NRDC

National Research and Development Centre
for adult literacy and numeracy

Research briefing

Family literacy, language and numeracy (FLLN)

This is one of a series of publications produced to provide up-to-date summaries of recent research findings from the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) and associated organisations. The series features summaries in each of the following areas:

- Embedding
- Family literacy, language and numeracy (FLLN)
- Formative assessment
- ICT
- Literacy and ESOL
- Numeracy
- Persistence
- Priority groups
- Progression

Family literacy, language and numeracy (FLLN)

Introduction

The impacts of family literacy, language and numeracy learning (FLLN) are vast. In addition to building confidence and improving attitudes to education, both in children and adults, FLLN has a key role to play in increasing social inclusion and reducing the intergenerational transfer of disadvantage. For FLLN to have these wide-ranging effects, however, practice needs to be both effective and inclusive, from recruitment through teaching and, when appropriate, assessment and accreditation.

This paper offers a brief summary of recent and ongoing NRDC research and development looking at this topic, drawing on international research and UK case studies to offer practitioners and policy-makers guidance on the effective provision of FLLN.

Family literacy, language and numeracy (FLLN)
What the research shows

Family literacy, language and numeracy learning (FLLN) has a central role to play in promoting social inclusion and reducing economic disadvantage.

Intergenerational transfer of disadvantage

As NRDC research has shown, there are statistically significant links between poor literacy, language and numeracy (LLN) skills in parents and poor test performance by their children, with the correlation being strongest at the lower levels of parental literacy and numeracy (Parsons and Bynner 2008). This research also finds that adults with the lowest levels of literacy and numeracy reported that as children they received little support or encouragement in relation to education. Parents with low level skills were less likely to read to their children and had fewer books in the home, and their children were less likely to read for pleasure. Children of such parents were less likely to report that they enjoyed school, and boys in particular were more likely to have stunted educational aspirations.

Cumulative disadvantage

Such disadvantages are cumulative, and start very early. NRDC colleagues at the Centre for Longitudinal Studies have found that, by the age of 3, children of the least educated parents were already up to one year behind their more advantaged peers on vocabulary tests (George et al. 2007). FLLN can play a key role in helping to reverse these trajectories of disadvantage.

Guidelines for effective practice

A new practitioners' handbook offers guidelines for achieving effective and inclusive practices in FLLN (Mallows 2008*). One of the keys to building successful provision is partnership working between organisations. FLLN by its very nature straddles a number of boundaries in bringing adults' and children's learning together – to do this successfully it is important to draw on the expertise, resources, reputations and credibility of different organisations. Such partnerships are of great value;

however, setting up and maintaining them can be both difficult and time-consuming.

Recruitment

Recruitment of families can be challenging, and some of the standard strategies for communicating with parents do not always work. For example, if schools attempt to recruit parents by sending home letters with their children, they are unlikely to reach parents with significant literacy and language needs. Head teachers report that the 'personal touch' is the most important aspect of the FLLN

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recruitment process: success in reaching learners is often largely attributable to the skill, confidence and cultural awareness of those who approach parents/carers to participate, especially in the case of bilingual workers/tutors in areas where people may not speak much English. For example, one of the organisations the NRDC has worked with has a special 'Parents as Learners' (PALs) programme to help with partner and learner outreach. Here, former learners serve as learning champions, going out to speak to parents/carers and telling their own stories about coming on to courses.

Supportive environments

Supportive teachers and learning environments are important in all areas of education, but are particularly essential in FLLN. As one teacher observed:

'Parents/carers and tutors often note that FLLN courses are memorable for the positive, welcoming, supportive, friendly, non-threatening atmosphere which is of

particular importance to parents who had negative experiences while in school themselves. FLLN teachers' broad range of skills and knowledge are of utmost importance.'

One way for FLLN teachers to maximise learners' enjoyment and potential is to make good use of those learners' knowledge and practice. In FLLN courses there are great opportunities to blend participants' existing practices with new knowledge, skills and resources to learn about and evaluate how children play and learn. One example of this is the inclusion of activities based around oral storytelling, which is still deeply ingrained in the family practices of many communities.

Just as supportive teachers are essential, so too is a supportive teaching environment. Separate spaces for children and adults are preferable, and where possible the adults should work in an adult area rather than a children's classroom. Ideally this area would be non-threatening and also give a high profile to the course. However, where the school environment is less appropriate, provision held away from the school can help avoid possible negative connotations of school-type environments.

Assessment and accreditation

Assessment and accreditation have important roles to play in FLLN, but some learners are uncomfortable initially with the idea of being assessed, particularly if they have had previous negative experiences of learning. This requires sensitive handling by staff as it can often be a barrier to recruitment and particularly to retention. On many courses initial assessment is carried out informally, with questions asked as the starting point of the process leading to an Individual Learning Plan.

In NRDC case studies, very few participants on FLLN courses cited a desire to take accreditation as part of the course. Indeed, the mention of accreditation in course publicity materials can have a negative effect on

recruitment. However, attitudes to assessment can and do change. FLLN courses lead to increased confidence in their LLN skills, which in turn sparks their interest in gaining a qualification and/or measuring their progress and confirming their new abilities. For many family learners, the key to this transition is the supportive, relaxed approach of their teacher. When there is no pressure to take a test, but learners are made aware of it and what it entails, some will want to take it.

Outcomes of FLLN

FLLN has a positive impact in a number of different ways. For example, there are gains that are immediately transferred to home – e.g. when adults participating in FLLN programmes develop a greater understanding of how their children learn and what they can do to support that. Existing research evidence suggests that children who take part in FLLN courses do make gains (Brooks et al. 2008). Schools report better motivation and increased confidence in the children who take part in FLLN programmes, with consequent improvements in their overall performance at school. Children also benefit in terms of increased LLN-related interaction with adults, and there is evidence to support a link between parents/carers' involvement in their children's literacy and their children's improvements in literacy learning (Brooks et al. 2008).

Adults also develop their skills in LLN; this may lead to accreditation and progression onto other formal and informal learning programmes, as well as greater engagement with the local community. As one FLLN tutor reported to the NRDC (Mallows 2008):

'The majority of parents/carers have gone on to volunteer to help in school. Some have started to do story time in classroom and others have become classroom assistants, lunchtime supervisors and some have gone on to college.'

FLLN around the globe

An NRDC meta-study (i.e. research analysing a number of research projects) has recently looked at 19 FLLN programmes around the world (Brooks et al. 2008). The study found evidence of improvements in children's assessed literacy skills, as well as reported improvements in language and numeracy. However, the research evaluating these programmes was limited, and more robust evidence is required. This is also the case with regard to benefits for parents, for whom much less evidence was available for these 19 studies.

FLLN programmes are capable of delivering both short- and long-term results.

Of the 19 international studies that comprised NRDC's meta-study, five gathered data some time after their FLLN programmes had ended. This is valuable in terms of enabling researchers to ascertain whether gains made by parents and/or children during the programmes were maintained over time. Of those studies, only one found evidence that gains from the programmes were later lost and, in that case, the losses were only partial. This suggests that FLLN programmes are capable of delivering both short- and long-term results.

Earlier we mentioned the key role of partnerships in building and supporting successful FLLN programmes. Research indicates that one of the relative strengths of UK programmes lies in the complex, community-focused partnerships that the various initiatives have encouraged, for example through Sure Start. However, the plethora of FLLN providers contributes to a sense of lack of leadership, with no single organisation taking a directing role (Brooks et al. 2008). This is complicated

by the funding arrangements for FLLN work. Since 2001, FLLN has been funded by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), but its budgeting arrangements are designed for adult provision. As a result, funding for children's participation is bolted on and not easy to secure.

FLLN for teenage parents

There are a variety of FLLN programmes in the UK aimed at teenage parents. NRDC is currently engaged in an ongoing QIA-sponsored research programme, led by Tribal/NIACE, to evaluate some of these programmes. While it is still too early to report findings, emerging evidence suggests that there are may be challenges, including the complex and/or insecure nature of funding for these learners, which can be a barrier to success for provision.

FLLN for grandparents

The research on teenage parents is part of a project which is also evaluating FLLN programmes for grandparents. In contrast with teen parent FLLN programmes, early evidence suggests that funding for grandparent programmes is generally helpful – though grandparent programmes are also rarer. As with teen parents, grandparents' main motivation for engaging in FLLN appears to be to help children. However, there appear to be particular challenges in recruiting and retaining grandparents, who do not necessarily live near their grandchildren's schools and who may still be working.

Upcoming research on family literacy

Sponsored by QIA, NRDC is currently investigating the impact of both short (30–49 hours) and intensive (72–96 hours) family literacy courses on parents and children aged between 3 and 6 years old, with the aim of identifying the most effective ways of delivering family literacy, of supporting children and adults during programmes, and of supporting the progress of adults into employability and employment, education and training.

Family literacy, language and numeracy (FLLN)
Scope of this paper

This paper summarises recent NRDC research and development work in family language, literacy and numeracy provision (FLLN). The key messages in this paper are drawn from three publications, which are discussed briefly below.

Effective and inclusive practices in family literacy, language and numeracy: A review of programmes and practice in the UK and internationally
This meta-study (a 'study of studies' or review of research; Brooks et al. 2008) is based on evidence from Britain, Canada, Germany, Nepal, New Zealand, South Africa, Turkey, Uganda, the USA, and a six-nation initiative led by Malta, which also involved Belgium, England, Italy, Lithuania and Romania. For the meta-study, 19 quantitative research evaluations were reviewed. The aims of the study were to:

• Conduct a UK-wide and international review of FLLN programmes and practice.

• Develop an international perspective on effective practices in FLLN, looking at how programmes enhance LLN skills and how families' wider outcomes are enabled.

• Identify criteria for promoting practice and models of inclusive and diverse FLLN delivery for widespread dissemination.

Effective and inclusive practices in family literacy, language and numeracy: Case studies of FLLN provision in the UK
Alongside the FLLN meta-study, three detailed case studies were carried out across a range of provision in the UK. Based on these case studies, a handbook for practitioners has been produced by CfBT (Mallows 2008). Its aims are to encourage innovative and inclusive FLLN learning and teaching practices, and to provide practical guidance and tips. The handbook analyses success factors in FLLN provision, offering numerous examples from the case studies illustrating effective practice.

Parents' basic skills and their children's test scores
Using a particularly rich data source and controlling for a wide range of factors, this study (De Coulon et al. 2008) found a strong link between parents' literacy and numeracy skills and their children's cognitive outcomes.

References and further reading
Brooks, G., Pahl, K., Pollard, A. and Rees, F. (2008) *Effective and inclusive practices in family literacy, language and numeracy: A review of programmes and practice in the UK and internationally*. Reading: CfBT.

De Coulon, A., Meschi, E. and Vignoles, A. (2008) *Parents' basic skills and their children's test scores.* London: NRDC.

George, A., Hansen, K. and Schoon, I. (2007) *Cognitive Development.* Millennium Cohort Study Briefing 1, June 2007. London: Centre for Longitudinal Studies.

Mallows, D. (2008) *Effective and inclusive practices in family literacy, language and numeracy: Family literacy, language and numeracy - A practitioner handbook.* Reading: CfBT.

Family literacy, language and numeracy (FLLN)
Key points

- There is strong evidence of the intergenerational transfer of disadvantage from parents with poor literacy, language and numeracy skills to their children. FLLN can play a key role in helping to reverse this process.

- Recruitment of families can be challenging, and specialised strategies are required. Head teachers report that the 'personal touch' is the most important aspect of the recruitment process.

- FLLN courses offer excellent opportunities to build on families' existing practices, such as oral storytelling.

- For family members who had negative experiences of compulsory schooling, the choice of a non-threatening learning environment can be key.

- In NRDC case studies, very few parents began FLLN courses with a desire for accreditation. However, as their confidence increases, the challenge of assessment and accreditation becomes more attractive.

- International studies of FLLN have found evidence of improvements in children's literacy skills.

- Most follow-up studies suggest that gains made by parents and children on FLLN programmes are maintained over time.

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