

## Family Literacy in Malta: An empowering experience for both parents and children

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### *How family literacy started in Malta*

Family literacy is a relatively new phenomenon in Malta, with an eight-year history. It has, however, put down solid roots and is entering mainstream professional development, as well as teaching and learning. Its importance has grown in parallel with the increasing recognition of the centrality of parental involvement in education and school life. Indeed, parental involvement has been enshrined as one of the key principles of the new National Minimum Curriculum, published in 1999, which states that:

*"An effective educational system recognizes the link between the home environment and differences between children. When possible, the education of children should be linked to educational and participatory programmes for their parents or guardians. Students who are denied a support system outside the school should be given special attention."*

NMC, page 31

Research (Basic Skills Agency, 1998; Brooks, 2002; Hannon, 2003) shows that children's attainment in school increases with their parents' increased involvement in the children's learning process, for example through family literacy programmes. At the same time, this participation, properly supported by the school, leads parents to become more involved in the educational process of the school, and eventually their own educational process as lifelong learning adults (Sultana, 1994; Hornby, 2000; Borg & Mayo, 2001).

The first experimental family literacy programme was organised by the Literacy Unit within the Faculty of Education of the University of Malta, in the wake of the National Survey of Reading Attainment, conducted in 1999 among children aged 6-7, that had highlighted literacy difficulties encountered by children from socio-economically disadvantaged areas of the island (Milton 2000).

Family literacy provision in Malta, however, only really took off with the setting up, in 2001, of the Foundation for Educational Services (FES). The FES was conceived as a mechanism to enable the Education Division, the state provider and national educational regulator, to provide a range of innovative educational initiatives in the field of literacy support and parental empowerment and lifelong learning, spearheading change within this sector. It started operations by focusing on after-school, family-oriented educational services that would complement and reinforce the teaching and learning in the day school. At the same time, it was envisaged that these after-school programmes would serve as potential catalysts that would infuse day-school provision with key good practices and attitudes, such as learning through play, differentiated learning, parental involvement in learning and parental lifelong learning through their involvement in their children's educational development.

The first type of family literacy programmes run by the FES was called *Hilti* (My Ability), and started in 2001. Six state primary schools were invited to participate, and the advantages of family literacy for both the families and the schools' teaching and learning processes were explained to school administration, staff and school councils, which include parent<sup>1</sup> representatives. The schools that were invited to attend had the following characteristics:

- geographically distributed all over Malta;
- had a pupil population with demonstrated literacy needs;
- had excellent school leadership that welcomed FES programmes;
- had the necessary physical space for the dedicated rooms required for family provision – these rooms were then upgraded as multipurpose rooms by the FES, to be used throughout the school day, as well as for family literacy provision;
- had viable school populations, with a typical pupil cohort for any one year about 60, to ensure enough applications, but not too many, as that would lead to disappointed refused applicants.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Parents' are here defined as the significant adult or adults in the life of the child in a family or cared-for environment.

In schools that agreed to participate, an introductory meeting was held for parents of a year-group, identified by the school - say, families with children in Year 2 (aged 6-7). Between 10 and 19 pupils were accepted per tutor, provided by the FES; an additional tutor worked with parents, who were actively encouraged to participate. Different numbers of pupils were tried in different sites, to compare the relative effectiveness of the different approaches.

The hosting school was also asked to identify pupils within the year group who would benefit especially through participation, either because of literacy or social development needs. These pupils were given first priority if they applied, but the mix of identified to non-identified pupils was kept at not more than 40% to 60% respectively. The school would also decide whether the focus for the particular programme would be literacy (Maltese or English) or numeracy.

A set of family literacy sessions was called a *Hilti Club*, and pupils wore special T-shirts to differentiate from school learning time. Sessions were held twice a week, straight after school, for a term; each lasted 1¼ hours, for roughly three months. In some cases, Clubs were held for as long as a semester - for example, from September to February - to gauge the relative effectiveness of the two approaches.

After the first two years of operation, experience showed us that the *Hilti* family literacy programmes needed to be fine-tuned to maximise effectiveness:

- Parents' participation needed to be obligatory, since as will be shown later, there were significant differences in attainment by participants, depending on the frequency of parental participation;
- The optimum length of a *Hilti Club* was one scholastic term, that is about three months; the optimum number of pupil participants per tutor was 8 to 12;
- The *Hilti* Programme was most effective with children up to Year 2, that is up to the age of 7;
- *Hilti* was most effective as an early intervention literacy strategy, rather than a literacy remediation one. It was also effective as a personal and social development strategy, both in early intervention and remediation modes.



### Structure of the *Hilti* Family Literacy session

The *Hilti* family literacy session has a common basic structure, as follows:

Episode	Activity
A: 2.25-2.50	Transition from end of school: personal hygiene, lunch, putting on Club T-shirt, and energiser.
B: 2.50-3.00	Circle Time for both parents and pupils in two separate rooms
C: 3.00-3.35	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Big Group play-to-learn activity for the children</li> <li>• Simultaneously, parents will be meeting to prepare their participation in the Small Group Activity</li> </ul>
D: 3.35-4.05	Small Group Activity
E: 4.05-4.15	Parents and pupils separate: tidying up and processing of learning experience
F: 4.15-4.45	Review and preparation by staff

Part A allows the children to make the transition from school to after-school 'club'. Part A is divided as follows:

- Participants wear a big T-shirt over, or instead of, their uniform.
- They take lunch, provided by their family, according to the FES healthy food policy, and rest and go to the bathroom.
- Afterwards, together with their *Hilti* tutor, they do some exercises or games, as energisers, for about ten minutes.

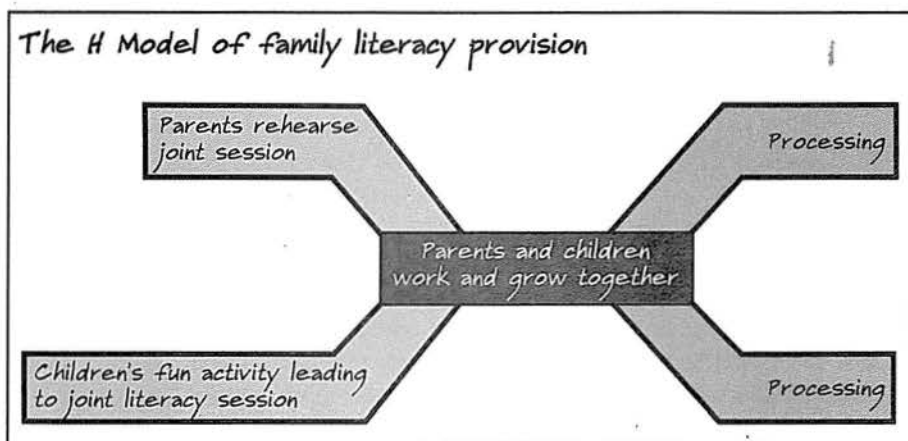
Part B allows children to express and resolve feelings, wishes and concerns. At the same time, parents are having their own Circle Time, in which they review learning that has happened at home since the previous session.

The Big Group activity in Part C provides the social, communicative and thematic context for the learning in Part D. From the children's perspective, Parts C and D are an organic whole, with one activity leading to another. The difference is that Part C is more group-based, while Part D focuses on parent-child pairs and small-group work, with academic skills-oriented tasks.

At the same time, Part C reaches wider educational objectives: knowledge of the world around us, social and communicative skills, manual dexterity, etc. During Part C the parents remain in a separate room, discussing and practising how to achieve specific learning targets from the activity that they will carry out with their children in Part D.

In Part E, parents and children go back to their respective rooms, and process the session. The children become aware of what they have learnt, while the parents discuss how they intend to replicate and expand at home the learning task just practised. Finally, in Part F, after participants have left, staff members review the session and prepare for the next one.

The development of the session can perhaps be visualised better with the following graphical representation, which we call 'The H Model'.



### *Results of the Hilti programme*

The *Hilti* family literacy programme was extensively assessed in June 2003. Four interrelated attitudinal tools were used for:

- participating parents
- participating children
- day-school teachers whose pupils participated in *Hilti* Clubs
- heads of schools hosting *Hilti* Clubs.

257 parents and 365 children took part in the parents' and children's evaluation respectively - practically the whole cohort. Both parents and children were requested to complete a questionnaire in the last separate session of their *Hilti* Club. Parents were asked 12 questions related to their perception of their children's educational development and their own lifelong learning development, while the children discussed the questionnaire items with their tutor and then filled in their responses. 104 teachers - practically the whole cohort of day-school teachers whose pupils were participating in *Hilti* - also answered a questionnaire, and all of

the 22 heads of schools answered a separate questionnaire regarding administrative and educational attainment issues. The sum of the results showed that:

- There seemed to be a strong correlation between parental presence and participation in their children's education and the children's educational progress, in terms of literacy learning, participation in classroom activities and personal and social skills. Data collected from day-school teachers showed statistically significant correlations ( $p < 0.005$ ) between children's increase in literacy development and parents' rate of participation, and also between children's participation in the programme and a corresponding increase in literacy learning and development of personal and social skills.
- Teachers tended to feel that children's and parents' participation in family literacy programmes was beneficial, and indicated a degree of value added for family literacy, over and above education progress due to day-school efforts. Teachers' relatively modest ratings need to be viewed with caution and studied further, due to known distortion effects in some schools and potential conflicts of interest for teacher respondents.
- Parents and children strongly felt that participation in family literacy programmes was very beneficial both for education and personal and social development, with approximately 90% of parents stating that they had learnt how to support their children more effectively and had become better communicators with their children. Further, having understood their own educational needs better, they had gained confidence in openly discussing school and educational issues with others. Children overwhelmingly agreed that the programme helped them to read and write better and to try harder to achieve in literacy tasks. There did not seem to be any gender distinction in these perceptions among children.
- Heads of school strongly felt that the family literacy experience in their school was a very positive one. Approximately 90% stated that programme outputs were effective in terms of children's and adults' learning experiences and actively encouraged parental participation in the school.

### *FES participation in international family literacy projects*

In 2001, the FES won funding for a Grundtvig 1 project for the training of family literacy tutors and the implementation of such programmes in Italy, Belgium, Romania, England, Lithuania and Malta. This was the first Grundtvig 1 project co-ordinated by a Maltese institution, and the first about family literacy. The project, called 'Parent Empowerment for Family Literacy' (P.E.Fa.L.) flexibly adapted the Maltese family literacy model to different socio-cultural contexts:

- Families in special needs inclusive environment (Lithuania)
- Women forming support group from dominant husbands (Lithuania, Malta)

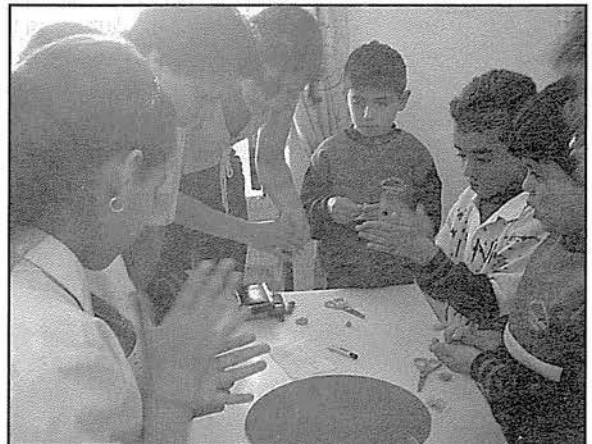
- Families from minority groups in multicultural settings (England, Belgium)
- Families in socially disadvantaged areas (Romania, Malta, Italy, Lithuania)
- Families with children at severe risk of educational failure (Malta)
- Programmes specifically targeting fathers (Malta).

P.E.Fa.L. generated a wealth of resources, which are available on the project website [www.pefalmalta.org.mt](http://www.pefalmalta.org.mt). The project also yielded the following outputs:

- 20 schools in local communities hosted family literacy programmes;
- 64 trained and experienced family literacy tutors forming core teams in six European countries;
- 30 family literacy programmes organised in the participating countries;
- 419 families participated in family literacy programmes in the six countries;
- 36 identified potential parent leaders from the six countries to support the core team of tutors in the dissemination of family literacy in their country.

Camilleri (2004) evaluated the effectiveness of family literacy provision within the P.E.Fa.L. project. The evidence of increased self-confidence of parents participating in P.E.Fa.L. confirms the findings that emerged from the study carried out on a local level and described in Section 3 of this chapter. Camilleri's research also clearly showed that:

- Parents felt encouraged to actively involve themselves in literacy activities that benefit their children, together with an increased ability to support their children in their literacy development;
- Parents reported increased self-confidence and a renewed ability to become pro-active in their own journey of lifelong learning;
- Parents learnt to value education and the literacy community was extended;
- Parents created parallel practices between home and school and enhanced their personal involvement in schools and school life;
- Parents' knowledge about parenting options and child development increased and thus created a more supportive home environment;
- Parents' social awareness and self-advocacy increased;
- Parents discovered their own learning abilities and could potentially seek new opportunities for learning, enhancing their employment status and job satisfaction;



- Attitudes towards reading improved (especially evident in children) and involvement in home literacy activities and learning as families was enhanced;
- Families were engaging in meaningful family literacy experiences with the formation of informal local parent support groups, including parents from diverse cultural backgrounds;
- There was, overall, a strong impact, and medium-term effectiveness, in all the countries involved in P.E.Fa.L., notwithstanding the cultural diversity;
- Finally, the P.E.Fa.L. programme has been proven to be culturally multivalent across all countries and brought families together within and across nations, transcending cultural, ethnic and religious barriers.

In 2005, the FES entered a Grundtvig 2 Learning Partnership, led by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, partly as a follow-up of the P.E.Fa.L. experience. Some of the key outputs of this partnership for the FES were:

- the sharing of good practice;
- access to international experts in the field and the comparative discussion of technical issues;
- the training of family literacy tutors, and
- the development of resources, such as an anthology of session plans and a DVD training session on how to make and use story bags in a family literacy context.

### *Family Literacy adaptations in Malta*

As word of the positive experience of schools hosting *Hilti* family literacy Clubs spread, more and more schools in Malta began asking the FES for this service. The initial six schools in 2002 grew to 25 in 2004; by December 2005, over 60% of state primary schools had had at least one programme. Over a four-year period 2002-2005, more than 2,700 families had participated in 224 *Hilti* Clubs. However, as always happens, experience also started highlighting the limitations of provision. These were that:

- Service was effectively not available for families where parents could not participate immediately after school, which was the case for most working parents;
- Families where pupils were at severe risk of educational failure, because their literacy attainment was significantly below expectations, needed more individual and focused attention than could be given by *Hilti* Clubs;
- Although reference is made to 'families', it is almost always the mothers who attend. Indeed, fathers' participation in *Hilti* Clubs is around 3%, which compares with similar proportions around the world. In the UK, for example, the figure is stated to be "well under 10%" (Hannon, 2003);



- The *Hilti* family literacy model was not an integral part of primary school teaching and learning, since it was held after school. Following the experience of the REAL project held among families with pre-schoolers in Sheffield between 1995 and 2002, we wanted to explore this possibility as well, but to transpose it to a school context.



The FES went for a multi-pronged response to these concerns. I shall focus here on two of these avenues:

### Service for children with severe literacy needs

A specialised family literacy programme, *Nwar* (Late Blossoms), was set up for families whose children had severe literacy needs. Participation in *Nwar* is limited to two families per tutor, and parental participation is obligatory, to ensure continued learning between sessions. Sessions are one-hour long, twice a week for a minimum of four months, though they may be extended according to the needs of the child. Each child is assessed and an individual learning programme constructed; the family actively identifies the learning targets to be achieved. *Nwar* was set up in 2002, and has seven regional centres around the country, with 49 tutors working with about 180 families at any one time. To date, *Nwar* has worked with over 400 families, 40% of which have achieved their learning targets and stopped receiving service.

An external evaluation of the *Nwar* Programme in 2004, by the late Prof. Sheila Wolfendale of the University of East London, confirmed the validity of the programme as a learning experience for both children and parents. The report indicated that:

*"The evidence-base is strong, to support the view that Nwar is a by now well-established FES programme which offers literacy support to children at risk of significant failure, and which includes parents in the 'learning partnership', on the premise that their participation will enhance pupil performance."*

(FES 2004:35)

Statistical analysis, based on pre- and post-testing, showed significant achievement in alphabet recognition, auditory-blending oracy and, to a lesser extent, decoding. More work was needed on the development of writing skills. The report made a number of recommendations that have since been integrated into the programme.

### Family literacy as part of day-school provision

In 2004, the FES ran two pilot family literacy programmes, as part of the day school in two hosting primary schools. While the classroom teacher worked with the children, the FES tutor worked with the parents, followed by a joint session and processing as in the case of the *Hilti H Model* discussed earlier. These programmes were organised with specialised literacy teachers working with identified groups of pupils in primary schools, as well as with class teachers. Results were very encouraging and, in 2005, the focus was shifted to working with kindergarten children, with family literacy and parental involvement being introduced as an integral part of the day-school programme. Up to now 19 such programmes have been delivered or are in process. The response from school administrators, educators and parents and pupils is extremely positive, with practically 100% parental participation for all sessions and consistent demand for follow-up sessions at the end of each course.

### Conclusion

Family literacy is not about changing people but rather about 'offering choices and opportunities to families' (Neuman *et al.*, 1998, p.224). As literacy researchers and practitioners, we need to learn how to develop multivalent programmes and instructional materials for different populations and configurations of families that are easily adaptable to various cultural and ethnic groups. Programmes must be able to meet the particular needs of different cultural groups and to celebrate the diversity of the various home literacy practices and discourses.

Rather than propagating school-based methods of teaching and learning literacy, family literacy programmes can offer a unique opportunity for parents and children from different cultural backgrounds to share their literacy experiences, while striving to find common learning points. This is particularly pertinent within the context of the cultural and linguistic diversity that characterises today's globalised society. Transnational and multicultural initiatives, such as P.E.Fa.L., can be powerful ways to synergise multi-cultural resources, together with the sharing of experiences and transfer of expertise.

Family literacy programmes, however, cannot rely on models that are packaged and adopted uncritically across Europe, or indeed the world. As family literacy educators, we need to attend to the pervasive and continuously changing complexity and diversity in society and individuals' lives. The strength of family literacy programmes must lie in their ability to foster empowerment and autonomy within families, schools and communities (Shanahan *et al.*, 1995).

Families from different cultures might require different pedagogies and programmes, of which *Hilti*, *Nwar* and P.E.Fa.L. family literacy experiences are

just some of the possible permutations. But all provision needs to start from a deep respect for the educational and transformational value of parenthood that leads to a co-construction of choices, options, lives and possible futures for all involved – adults, children, siblings, families, teachers and communities.

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