

# **Family literacy in Europe: using parental support initiatives to enhance early literacy development**

## **Executive summary**

### **1.1 Background and objectives**

- 1.1.1 This is the Executive Summary of the European Commission report "Family literacy in Europe: using parental support initiatives to enhance early literacy development". As highlighted by evidence from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Progress in International Reading Study (PIRLS), there is a clear link between poor literacy and factors such as socio-economic background and migrant status. While there are a wide range of school-based initiatives designed to reduce the impact of such factors on literacy acquisition, there is also a growing emphasis on programmes seeking to improve parents' ability to support child literacy development. Such "family literacy" initiatives take a variety of forms, including shared parent-child book reading programmes and book gifting schemes.
- 1.1.2 This report provides an overview of research, strategies, policies, initiatives and programmes in the field of family literacy. In particular, it analyses the evidence on the effectiveness of a broad range of family literacy interventions, placing special emphasis on those targeted at disadvantaged families. The report highlights good practice by providing case studies of unique and successful programmes throughout Europe. Furthermore, this report analyses the family literacy policy-making process in a number of Member States, providing evidence of policy successes and challenges through interviews with policymakers and other policy stakeholders. The aim of these investigations is to provide the Commission and Member States with practical information and analyses which can serve as a basis for future policy and programme design.

### **1.2 Key findings**

- 1.2.1 The key finding of this report is that family literacy programmes are effective, both in improving child literacy and in improving parental support skills. We arrive at this conclusion based on our review of six recent meta-analyses of family literacy interventions, all of which found positive effects on child literacy development. These findings support those of the still small body of methodologically robust quantitative research on European family literacy programmes. We will look first at the meta-analytic evidence.

- 1.2.2 In quantifying programme effectiveness, meta-analyses use a measure known as effect size, which is a numerical estimate of the magnitude of an intervention's impact (Coe, 2002). An effect size of 1.0 is equivalent to an increase of one standard deviation. This would be considered an extremely large impact – the equivalent of advancing a child's achievement by two to three years or improving the rate of learning by 50% (Hattie, 2009). As Hattie (1999, 2009) has shown, the average (mean) effect size for educational interventions, the vast majority of which occur in schools, is 0.4. Most interventions have less impact than this: the most common effect size is 0.3, with the next most common being 0.2. These are followed by 0.4, then 0.1. This indicates that the majority of educational interventions have relatively limited impact. For example, the effect size of giving homework to primary school pupils is 0.15 (Hattie, 2009), while reducing class sizes from 23 to 15 yields an effect of 0.30 (Hattie, 1999).
- 1.2.3 The meta-analyses reviewed for this report found impacts of family literacy interventions ranging from a low of 0.25 to a high of 0.68. Five of the six meta-analyses found effect sizes greater than 0.3, with four finding effects greater than 0.4. In three of the six meta-analyses, the effect size is greater than 0.5. These findings suggest that family literacy interventions have a relatively large impact on child literacy acquisition.
- 1.2.4 Table 1.1 summarises the effect size found by each meta-analysis included in our review. For example, the bottom row presents the results of Sénéchal and Young (2008), who found an effect size of 0.68.
- 1.2.5 Columns 3 and 4 of this table illustrate the impacts of particular effect sizes. For example, Column 3 shows that with an effect size of 0.68, approximately 75% of the children in a control group (i.e. not receiving the intervention) would score below the average child participating in a family literacy intervention. That is, the effect of the programme is the equivalent of moving a child from the 50th percentile to the 76th. This is a large gain. Still focusing on Sénéchal and Young's meta-analysis, Column 4 shows that the average family literacy intervention group score (i.e. the 13th highest score in a group of 25) would be equivalent to the sixth highest score in a comparable control group.

Table 1.1 Family literacy effect sizes, and gains expected from these effect sizes

Study	Effect size	Approximate percentage of control group who would be below the average person in the experimental group	Approximate rank of person in a control group of 25 who would be equivalent to the average person in the experimental group
van Steensel et al (forthcoming 2011), How effective are family literacy programmes? Results of a meta-analysis	0.25	60%	11th
Manz et al (2010), A descriptive review and meta-analysis of family-based emergent literacy interventions: To what extent is the research applicable to low-income, ethnic-minority or linguistically-diverse young children?	0.33	63%	10th
Nye et al (2006), Approaches to parent involvement for improving the academic performance of elementary school age children	0.42	66%	9th
Erion (2006), Parent tutoring: A meta-analysis	0.55	71%	8th
Mol et al (2008), Added value of dialogic parent-child book readings: A meta-analysis	0.59	73%	7th
Sénéchal and Young (2008), The effect of family literacy interventions on children's acquisition of reading from kindergarten to grade 3: A meta-analytic review	0.68	75%	6th

(NB: Van Steensel et al found no positive effect in randomised studies. In contrast, Nye et al found an effect size of 0.42, even though their review included only randomised studies.)

1.2.6 The key question in deciding whether or not to employ a particular intervention is not "Does it work?" Most educational interventions work to some degree (Hattie, 2009). The key question is: "How well does an intervention work in comparison to other viable alternatives?" The meta-analytic evidence indicates that family literacy programmes have a greater impact than most educational interventions. This impact is heightened by consideration of the reduced opportunity cost associated with family literacy programmes. While school-based interventions tend to be "either-or" propositions – if one intervention is being implemented in a classroom, others cannot be – family interventions (the vast majority of which occur outside of school hours) are more likely to complement than to compete with school activities.

1.2.7 In our assessment, the meta-analytic evidence therefore strongly supports the argument that all Member States' child literacy strategies should include a family literacy component, and that policymakers should more actively support the widespread proliferation of family literacy interventions.

- 1.2.8 Primary research data also support this conclusion – albeit more tentatively, given the limited European evidence base. Only three countries – Turkey, the Netherlands and the UK – have produced a significant body of quantitative research measuring the effectiveness of family literacy programmes. In the UK, the evidence suggests that government-funded family literacy interventions have been successful at improving child literacy amongst children in disadvantaged households (Brooks et al, 1996, 1998, 2008). In the Netherlands, the evidence indicates that the most extensive initiative, Opstap, initially failed to produce the desired gains (Eldering and Vedder, 1999). However, a modified programme, Opstap Opnieuw, has had some success, though not for all target groups (van Tuijl et al, 2001). In particular, the programme has led to gains for Turkish-Dutch children, but not for Moroccan-Dutch. Reasons for this discrepancy include the poorer literacy skills typical of Moroccan-Dutch parents, in comparison with their Turkish-Dutch peers.
- 1.2.9 Potentially the most valuable primary research comes from Turkey, where researchers have generated a relatively large body of longitudinal evidence of the effectiveness of two programmes: the Turkish Early Enrichment Project (TEEP) and its successor, the Mother-Child Education Programme (MOCEP). This research finds strong evidence of long-term cognitive and non-cognitive gains for disadvantaged children participating in these programmes (Bekman, 2003; Kağıtçıbaşı et al, 2001, 2005). These include gains in literacy skills and improvements in a range of other educational areas. They also include long-term returns to society, such as better employment outcomes in adulthood (Kağıtçıbaşı et al, 2005). Evidence suggests that long-term gains in child literacy are particularly likely when family literacy programmes emphasise the importance of providing parents with training not just in educational support skills but also in socio-emotional support skills (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Kağıtçıbaşı et al, 1992, 2001, 2005; Heckman, 2009). It is our own assessment, based on analysis of the evidence, that such programmes should be widely available in Member States, and targeted at disadvantaged households.
- 1.2.10 Other types of initiatives also appear to produce gains, both in child literacy and in other areas. For example, research on the impact of book gifting programmes such as Bookstart on child literacy is limited, but does suggest sustained literacy improvements (Wade and Moore, 1998; Moore and Wade, 2003). In their meta-analysis, Sénéchal and Young (2008) found particularly large benefits from programmes in which parents were trained to teach specific literacy skills to their children.
- 1.2.11 Looking specifically at benefits for disadvantaged families, the British, Dutch and Turkish programmes discussed above were targeted specifically at educationally disadvantaged and/or migrant families, and produced positive effects for most participants. However, the meta-analytic evidence on disadvantage produces

conflicting findings. Mol et al (2008) and Manz et al (forthcoming 2011) both found smaller gains for disadvantaged children. In contrast, Sénéchal and Young (2008) found that intervention impacts were no lower for children of low socio-economic status or those experiencing reading problems or considered to be at risk of such problems. Research on implementation quality has indicated that disadvantaged families often find it difficult to implement family literacy programmes as intended by programme developers (McElvaney and Artelt, 2009; van Steensel et al, forthcoming 2011). The policy and programme leaders we interviewed for this project suggested that disadvantaged families benefited from programmes with more highly structured educational models: the increased structure ensured that parents had clear guidelines about tasks and techniques, and could readily understand how to perform the parent-child literacy tasks required of them.

1.2.12 Thus far, our discussion of effectiveness has focused only on quantifiably measured child literacy gains. This provides a somewhat limited understanding of the impacts of parental support programmes. Particularly when targeted at disadvantaged families, family literacy interventions appear to produce an important range of additional benefits that may support long-term child literacy development, including improved social and cultural capital, improved parental self-confidence and self-efficacy (Swain et al, 2009), and improved child self-concept as a reader and learner (Desforges and Abouchar, 2003). Policy stakeholders interviewed in the course of our research observed that even in programmes in which it was not a core objective, parental empowerment of low-income, poorly educated and/or migrant mothers was a common outcome of family literacy initiatives. There is also evidence of the broader societal impacts of family literacy interventions. A recent Social Return on Investment (SROI) of Bookstart in the England produced an estimate of savings to society over the next 37 years of £614 million on an investment of £9 million – i.e. £25 saved for every £1 invested.

1.2.13 A core objective of Bookstart and similar initiatives is to encourage a celebration of reading for pleasure. This is also the aim of initiatives such as “Every Czech Reads to Kids”. Such programmes seek to contribute to a cultural shift in which reading and learning become seen by all families, including disadvantaged ones, as enjoyable parts of daily life. Initiatives such as these can play a key role in contributing to Europe's necessary transition to a knowledge economy. This ambition, advanced in many European and national skills strategies, is impossible without an improvement in literacy skills and, in particular, a closing of the literacy gap.

### **1.3 Policy context, influences and obstacles**

1.3.1 In Section 1.2, we presented key findings from our review of family literacy research. In Sections 1.3-1.5, we summarise key messages from our own research of family

literacy initiatives. This research consisted of semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted with policymakers and other policy stakeholders in a number of Member States. In addition, we conducted case studies of successful and innovative family literacy programmes in the following countries: Germany, Ireland, The Netherlands, Norway, Romania, Turkey and the UK.

1.3.2 Despite increasing interest, family literacy remains a marginal field, even in countries where parental support policies and programmes are most developed. A particular challenge is the lack of a clear policy home for family literacy programmes. Our research found that institutional barriers frequently limit the development of family literacy initiatives. In many countries parents are acknowledged in principle as the "first teachers"; however, in practice, school systems are often indifferent or even hostile to the potential of family literacy interventions to complement school-based literacy strategies. One exception is Malta, where the new national literacy strategy includes a family literacy component.

1.3.3 A primary cause of such indifference is the complexity inherent in developing and administering policies and programmes focused on families rather than on institutional structures such as schools. The focus on families requires "joined-up", cross-departmental policy making. While our research found many barriers to such cross-departmental work, we also found examples of success. For example, the Netherlands has made significant strides in crafting "childhood-wide" policies which rely on cooperative efforts from a number of departments or ministries, particularly those responsible for education and health. In the Netherlands, family literacy programmes have successfully worked with Health Services to ensure greater coverage of family literacy policy. Likewise, Bookstart in the UK utilises home health visitors to provide free book packs to children, while Buchstart in Hamburg distributes book packs via paediatricians.

1.3.4 In part due to the lack of a clear policy home for family literacy interventions, coupled with the challenges associated with cross-departmental policy-making, family literacy policy would likely benefit from the presence in Member States of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) specifically charged with advancing the interests of the field. We found evidence of such benefits in Ireland, Turkey, the Netherlands and the UK, where family literacy programmes have gained from the presence of NGOs serving as policy champions. However, in each of these countries, the NGOs in question have championed not family literacy in general, but one specific type of programme. For example, in Ireland the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) supports family literacy programmes which include a focus on both child literacy development and parental literacy development. In Turkey, the Mother-Child Education Foundation (AÇEV) engages in advocacy work and coordinates a number of programmes, including the Mother-Child Education Programme (MOCEP)

and the Father Support programme. However, in no Member State did we find an organisation, whether governmental or non-governmental, working to advance the interests of the field of family literacy as a whole. Likewise, we found little evidence of coherent, overarching family literacy strategies. The emphasis is on individual programmes or types of programmes, rather than a coherent mix of offerings.

## **1.4 Programme sustainability, expansion and transfer**

- 1.4.1 In addition to a lack of policy strategy and vision, our research found a number of barriers to programme success and sustainability. Policy stakeholders emphasised that programmes should be tailored to meet the particular needs of participating groups. Disadvantage is heterogeneous, and initiatives are not necessarily as effective with all types of families, as was found in the Netherlands with Opstap Opnieuw (Eldering and Vedder, 1999).
- 1.4.2 In the Netherlands, an established programme – HIPPY – was transferred into the country, but rolled out without sufficient evaluation (Eldering and Vedder, 1999). The Mother-Child Education Programme (MOCEP) has been transferred to Belgium (French-speaking), France, Cyprus, Germany and Switzerland, and a number of Middle Eastern countries, with apparent success (Bekman et al, 2010). Programme leaders and researchers associated with MOCEP emphasise that it is necessary to analyse the needs, beliefs and characteristics of the new target population, while also analysing the objectives and aims of the old and new initiatives. According to analysts of MOCEP, successful transfer can be credited to what we will call the 4 P's: participant characteristics; pilots; partnerships; and project teams.
- 1.4.3 Regarding participant characteristics, cultural validity is a key concern (see also Manz et al, forthcoming 2011). Programmes tend to be more successfully transferred when the new target population has similar characteristics to those of the programme's "home" population; however, they need not be the same ethnic group or otherwise "identical". The next factor is piloting. Ideally, transferred family literacy interventions should have two pilots: the first to learn what adjustments need to be made in order to meet participant needs, and the second to evaluate effectiveness.
- 1.4.4 The third "P", Partnership, was cited both as a key to programme transfer and to programme sustainability in general. Partnerships were highlighted as important not only by MOCEP but by a number of other programmes we analysed. Leaders of Bookstart, for example, insisted that effective collaboration – whether with government departments, NGOs or the private sector, or a combination of the three – is a prerequisite for programme success.
- 1.4.5 MOCEP's final "P" concerns the Project team. Particular emphasis was placed on the importance of high quality, well trained staff. Stakeholders from MOCEP and other

programmes indicated that a reliance on volunteers has a tendency to negatively affect quality and sustainability.

- 1.4.6 Looking more generally at sustainability, our research found four key factors shaping long-term programme success: funding, programme quality, partnerships, and research-based evidence of success. Some programmes also cited a fifth factor for sustainability: media support. Stakeholders in a number of Member States suggested that many good programmes, which took considerable time and resource to develop, have suffered or disappeared because of a dependency on short-term grants which require frequent renewal and are subject to numerous external policy pressures. The short-term nature of much family literacy funding is representative of the general lack of overall policy vision for the field. Member States tend to conceptualise family literacy unconnected programmes, rather than as a broad-ranging but ultimately coherent policy field made up of initiatives which complement each other, while also complementing broader literacy strategies.

## **1.5 The role of research: evidence-based policymaking**

- 1.5.1 Research evidence was cited by programme leaders and policymakers as key to programme sustainability, expansion and transfer. For example, when family literacy advocates seek to launch versions of Bookstart in other Member States, they often refer to quantitatively measured benefits found in UK studies (e.g. Wade and Moore, 1998; Moore and Wade, 2003). In general, however, there is a strong need for a much larger body of high-quality European research in this field, particularly outside Turkey, the Netherlands and the UK. A greater number of methodologically robust studies of family literacy provision would not only improve our understanding of the degree to which such initiatives work, it would also enhance our understanding of how, why and for whom programmes work, and under what conditions. A larger European evidence base would also reduce the current over-reliance on North American research. Particularly important research gaps exist with regard to issues including: implementation quality; cultural validity and the impact of disadvantage on programme implementation; and the comparative effectiveness of different programme types for different participant groups. There is also an increasing need for research on the potential uses and impacts of digital technologies in family literacy interventions.

## **1.6 Recommendations**

- 1.6.1 In order to facilitate pan-European sharing and transfer of good programme practice, EU-level funding, either from structural funds or from the Lifelong Learning Programme (or its successor), should be made available to support the development

of Peer Learning Activities, European networks and other recognised means for sharing good practice. Funding and opportunities should also be made available for family literacy experts to share knowledge and messages with policymakers in related fields, particularly school education.

- 1.6.2 All national child literacy strategies should include family literacy strategies. As part of all child literacy strategies, schools should be encouraged to utilise family literacy initiatives as a complement to in-class literacy programmes. In addition, policymakers should view the different components of their child literacy strategies as complementary rather than competing. For example, funds should not be diverted from family literacy initiatives in order to fund interventions such as Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), as has occurred in the Netherlands.
- 1.6.3 Policymakers and policy stakeholders should develop coherent national family literacy policies which include a range of complementary programme types meeting a range of targeted and universal needs. In particular, Member States should support the development and sustainable funding of three key programme types, adopted to local contexts:
- a) universal book gifting or "celebration of reading" initiatives, such as Bookstart and "Every Czech Reads To Kids", which encourage the development of a culture of reading and learning that is essential in modern knowledge societies;
  - b) national family literacy initiatives targeted at disadvantaged families and modelled on Turkey's Mother-Child Education Programme. These programmes should aim to improve child literacy and socio-emotional development, while also (and in part through) developing parents' ability to support their child's cognitive and non-cognitive development. In some Member States, such programmes may also seek to develop parents' literacy skills;
  - c) Shorter-term, local, targeted initiatives focused only on child literacy and parental support of child literacy. Examples of such programmes include dialogic reading programmes for younger children, and the successful literacy skills training programmes highlighted by Sénéchal and Young (2008).
- 1.6.4 In most Member States, the field of family literacy will continue to be overlooked by policymakers and thus will not develop sufficiently under current institutional structures, which tend to encourage either child-focused, school-focused or adult-focused approaches. Member States should therefore encourage the establishment of non-departmental organisations – for example, NGOs – charged specifically with the support and advocacy of the full range of potentially valuable family literacy interventions. In the field of adult literacy, similar organisations already exist, advancing policy and programme development in Member States such as Ireland (the

National Adult Literacy Agency, NALA) and the United Kingdom (the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, NIACE). Another potentially useful model is that adopted for adult learning in Norway, where Vox, the Norwegian Agency for Lifelong Learning, is part of the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, but operates with a great deal of autonomy.

- 1.6.5 Programme developers and researchers should devote greater attention to the cultural validity of initiatives, in order to ensure that they successfully meet the needs of low-income families and ethnically diverse target groups. Based on the available research evidence, the cognitive aspects of programmes targeted at disadvantaged families should be more highly structured than those developed for the general population.
- 1.6.6 European and national research councils and other grant-giving bodies should fund more European primary research and meta-analyses, in order to overcome the current over-reliance on non-European evidence.
- 1.6.7 In order to assess more fully the promising gains associated with programmes in which parents are trained to teach specific literacy skills to their children (Sénéchal and Young, 2008), Member States and/or the Commission should fund research and development projects investigating such programmes.