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An Fóram Náisiúnta Eacnamaíoch agus Sóisialta
National Economic & Social Forum

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Summary

Child Literacy and Social Inclusion: Implementation Issues

NESF Report 39 · November 2009

An Oifig Náisiúnta um Fhorbairt Eacnamaíoch agus Shóisialta
National Economic & Social Development Office NESDO

Introduction

The National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) is a social partnership organisation which advises the Government on policies to achieve greater equality and social inclusion. In the renewed mandate given to it recently by the Government, the NESF has been asked to focus on examining ways to improve the implementation of policies on the ground.

This leaflet summarises the findings and recommendations of the NESF Project Team's Report on *Child Literacy and Social Inclusion: Implementation Issues*, which seeks to identify best practice in literacy and social inclusion policy and to pin-point barriers and supports to effective implementation in and outside of schools, including in the home and the local community. The Project Team comprised representatives from the Oireachtas, the social partners, educationalists and was chaired by Professor Áine Hyland.

Why Focus on Implementation Issues in Relation to Child Literacy and Social Inclusion?

With educational disadvantage, as with many other complex social inclusion issues, there has been difficulty realising goals and implementing policy. There is, therefore, considerable value in exploring what barriers and supports may be present to the effective implementation of literacy policy.

In the 21st century, the importance of literacy cannot be overstated, bringing with it social, economic and health benefits to the individual and across society as a whole.

What we understand literacy to be is shifting with new approaches emerging. It is imperative that we keep pace with these changes if we are to compete effectively at international level. While much can be done in schools, the report argues that improving literacy must also involve the family and the wider community.

Despite widespread support and good practice in recent years, there has been little observable shift in levels of child literacy problems in disadvantaged areas, which is almost three times the national average. Eivers *et al.* found that 30% of pupils in First and Sixth classes in a national sample of designated disadvantaged schools had 'serious literacy difficulties' [1].

1. Defined as scoring at or below the tenth percentile on a nationally normed test. Eivers, E., Shiel, G., & Shortt, S. (2004). *Reading Literacy in Disadvantaged Primary Schools.* Dublin: Educational Research Centre.

The economic and social costs in not dealing more effectively with this are severe; a UK study showed that costs to the public purse from failure to learn to read in primary school years was between £1.73BN to £2.05 BN every year[2]. This has serious consequences for children's life-chances, with many of them more likely to experience educational failure, social and economic hardship.

Literacy Policies

While it has been a key issue in education in recent years, there is as yet no national policy on literacy for all children. However, statements about literacy are included in the *English Curriculum for Primary Schools* and in *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools* (DEIS). DEIS is designed as an integrated policy on educational disadvantage, drawing together a focus on literacy, numeracy, home-school engagement, and family literacy for schools designated as the most disadvantaged. It includes targets, measurable outcomes and an evaluation plan. However, with only 22% of primary schools coming under DEIS, there is some concern that many disadvantaged children are not covered by this policy.

Scope of the Project

The Project adopted a case study approach, grounding the work of the Project Team in examples of policy delivery. Four schools were selected that are currently serving disadvantaged communities taking part in the DEIS Programme. A focus on community projects was also included, to demonstrate ways that school, family and community combine on the ground. In addition, the Project Team received 95 Submissions from teachers, parents, principals, libraries, university departments, partnership companies, voluntary and community organisations, among others.

Findings

The Case Study research indicated good practice and supports including:

- DEIS was providing needed resources, supports and training and there were benefits arising from smaller class sizes, the increased funding and extra support staff;
- Structured programmes were welcomed, as well as the new focus on planning across the school and setting targets, effective leadership and teamwork;

2. This was summed up over the life course to age 37 to £44,797 (lower bound figure) and £53,098 (upper bound figure) for each individual. KPMG Foundation (2006). *The Long Term Costs of Literacy Difficulties.* KPMG Foundation.

- DEIS Advisors made a positive contribution in helping to deliver programmes and improve literacy teaching in some schools;
- A welcoming school atmosphere and positive organisational culture made a difference in implementation, with high expectations and a shared vision; and
- Strong links with the Home School Community Liaison co-ordinators and sharing of good practice inside and outside of the school were noted in some schools.

The Case Studies also highlighted some barriers to effective implementation of DEIS, such as:

- Perceived uncertainty over DEIS status – lack of clarity in some schools over how schools were selected;
- DEIS does not have a strategy for dealing with success – there is no incentive, recognition or reward for improving literacy levels;
- School as an island – where schools are isolated from each other and the wider community, there is less sharing of good practice and building of supportive networks;
- Lack of understanding of how disadvantage impacts – a perception that current policy does not fully reflect the challenges being faced on the ground;
- Lack of integration of different aspects and phases of DEIS – the policy is delivered in phases and units and is not perceived to be an integrated one; and
- Poor leadership, communication and team morale – this adversely impacts the effectiveness of schools to deliver policy on the ground.

In relation to communities, while there is excellence in provision, there is also variability. Some conclusions included:

- Greater quality assurance and support are needed;
- A more systemic approach to community provision is needed, building on relationships with schools;
- Despite the considerable work of the Home School Community Liaison Scheme, there is a gulf between school and community which needs to be bridged; and
- Community development projects, Family Resource Centres, neighbourhood youth projects, VEC's, libraries and integrated partnership companies can complement what is happening in the formal education system and provide links.

Overview of Findings and Conclusions

Successful Implementation: What are the Key Elements?

The Report examines the implementation of DEIS where it is compared to an outcomes-oriented approach to policy using the Implementation Template[3].

In summary, the conclusions on policy indicate the need for the following:

Figure 1 Implementation Template

i.	Strategy plans with agreed outcomes
ii.	Delivery plans and delivery on the ground (including standards, competition, co-ordination of organisations and procedures and tailored universalism)
iii.	Monitoring, evaluation and measurement of inputs, outputs and outcomes
iv.	Links between outcomes and budget
v.	Good accountability and incentive structure
vi.	Equity in provision
vii.	Cultural Elements (including values, beliefs and tacit assumptions, leadership, attitudes and quality of collaborative relationships)

Source: NESF Secretariat

i. Strategy plans with agreed outcomes

- The development of a national strategy plan on literacy, with agreed national outcomes and specific targets for children experiencing educational disadvantage;
- An integrated approach which builds bridges and links between schools and communities in the delivery of literacy supports;
- A clearer link between national high level goals/targets and local goals/targets with transparent accountability structures all the way along; and
- Clear outcome measures for each stage of delivery.

3. Drawn from a variety of sources:
NESF, 2007, 2009; OECD, 2008 (presented in Figure 1 above). NESF (2007). *Improving the Delivery of Quality Public Services.* Dublin: National Economic and Social Forum;
NESF (2009). *Implementation of the Home Care Package Scheme.* Dublin National Economic and Social Forum;
OECD (2008). *Ireland: Towards an Integrated Public Service.* Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

ii. Delivery plans and delivery on the ground (including standards, competition, co-ordination of organisations and procedures and tailored universalism)

- Provide a roadmap for DEIS-what it is trying to achieve, by when and how. This would include an annual business and implementation plan; and
- Strengthen integration within the Department of Education and Science and across Departments and agencies in the delivery of literacy policies from a Child-Centred Approach, with shared goals and effective communication.

iii. Monitoring, evaluation and measurement of inputs, outputs and outcomes

- There should be frequent systematic collection and publication of data in relation to literacy outcomes;
- Evaluation reports should be publicly available and should be used to review and revise implementation strategies; and
- Consideration should be given, in the next phase of DEIS, to the allocation of funding on a sliding scale of disadvantage so that a greater number of pupils experiencing educational disadvantage would be supported.

iv. Links between outcomes and budget

- There should be greater linking of outcomes to budgets; and
- National outcomes need to be linked more closely with local outcomes.

v. Good accountability and incentive structure

- The system needs clearer and better accountability (responsibility for outcomes);
- Increased incentives and recognition for the delivery of policy outcomes would help implementation, with regular, comprehensive and transparent reporting; and
- 'Purveyors' or 'mentors' from schools which have successfully implemented literacy policies should be encouraged to share good practice with staff in other schools and in the wider community.

vi. Equity in provision

- More focused action to tackle disadvantaged issues linked to literacy is needed under the Government's National Action Plan on Social Inclusion 2007-2016;

- Increased clarity would be welcome in relation to the target group for child literacy and social inclusion policy; and
- Greater consistency of service delivery to schools is needed under DEIS.

vii. Cultural Elements

- A system for sharing information on implementation across Departments and agencies should be promoted;
- Sharing of information on best practice is effective;
- More research on the impact of 'soft' cultural elements on implementation of policies in schools is needed in an Irish context; and
- Setting clear and high expectations and a vision for what is to be achieved helps to create a positive and successful working culture.

Recommendations

From its deliberations and analysis of implementation as set out above, the Project Team puts forward one central overarching recommendation, namely that a **National Literacy Policy Framework be put in place that has a 'life-cycle' emphasis, with the involvement of the various education and community stakeholders. A Steering Committee should be established to develop this framework led by the Department of Education and Science.** For this purpose, the Department should liaise with other relevant Departments, statutory and non-statutory agencies, and voluntary agencies. This would provide a shared vision for future action with greater policy coherence and integration. It should be underpinned with a strategic focus on child literacy.

Following the Policy Framework, the Project Team identified a number of supporting recommendations. These were presented under the following headings, listed here in brief:

- Quality Early Childhood Care and Education;
- School-based actions;
- Support for Schools;
- Community Literacy Practices; and
- Institutional Supports.

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