

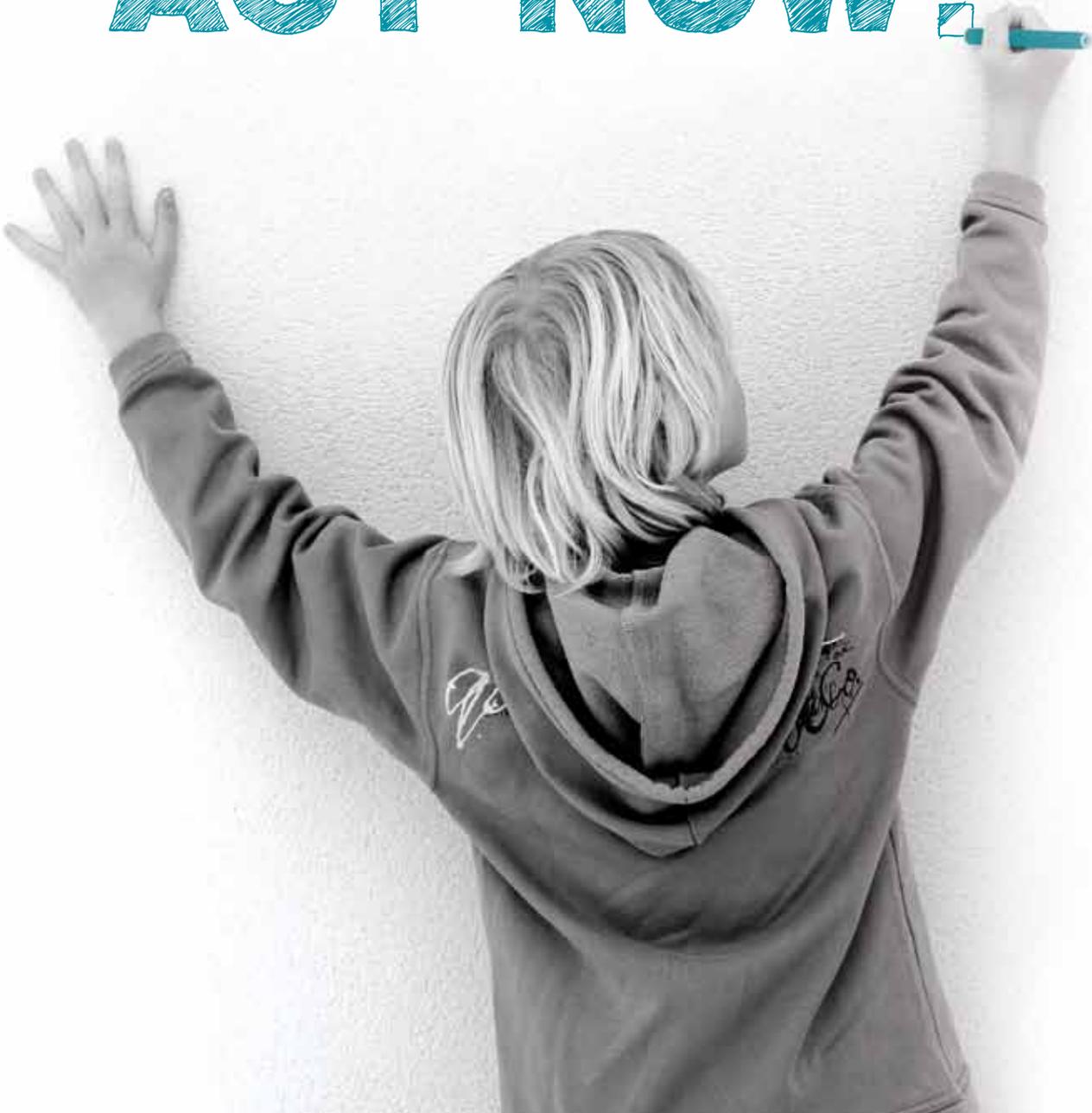
**ROF 1 NI 5
SNAEPORUE,
ETH DLROW
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**FOR 1 IN 5
EUROPEANS,
THE WORLD
IS HARD
TO READ**

EU HIGH LEVEL GROUP OF EXPERTS ON LITERACY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY, SEPTEMBER 2012

ACT NOW!





EU HIGH LEVEL GROUP OF EXPERTS ON LITERACY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is a wake-up call to the literacy crisis that affects every country in Europe. We need to realise that reading and writing are much more than a technique or a skill. Literacy is about people's self-esteem and ability to function and flourish in society as private individuals, active citizens, employees, or parents. Our societies need to face this hidden crisis and all need to act, and act together, to boost literacy levels and to reduce illiteracy. We are living a paradox: while the digital age requires ever higher levels of literacy, millions of Europeans of all ages continue to fail to reach the mark.

Far too often we take for granted everyone's ability to read and write, to process information, and to critically engage with its multiple sources. Far too often we assume that it is up to teachers, schools or governments only to deal with literacy. Yet precisely because literacy skills touch so many aspects of our social and economic functioning, a broad range of players have a role to play in addressing the issues.

This report outlines the key issues and solutions to achieve literacy for all in Europe.

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEMS & OPPORTUNITIES:

WHY LITERACY IS A BIG DEAL

LARGE NUMBERS OF CITIZENS LACK THE NECESSARY LITERACY SKILLS

Good literacy skills are essential for improving people's lives and promoting strong and sustainable economic growth in Europe. Literacy empowers the individual to develop capacities for reflection, critique and empathy and is core to personal wellbeing. Indeed, without an increase in the variety of skills and consequent productivity of the working-age population, Europe's demographic and socio-economic challenges cannot be met. Poor literacy is solvable, with countries that have already adopted a variety of approaches to improving levels having seen positive, cost-effective results. But much more needs to be done.

A startlingly large number of Europeans do not have a sufficient level of literacy. National and international surveys show that roughly one in five adults and one in five 15-year-olds lack the reading skills they need to fully function in modern society.

Better literacy for
INDIVIDUALS

- Help overcome poverty of aspiration
- More empowerment
- Higher earnings

- More civic participation
- Improved educational & employment opportunities

Literacy is a fundamental requirement for citizens of all ages in modern Europe, and changes in the nature of work, the economy, and society more generally are making it even more important. Literacy is a big deal because:

- the labour market requires ever higher literacy skills;
- social and civic participation are becoming more literacy-dependent in the digital world;
- digitisation is changing the very nature of literacy and making it more important, since social, civic and economic interaction and communication are centred on the written word;
- the population is ageing and their literacy skills, including digital literacy skills, need updating;
- poverty and low literacy are locked in a vicious circle, each fueling the other; and
- growing mobility and migration are making literacy more and more multilingual, combining a wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

We are living a paradox: while reading and writing are more important and relevant than ever before in the context of our digitised world, our literacy skills are not keeping up. We urgently need to reverse this alarming situation.

INVESTMENT IN LITERACY IS CRUCIAL FOR THE WELLBEING OF CITIZENS AND MAKE ECONOMIC SENSE

Investments to improve literacy among citizens of all ages make economic sense, producing tangible gains for individuals and for society, adding up to billions of euros in the long run. Improving literacy is an essential precondition for the EU's future economic growth and for the wellbeing of its citizens. And beyond material gains, we must not forget that being literate lies at the core of being human. While self-confidence may not have a quantifiable economic value, it stimulates economic and social success through the aspiration to be successful.



Some widely-shared misconceptions exist about the nature, size and scope of the literacy issue and its solutions across Europe. These hamper literacy development as they are to be found among individuals and policy makers alike. For us to achieve real progress, we first need to dispel these myths.

DISPELLING MISCONCEPTIONS

MISCONCEPTIONS	THE FACTS
'Low literacy is something that happens in developing countries, surely not in Europe!?'	One in five European 15-year-olds and almost one in five adults lack the literacy skills required to successfully function in a modern society.
'Low literacy is a problem imported by migrants, not for those born and bred in European countries.'	The vast majority of children and adults with poor literacy skills were born and raised in the country they live in, and speak its language of instruction as their mother tongue.
'Poor literacy only affects those on the margins of society.'	One in five adults in Europe lack sufficient literacy skills and most of them are employed.
'Some people just cannot learn to read and write.'	Almost everyone who struggles with reading and writing could develop adequate literacy skills, given the right support. Only people with the most severe cognitive difficulties are incapable of developing functional literacy.
'Schools are responsible for teaching children to read and write.'	Schools play an important role but are not the only ones responsible. A broad range of actors shape literacy development, from parents and peers to health services and others. After formal education, employers have a vital role to play, with positive gains for both employer and employee.
'Dyslexia is an incurable condition so there's nothing we can do about it.'	Today's children are increasingly expected to progress in reading and writing at a standard speed and through one methodology. Struggling readers are often diagnosed as dyslexic. The diagnosis should be 'struggling reader', and the focus should be on solving the problem. Every child can, in principle, learn to read and write.
'Improving struggling readers' skills is too time-consuming, too difficult and too expensive to be worth the effort.'	Programmes aimed at improving struggling readers' skills have a high rate of success, and are extremely cost-effective. This investment pays for itself dozens and possibly even hundreds of times over during the course of an individual's life.
'Parents have no influence on their children's literacy development after the early years.'	Parents' attitudes and literacy practices have a very significant influence on their children's literacy development, all the way through secondary school. Interventions to improve parents' support skills have a large impact on child literacy.
'It's too late to do anything about literacy problems after children finish primary school.'	Millions of children enter secondary school able to read, but not well enough to do well in school. With specialised support, these young people can develop good or even excellent literacy skills.

FRAMING THE SOLUTIONS:

A CO-OPERATIVE APPROACH

CREATING CO-OWNERSHIP

Literacy has for too long been viewed as solely a matter for the education system. Low literacy is a societal problem with huge consequences for our ambitions and strategies on public health, employment, digital participation, e-Government, civic participation, poverty and social inclusion. Achieving real improvement in literacy requires political ownership and co-operation across the policy spectrum and beyond. Literacy strategies should be co-owned across society and government, should cover all ages, and should be independent of political timetables.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

Europe should raise its aspirations, and aim for functional literacy for all citizens. This means committing to a vision in which anything less than 100 % functional literacy is unacceptable. Governments, schools, employers and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) should commit themselves to reaching this goal. As part of this process:

- partnerships for literacy development should be created between societal and educational players;
- EU Member States should adopt comprehensive literacy strategies, based on joined-up policy-making across departments and organisations, positioning literacy not just at the heart of education but at the heart of all relevant public policies;
- these strategies should span all ages, starting in early childhood, going across school years and including adults;
- raising awareness of the problem and sweeping away the taboo around poor literacy should be part of the strategic effort, which should include surveys of the population's skills levels and monitoring progress;
- these strategies should have adequate budgets and long-term frameworks for national, regional and local action; and
- political commitment from the top is needed to put the issue on the agenda, keep the issue visibly alive across society, and maintain momentum for initiatives on the ground.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Based on our review of the evidence, the High Level Group of Experts on Literacy has produced a number of recommendations. We have three overarching recommendations that apply to all age groups:

1. Create a more literate environment

A literate environment requires books and other reading materials to be easily available at home, in schools, libraries and beyond, on paper and online. This includes, for instance, libraries in unconventional settings such as shopping centres or train stations. Parents need help to improve their skills and confidence to engage their children in language development and reading for pleasure. Reading promotion policies should be encouraged to stimulate reading and access to books, by organising media campaigns, book fairs, public reading events, competitions, and book awards. We need to shift the mindset of all players in society – from parents to policy makers, from social and medical services to educational players, and from individuals themselves to businesses – so that they see their engagement is crucial to promoting reading and writing, and that everyone can learn to read and write with the right encouragement and support.

2. Raise the level of literacy teaching and provide more reading support

Raising the quality of teaching begins with the introduction of high qualification requirements for all teachers. Initial and continuous professional development of all teachers should cover literacy and digital aspects explicitly. Teacher education should also include a wide range of literacy-specific teaching strategies, assessment techniques, and methods for diagnosing problems in reading and writing.

Higher quality teaching can help significantly reduce the literacy problem. The keys are to:

- ensure teaching is an attractive profession and recruit teachers selectively;
- give teachers a high degree of autonomy; and
- ensure teachers use that autonomy well by giving them excellent training, both initially and throughout their careers.

To support them in this task, we need to:

- include a wide range of literacy-specific teaching strategies, including digital aspects, assessment techniques, methods for diagnosing problems in reading and writing, in initial education and professional development of teachers of primary, secondary and adult education and improve teachers' capacity to communicate with families to inform and complement school work;

- improve and raise awareness of the early diagnosis of sensory, language, and learning difficulties in order to provide more effective educational support addressing all reading and writing difficulties;
- give incentives and support for the creation of organisation-wide literacy strategies in schools, explicitly committing the whole school community to raise the level of achievement in reading and writing;
- develop a coherent literacy curriculum from early childhood education to adult learning;
- cover the full range of reading materials, ranging from electronic to print, from canonical literature to newspapers and comic books;
- allow adequate time for reading instruction and for free reading activities, allowing students to choose their reading material and set their own pace while reading;
- set age-related standards and provide assessment tools to help teachers measure progress and identify extra support needs, and make sure this support is available;
- mainstream reading literacy across the curriculum, addressing reading aspects in the curricula for other subjects throughout secondary education, whether academic or vocational; and
- develop a curriculum for adult literacy. For adults, curricula should focus on acquiring literacy skills through practical, real-life and/or workplace examples.

3. Increase participation and inclusion

To achieve fairer and more inclusive participation in literacy learning we need to close the following gaps:

The socio-economic gap: poor and disadvantaged children generally have lower literacy levels. The gap caused by social disadvantage is the most significant literacy gap Europe needs to address. More equitable education systems, ensuring access to affordable, good quality early childhood education and care (ECEC), avoiding early differentiation of students by ability in different educational tracks, avoiding class repetition, and providing all the necessary support and material for children's needs in education (for example, by funding books, clothes and lunches), can help narrow this gap.

The migrant gap: many, but not all migrants have lower literacy levels in the language of the country they have moved to. To address this, newly-arrived migrants, adults and children alike, must have access to language and literacy screening and flexible language learning opportunities, tailored to individual needs. Outreach activities should be implemented for migrant parents, involving the school community. Bilingualism should be treated as an asset for further language development, encouraging language maintenance and pride for all linguistic minorities.

The gender gap: literacy levels are lower and decreasing for boys in adolescence. The gender gap is primarily a motivation and engagement gap. Addressing it requires more appealing materials and opening up to digital resources to make reading and writing relevant to boys' preferences, more male role-models engaging in literacy, and attracting more men into the educational profession.

The digital gap: not only do the poor and disadvantaged access the Internet less, but when they do, it is less for learning and more for entertainment. Moreover, for many children there is a gap between literacy practice in school, where they use print-based media, and digital reading and writing at home. For adults, improving literacy skills in the context of developing their digital skills can bring triple dividends: developing digital skills themselves; embedding the necessary literacy skills gives access to the written world of texting, e-mailing, etc.; and instilling critical skills to evaluate the sources of online information.

Therefore, more digital and non-formal digital practices should be used in classrooms and in adult education in order to boost motivation of learners to engage in reading and writing. Teachers at all levels should be equipped with skills to integrate ICT in the teaching of literacy. Publishers and software producers should provide varied digital reading environments, allowing for more use of ICT for learning – not only for entertainment.

ADDRESSING SPECIFIC LITERACY ISSUES:

LITERACY FOR ALL AGES

Each age group – broadly: young children, primary age children, adolescents and adults has its own, distinct challenges in literacy acquisition. The report also addresses specific issues pertaining to these age groups in detail. Our recommendations per age group are as follows:

YOUNG CHILDREN

1. Stimulate and support the family

Implement family literacy programmes to improve parents' literacy and parenting skills and create a culture of reading for pleasure. Offer language courses for parents who do not speak the language of the school.

Co-operate with businesses, NGOs and family support services (e.g. health services) to reach out to parents and engage them in literacy programmes.

Equip those responsible for family support services to assist both children and parents in their literacy development.

2. Improve the quality of ECEC and provide free access

Increasing investment in high quality ECEC is one of the best investments Member States can make in Europe's future human capital. Free ECEC should be available to all children. 'High quality' means highly-qualified staff and a curriculum focused on language development through play with an emphasis on language, psychomotor and social development, and emerging literacy skills, building on children's natural developmental stages.

3. Ensure early screening for emerging literacy problems

Ensure that all young children have their hearing, eyesight and speech tested at the appropriate ages, and that problems are corrected as soon as possible. Implement a system of early screening for language and pre-literacy skills and for identifying and reaching out to those who risk lagging behind or being excluded.

4. Co-operate among stakeholders from a child-centred perspective

Stimulate co-operation between ECEC institutions, parents, health services, libraries and other organisations that are central to the lives of young children and their development. Support the establishment and expansion of book-gifting programmes.

PRIMARY SCHOOL YEARS

1. Increase the number of specialist reading teachers and promote qualifications for all primary school teachers

Create the role of specialist reading teachers, acting as key resource persons for other primary and secondary teachers in improving literacy. Develop measures to raise the standing and attractiveness of the profession of primary school teachers, e.g. through salaries, good working conditions and high qualification requirements.

Ensure that all newly-qualified teachers obtain a Master's degree, with competences such as critically evaluating literacy research and new instructional methods, tailoring instruction to student language diversity and engaging parents in their children's reading and writing work at school.

2. Early intervention

Establish age-related minimum standards for literacy achievement, supported by assessment in order to address pupils' individual literacy needs early. Provide low-performing pupils and schools with the assistance they need, as early as possible. Support parents to understand learning difficulties and to collaborate better with schools in addressing them. Change the mindset on dyslexia, shifting the emphasis from medical to educational support for struggling readers.

3. Inspire the motivation to read

Ensure that curricula and teaching methods focus on reading and writing motivation combined with a high expectation of success, in order to avoid learning failure and to build up confidence. Provide school and classroom libraries with reading materials that are attractive and challenging for all age groups and different interests. Use ICT tools and digital reading both in schools and in family activities at home. Develop campaigns and programmes that offer resources, support and reading volunteers to disadvantaged parents and pupils in the context of family literacy programmes.

ADOLESCENTS

1. Make every teacher a literacy teacher

Adapt teaching approaches so that reading and writing are taught as essential skills across the secondary curriculum. Raise awareness among teachers about the importance of literacy skills for all courses, in order to stimulate all teachers to see reading and writing as part of their responsibility. Mainstream reading literacy across the curriculum, addressing reading aspects in the subject curricula throughout secondary education, whether academic or vocational.

2. Provide the right materials to motivate all readers, especially boys

Provide increasingly diverse reading materials, from comic books to canonical literature, from SMS to electronic books. Include digital reading as part of the norm in schools across Europe. Provide language and literature teachers with skills to use more ICT in their classes.

3. Stimulate school-business co-operation

Promote, stimulate and facilitate co-operation between schools and businesses, providing pupils with the mindset that literacy skills are essential for personal development and for getting and keeping a job.

ADDRESSING SPECIFIC LITERACY ISSUES: LITERACY FOR ALL AGES

ADULTS

1. Establish systems to monitor adult literacy levels and practices

Develop data on levels of literacy achievement among the adult population, as well as national and regional surveys and monitoring to identify groups in need of particular attention and to plan future strategies. Within this, establish a specific focus on the literacy and numeracy levels of disaffected young people and of offenders, both adult and juvenile. Use the results of international surveys, such as the forthcoming Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), to stimulate policies. Share best practices and create demand among players not yet involved.

2. Communicate widely about the need for adult literacy development

Intensify policy and enhance strategies directed at poor literacy among adults. Use direct and indirect communication to encourage adults to acknowledge their literacy problems and then take steps to improve their literacy skills. The media should break the taboo associated with low literacy, targeting both native EU citizens and migrants. Societal awareness needs to be raised: work with NGOs, media, employers, societal organisations and celebrities to make both the literacy problem and its solutions visible.

3. Strengthen the profession of adult literacy teachers

Raise the professional profile of adult literacy teachers by providing tailored initial and continuing pedagogical training, good career prospects, and adequate remuneration. Produce appropriate teaching and learning materials and make them available free of charge. Design curricula and assessment methods sensitive to the needs of the adult learner. Support volunteers in gaining pedagogical skills and joining programmes aimed at reaching and teaching adults with reading difficulties.

4. Ensure broad and varied access to learning opportunities

Provide adults with a variety of personalised learning opportunities, of adequate length and pace, at convenient times, in convenient settings as well as with ICT support, and preferably related to their life or work context. Use national and regional legislation to finance, mandate and support increased access to high quality adult literacy courses. Co-operate across government departments and with local and regional authorities, business and civil society to reduce institutional barriers. Co-operate with employers to promote literacy among their workers and provide incentives for social partners to take ownership of developing literacy programmes at work. Encourage providers of vocational education and training, and vocational teachers and trainers, to embed literacy instruction within their programmes. Recognise and validate non-formal and informal learning, putting a premium on adults' achievements in experiential learning and tacit knowledge consolidation. Develop effective programmes for improving the literacy of disaffected young adults and offenders with low literacy skills.

COPIES OF THE FULL REPORT CAN BE OBTAINED FROM
<http://ec.europa.eu/education/literacy>

European Commission

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