



National Economic and Social Forum: Literacy and Social Inclusion

Submission by Home, School Community Liaison National Team Initiatives undertaken to support the development of literacy The Home School Community Liaison Scheme January 2009

In this submission, the approach taken by the Home, School, Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL) in supporting literacy and the range of initiatives undertaken by HSCL coordinators in areas at risk of social exclusion are outlined.

The HSCL Scheme operates from the belief that literacy skills are essential so that a child can engage fully with and benefit from the education system. Pupils for whom reading is a struggle, for whom engagement with school texts is too challenging and undermining are more likely to either resort to disruptive behaviour or withdraw from the learning process. These pupils are less likely to be retained in the education system. In areas of social and economic disadvantage there are significant challenges which need to be addressed.

The HSCL Scheme is proactive in devising and implementing a wide range of initiatives aimed at involving parents in developing their child's literacy skills.

Outline of Submission

1. Literacy in the context of the DEIS programme
2. Goals of HSCL scheme
3. The philosophy of the HSCL scheme as manifested in Home Visitation
4. Literacy initiatives currently operated by coordinators
5. Challenges in effective delivery of HSCL literacy initiatives
6. Recommendations

DEIS

Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) – An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion states ***Targeted measures to be implemented to tackle problems of literacy and numeracy with particular reference to family literacy, early education, primary and second-level education and the role of the local authority library system***

HSCL coordinators are actively involved in promoting parental involvement in literacy initiatives in the home, at school and in the community

Underachievement in literacy

The HSCL team is aware both from current research and also from experience in schools that pupils in schools in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage underachieve in terms of literacy achievement as compared with pupils from more advantaged backgrounds. (Weir, 2001, Eivers, Shiel and Shortt, 2004, Department of Education and Science 2005).

Embedded in the HSCL Scheme is the belief that parents are the first and most important educators of their child. The role of parents in fostering and developing their child's literacy skills is central and this is where the HSCL scheme is focused. The HSCL Scheme aims to enable parents to become active participants in their children's learning and to stimulate learning in the home. A wide range of literacy initiatives is

implemented by coordinators, each adapted to the age and ability level of the pupil. Parents are invited to participate in these programmes both in the home and in school.

Goals of HSCL Scheme

The five goals of the scheme are as follows:

- Maximise participation in school
- Promote active cooperation between home, school and community agencies
- Raise awareness in parents of their capacity to enhance children's educational progress and assist them in developing relevant skills
- Enhance children's uptake of education and their retention in the education system
- Disseminate good practice

Recognising the parents as primary educator, the scheme reaches out to parents, inviting them to partnership with teachers in the education of their child. In particular the scheme works to support:

- Parents who may have been early school leavers
- Parents who may have had a negative experience of the school system
- Parents who may believe themselves to have been failures in the school system
- Parents who have little belief in their capacity to contribute to their child's education

Marginalised parents may not be familiar with the school system. Crozier (1997) argues that working-class parents defer to the professionalism of the teacher and do not see a role for themselves in the education of their children. The HSCL Scheme is directed towards building parents' knowledge of the education system and their confidence in supporting their child within it.

Rather than promote indiscriminate parental involvement, the HSCL scheme is 'a targeted and focused resource aimed at the most marginalised within the designated schools' (Conaty 2002, 29).

The coordinator does not work with children but works with the significant adults in the child's life-parents and teachers.

Home Visitation

Home visitation is at the heart of the HSCL scheme and coordinators are recommended to spend at least one-third of their time on home visitation. Home visitation is the outreach of the scheme to marginalised parents. The coordinator visits homes to build bonds of respect and trust between home and school. The coordinator goes to the home to listen to parents, to learn about their lives, their children and their difficulties.

The coordinator also goes to the home to affirm the parent

- as a person whose views the school values
- as a parent who is doing the best they can for their child
- as the first and most important educator of their child

The coordinator acknowledges the learning that takes place in the home and encourages the parent to talk to, play with, involve in household activities and, of course, share books with their child.

The coordinator brings information about what is happening in the school and how the school operates. Marginalised parents may not be familiar with the school system. Lareau (2000) proposes that working class parents, unlike their middle-class counterparts, believe that teachers are responsible for education. They seek little information about either the curriculum or the educational process and their criticisms of the school centre almost entirely on non-academic issues. This may inhibit their ability to support their child's learning.

The coordinator encourages, supports and facilitates parents in engaging with their child's learning at home and in becoming involved in school activities in support of their child's learning.

For many parents this can be a huge challenge. Often the first step back towards the classroom may be a non-threatening leisure course. As parents' confidence develops, more formal courses are offered both in curricular areas and in promoting personal development. Gradually, parents are encouraged into the classroom to engage in literacy and numeracy initiatives with pupils.

Literacy initiatives

Early language development: Pre Infant and Infant Programme

At pre-school and early primary level the focus is on early language skills as the foundation for later literacy achievement. Parents are invited into the school for a number of sessions before their child starts school. Information is given about how the school operates and the personnel working in the school. The focus is on preparing the child for school and on the importance of talking, listening, playing, enjoying nursery rhymes and colouring with the child.

Packs containing materials to support early learning are demonstrated and an opportunity is afforded to parents to work on the material with their child. Best practice is modelled for parents and then in a workshop setting parents work with their child each week using books, jigsaws, playdough, crayons and scissors. Parents are given a pack to take home to repeat the activity in the home setting.

Early Start Parent Courses

Courses are provided for parents of Early Start children in the following areas:

Fine Motor Skills and Hand-Eye Coordination

Language Acquisition

Pre-reading and Reading

Pre-Maths activities

Gross Motor Skills

Information, guidelines and advice are given to parents on how ordinary family activities such as cooking, meal times, walking, tidying, shopping and bed-time afford opportunities for learning. Explanatory videos may be shown. Children are then brought to the Parents' Room and parents engage in activities with their child during the sessions and appropriate Home Packs are brought home to consolidate the learning.

Storybook Reading

Parents are invited into the classroom to read stories to groups of children. Parents can choose from a range of attractive, colourful books and may choose a book well in advance if they are apprehensive about their own reading skills. A wide range of benefits can accrue from parents and children sharing books.

- Storybook reading by parents in school portrays the parent in the role of teacher.
- A parent reading to a child is perhaps modelling behaviour that many children may not be familiar with.
- Storybook reading between parent and child is an opportunity for bonding, for physical closeness and for building relationships.
- Stories can open new vistas to a child of an exciting world of wonder and of challenges
- Language acquisition, cognitive, emotional and imaginative development are fostered through storybook reading
- Storybook reading can foster a love of books, reading and learning and lay a foundation for lifelong learning

In homes in areas of disadvantage there may be few books, newspapers or any reading materials. Parents may be so taken up with the struggle to survive that education or reading may not even begin to feature. Difficulties in family life may be forgotten for a while, at least, when a parent and child sit close together and share the magic of a story. In addressing educational disadvantage Kellaghan (2002, 19) advocates approaches 'which target not only children's cognitive and social competence, but also parenting behaviours, family interactions and social support'. When parents and children share books with excitement and appreciation, instead of regarding it as an activity marginal to their lives, 'they help overcome a major risk-factor for failure at school' (Segel 1994, 78).

Language Development Programmes

Specific language development programmes such as Chatter Box: LDA: Conceptual Language or Stile LDA/SRA Reading Lab are implemented in the classroom by parents.

Workshops are provided for parents on how to stimulate their child's language development through simple seasonal activities in the outdoors.

The Home School coordinator supports work done by the Speech and Language therapist with parents and children in the classroom by visiting homes and encouraging parents to repeat the exercises with the children at home. A Speech and Language Therapist works with parents in the classroom modelling language development strategies and approaches and these are then implemented by parents working with groups of children in the classroom.

Literacy materials into the home

Gift packs of books, colouring books and colouring materials, information on the school and courses for parents are brought to homes by coordinators.

In the CLOVER project in Clondalkin which is funded by Clondalkin Partnership and Clondalkin Library gift packs of books and literacy materials are provided for pupils. These packs are provided at entry to school and at transfer to Senior School (Second Class) and are distributed by parents.

At entry to post-primary, gift packs may include a dictionary, atlas or set of mathematical instruments.

Books and accompanying CD's are brought to homes by parents as Home Visitors who talk to the parents about the book

Coordinators provide Toy Libraries from which parents may borrow toys or games. These are usually accompanied by prompt cards to stimulate conversation and language development.

As part of a structured literacy drive over a defined number of weeks, a variety of fun literacy materials such as work sheets are sent to homes to be worked by parents and pupils together.

Paired Reading

The Paired Reading strategy is explained to parents and guidelines on how Paired Reading operates are sent home to parents. The importance of reading for fun and enjoyment is emphasised. Parents are encouraged not to be critical or to over-correct their child's attempts. Topping (2003) notes the effectiveness of the Paired Reading approach, finding in published studies that Paired Readers progress at about 4.2 times 'normal rates' in reading accuracy during the initial period.

This initiative may be operated at Post-primary level also by parents and by Senior students such as Transition Year or Leaving Cert Applied students.

Literacy for Fun

A wide variety of literacy games are played in the classroom at work stations supervised by parents. These games are played initially with parents in the Parents' Room in order to familiarise parents with them. Pupils rotate among the tables and work on areas such as word-synthesis, word-analysis, phonics, spelling, vocabulary-building, grammar and story building.

Building literacy through computers

Parents are invited to work with pupils on computers, following a specific language or reading programme. Parents who are not computer-literate are afforded an opportunity to familiarize themselves with computer operation and can watch and share their child's learning.

Building Parents Knowledge of the school

At the beginning of the school year the content of the curriculum for that year is outlined to parents. Class meetings are organised to inform parents on specific aspects of the curriculum.

Workshops are arranged for parents to help them to understand the Letterland or Jollyphonic approach to teaching reading. Parents are also involved in Reading Recovery, First Steps and Literacy Lift Off activities, working with pupils in groups.

With support from HSCL coordinators, parents are involved in school policy-making, both organisational and curricular. Parents are taking an active part in a Literacy Committee in a post-primary school, promoting literacy development.

Courses and Classes for Parents

Leisure Classes

Courses are provided in areas such as Art, Crochet, Yoga. These are organised initially to bring parents into the school environment. Parents may have unhappy memories of their own school experience and coordinators work to ensure a warm, non-threatening experience for their return to the learning environment. These courses are a valuable means of re-engaging parents with their own and their children's education.

Curricular Courses

Courses which help bring parents closer to their children's learning are provided by coordinators.

They may be linked directly to classroom learning, using the children's text books and workbooks. Courses are provided in

- Maths
- Irish
- English
- Computers

Courses are provided also which cater for parents own learning needs. Courses leading to Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate, Third Level and FETAC qualification are facilitated.

Personal Development/Parenting Courses

Coordinators build a personal relationship with marginalised parents. They actively encourage and support them in attending these courses which offer parents hope in empowering themselves to take control of their own lives and return to education or to the workforce.

Class novels are read simultaneously by parents and pupils, both at home and in school. Craft activities based on the novel have been undertaken by parents and students together. Parents come into the classroom to discuss the novel with the pupils and to engage in fun activities based on the novel.

Storybags

Sacks containing books, games and suitable props are created by parents. Puppet figures may be knit or crocheted. Additional materials can be made or bought. Parents may keep them for their child or donate them to the school. Storybags are also bought commercially. Parents go into the classroom to tell the story using the props. Some parents visit neighbouring schools with the storybags and so increase in confidence. Storybags are a fun approach to highlighting the wide range of learning from books.

Writing initiatives

Parents work with their child on the First Steps programme and the Write-a-book project.

A Class Mascot is taken home so that the family members can be involved in including it in recording news of family events.

Grandparents and children together compile a Grandparents Book recording events from the Grandparents life and times. The book is given as a gift to the Grandparent at a special ceremony in the school.

Adopt a Book

A book is chosen and adopted by a cluster of schools. Pupils, parents and significant community members are invited to read the book. This initiative is developed through the HSCL Local Committee. Family Learning projects, Youth Groups, Drama Groups adopt the books also. The book is publicised and celebrated in the community e.g. at St. Patrick's Day Parade. Coordinators liaise with VEC and with Library service for funding.

Parent involvement in Junior Certificate School Programme

Coordinators promote and support parent involvement in JCSP initiatives such as Reading Challenge, Word Millionaire and Keywords. Parents are invited to the school to celebrate their child's achievements.

Community Links

Coordinators work closely with VEC and avail of VEC tutors and VEC teaching hours to provide courses. Coordinators direct parents to courses provide by VEC. If a relationship has been established and if a parent indicates an interest in improving literacy skills, a coordinator may direct him/her towards NALA services. Coordinators facilitate FETAC certification of courses. Coordinators also liaise with the Library service. Coordinators avail of local libraries as a source of information and books. They facilitate parent introductory visits and talks. The Library is frequently used as a venue for community celebration thus raising awareness in parents of the facilities provide by the library.

Challenges

In schools in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage there are significant challenges to be addressed in involving parents in supporting their children's literacy development:

- Parents' apprehensions and fears about involvement in school.

It is only by constant encouragement, support and reassurance that these parents can be enticed into participation in school activities.

- Parents' lack of confidence in their ability to contribute to their child's education.

It is necessary to support parents in building their self-esteem, to offer opportunities for parent development and to facilitate parents in availing of such opportunities.

- Parents' literacy difficulties.

When a relationship has been established, and where parents feel comfortable in discussing their difficulties, parents can be directed to agencies such as NALA or other Adult Education opportunities.

- Parents' availability.

Parents may be working or may be unable to commit to involvement because of family commitments. A flexible approach is required in order to facilitate these parents.

- Reaching the most marginalised parents.

This is a constant challenge and only a whole-school approach in continually reaching out to the most marginalised in a positive, friendly and welcoming manner can this be achieved

- Teachers' attitude
 - Guarding of territory
 - Apprehensions about parent involvement in the school
 - Perceived threat to professionalism of teacher

For many teachers, having parents in the school and parents in the classroom is a new experience and can be threatening. Building trust takes time and it is important to provide opportunities, both informal and formal for parents and teachers to meet and establish ways of working together.

Recommendations

Without literacy skills there is little hope of social inclusion for marginalised families. It is vital that continued support be given to initiatives to support parents and communities in strengthening literacy skills.

1. Home, School Community Liaison Scheme

The Home, School Community Liaison Scheme is vital in supporting literacy in the home and community. In the recent budget a significant number of schools have lost HSCL services. It is imperative that there are no further losses. The services provided by the HSCL Scheme will be needed to an even greater degree in the current economic climate. HSCL offers an avenue back into the education system to parents who may have been early school leavers. As the number of unemployed increases, there will be an increased availability of parents to partake in HSCL initiatives in support of their child's and their own literacy skills.

2. A Whole-School-Approach

Whole school planning is essential in order to ensure a consistent, structured, planned approach to literacy. Reading Recovery, First Steps and Literacy Lift Off are now in operation in DEIS schools. Parent involvement built into these approaches will increase their effectiveness. A planning and consultation process involving Principal, Class teachers, Learning Support and Resource Teacher and HSCL is recommended. Monitoring and evaluation of strategies and approaches to assess their effectiveness is required.

3. Provision of Books

It is not possible to address literacy difficulties in schools serving marginalised communities without an adequate supply of attractive books of a high standard of content and presentation. Children coming from homes where there may be few books need to be exposed to the best available in terms of children's literature. If there are books in their environment, if children are immersed in books at home and in school, children will read. The recent Budget withdrew schools' library allocation. It is strongly recommended that this decision be reversed for schools in the DEIS programme. Annual funding is required to supplement and update stocks of books in the classroom. It is recommended also, that books are brought to the home. Adequate funding is required for:

- Gift packs of books at birth
- Books at entry to school
- Books at transfer to Senior School (Second Class)
- Books (Novel, Dictionary, Atlas) at transfer to Post-primary

4. Literacy and the Community

It is important to address the community dimension of literacy. Fostering and celebrating literacy-related activities through initiatives such as the Adopt-a-Book project help build a culture of reading in the home and community. This initiative brings together, in an integrated approach, Adult Education, Family Learning, Youth and Drama groups and the Library service. Community resources such as local poets, writers, community arts events, local libraries and schools can be engaged to enhance the literacy experience in a community and it is important that these and schemes such as Writers-in-School continue to receive funding.

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