges: England as a case study

NRDC family literacy and numeracy studies

- 2007-09 (Evaluation of government FL programme)
 - 42 local authorities, 74 family literacy courses, short (30-49 hours) and long (72-96 hours)

Policy obstacles and challenges: England as a case study

2013-14 (A new study which attempted to build on the previous one)

- The programmes no longer exist
- Local government contacts from previous study: only a few remain. Expertise lost
- Most courses were only 8-10 hours long
- Huge differences in programme quality – e.g. instructors who've never worked w/adults

In just a few years, England moved from having a national programme shaped by relatively coherent (albeit tension-filled) policy to disconnected local projects existing in the absence of national policy

Policy obstacles and challenges: England as a case study

Why did this happen?

- **Lack of a policy home**
 - Falls “between stools”: no department sees FL as central to its remit
 - This problem is not unique to England. See EU report on Family Literacy (Carpentieri et al 2011) re policy barriers and challenges
- **Current government’s lack of interest in FL programmes (+ economic crisis)**
 - Booktrust’s 2010 Christmas gift from the new government: [100% funding cut](#)
 - Settled on 50% cut after [public outcry, twitter campaign](#)
 - Massive cuts to library funding

Policy obstacles and challenges: England as a case study

Almost complete lack of government interest in (& perhaps even antipathy towards) policies aimed at **“Creating a More Literate Environment”** (High Level Group recommendation 1). Short-term policy focus on **“Better Skills Now!”**

Policy obstacles and challenges

- Some good news: increased EU interest over last half-decade
 - **EU pre-2011: The invisible family**
 - Series of key policy statements in 2009 and 2010 (Council of the European Union, 2009, 2010; European Union, 2010) addressed literacy issues and objectives for children and adults, but had nothing to say about the family. **No mentions at all**

Policy obstacles and challenges

- 2012 report of the European Union High Level Group of Experts on Literacy mentioned “family literacy” 13
- Argued that FL programmes “are under-used by policy-makers” (p. 40), and recommended that EU, national and regional governments “[d]evelop more extensive, larger and better coordinated family literacy initiatives” (p. 98)
- 2012 EU Council of Ministers Conclusions on Literacy (Council of the European Union) suggested that intergenerational initiatives should play an important role in national literacy strategies
- Elinet