Every which way we can
A Literacy and Social Inclusion Position Paper
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Summary

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<th>Introduction</th>
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<td>The Literacy and Social Inclusion Project is a partnership between the National Literacy Trust and the Basic Skills Agency. Funded by the Agency, this three-year National Support Project delivered by the Trust aims to create a national resource on what works around literacy and social inclusion. The focus is on home and community literacy, rather than classroom practice.</td>
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The project has five key areas:

- Promoting early language and reading skills
- Building parents’ skills
- Out-of-school-hours literacy support
- Motivating disaffected young people
- Improving the skills of adults at risk

This is a summary of the Trust position paper, which follows an earlier discussion paper *Literacy and Social Inclusion: the Policy Challenge* published in April 2004. The paper raises some of the challenges in the current policy climate, and proposes a ‘literacy vision’, outlining the ‘perfect literacy system’ that best supports those of all ages most at risk from their poor or underdeveloped literacy or language skills. The purpose of the paper is to review the evidence gathered and to provide a resource for those concerned with issues in this field.

‘At-risk’ groups include children permanently excluded or ‘missing’ from school or those in care; prisoners and asylum seekers; and other groups at risk at some time in their lives, including those leaving school without qualifications, young people not in education or training, long-term unemployed adults (including parents), and those with multiple challenges in terms of education, employment, housing or health.

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<th>The policy context</th>
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<td>Social exclusion consists of multi-faceted and inter-linked problems, and the cycle of disadvantage is more clearly understood than ever before. Tackling educational standards, and literacy in particular, is an important part of the Government’s strategy to address the problem. At least two reasons lie behind the thinking. First, there is the desire to ‘close the gap’ between affluent and more deprived areas and neighbourhoods, and to address inequalities in educational attainment. Second, socio-economic factors such as the changing demands of the workplace, and the need for a more skilled workforce, have led to pressures for reform.</td>
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Improving the general standard of literacy teaching for pupils, students and adults will, of course, benefit those most at risk of social exclusion. According to a recent study by the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion at the London School of Economics, there has been positive movement on some key poverty and social exclusion indicators, but there are also tensions between improvements for all and ‘closing the gap’. It concludes:

“There is still a long way to go to reach an unambiguous picture of success, and sustained effort will be needed to make further progress.”
There is strong evidence that having poor basic skills impacts on adult life chances, especially for individuals at high risk of social exclusion from other factors. Risk factors in childhood, apart from poor reading, include social class, parents’ education and their attitudes to it, and living in overcrowded housing.

Research suggests that a lack of ‘capabilities’ leads individuals to become socially excluded; these capabilities relate to cognitive development and educational success, but also include health and social participation.

The role of families is critical to the development of children’s capabilities. However, acquiring capabilities is not restricted to childhood. The concept of lifelong learning recognises the potential for increasing capabilities throughout adult life.

The strongest predictor of children’s early literacy development is support for literacy in the home, while good at-home parenting is a significant factor in pupil achievement.

Parental attitudes to reading are important; research suggests that most children who know adults who read for pleasure take it for granted that reading is a valuable and worthwhile activity. However, poverty means fewer resources like books and computers in the home.

Around one in six (or 5.2 million) adults aged between 16 and 65 has lower level literacy skills (the level expected of an 11-year-old). Since very few adults regard their reading, writing or maths skills as below average, even among those with the lowest level of ability, persuading them that they could enjoy and benefit from learning is a considerable challenge.

There are many systems of influence on literacy learners of all ages, some of which are illustrated in the diagram below.

### Influences on literacy learners

- **Home experiences**
  - Parental interest and encouragement
    - Parental basic skills
    - Parental support inc. extended schools
    - Early language experiences
    - Story and rhyme experiences
    - Books in the home
    - Library visits

- **Personal qualities**
  - Resilience
  - Motivation
  - Self-image

- **Social influences**
  - Friends/peers’ attitudes
  - Families and social groups
  - Pop, TV & sports stars

- **School experiences**
  - Teacher attitudes and expectations
    - Quality of teacher supply
    - Literacy learning needs identified
    - School support in place
    - Out-of-school support
    - Home-school links

- **Work experiences**
  - Attitudes/support of employers
  - Workforce development opportunities
  - Support of trades unions

- **Influence of learning providers and funders**
  - Attitudes/support of employers
  - Workforce development opportunities
  - Support of trades unions

- **Influence of official agencies**
  - Attitudes and literacy awareness
  - Family support
  - Justice system
  - Housing agencies
  - Children’s homes/foster care
  - Social services
  - Health agencies
  - Children’s centres
  - IAG; Connexions

- **Regional and local government**
  - Children’s homes/foster care
  - Social services
  - Health agencies
  - Children’s centres
  - IAG; Connexions

- **Community influences**
  - Attitudes and literacy awareness
  - Arts, museums and libraries
  - Voluntary and community organisations
  - Faith groups

- **Influences of official agencies**
  - Attitudes to working in partnership
    - Local authorities
    - Libraries
    - VCS
    - Learndirect
    - Other funders

- **Government departments**

- **Funding**

- **Joining up provision**

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Abbreviations:
- IAG: Information, Advice and Guidance
- LA: Local Authority
- LSC: Learning and Skills Council
- LSP: Local Strategic Partnership
- VCS: Voluntary and community sector
The Literacy and Social Inclusion Project has identified four cross-cutting themes in motivating and improving the literacy skills of at-risk individuals. These are

1. Engaging individuals and building relationships
2. Meeting needs and interests
3. Providing book and reading experiences
4. Working in partnership

These themes are explored in the position paper, illustrated by a number of case studies. Some key points are:

In the early years, home visiting provides an opportunity to get to know at-risk parents and offer some first-steps help around early language and literacy in the context of their own environment. They can then be encouraged to step outside the home and join in family learning activities, or join the library. This may take time.

Supporting at-risk parents who have low literacy skills and little confidence begins by engaging them in fun activities, for example, using arts or crafts. Group work provides opportunities for vulnerable parents to develop relationships and individual support networks. A parenting or family learning programme that has clear literacy aims and focus, delivered by trained staff, is more likely to have positive literacy outcomes for children and parents. A deliberate strategy is needed to involve fathers since family learning programmes mostly attract mothers.

All children, especially those who have few books in the home, need opportunities to choose, borrow and own books. Schools and libraries in disadvantaged areas need to consider how they can provide study support, like homework clubs, to bridge the gap. Reading buddies help to build confidence. The arts, drama and sports can help develop important speaking and listening skills, and confidence, and can link to reading and writing activities.

To re-engage disaffected young people in literacy learning, informal approaches work best. Literacy skills development should be built into activities around learners’ interests and use a wide range of materials, for example, newsletters, video projects, new technology or poetry, as well as activities directly related to young people getting jobs. Working through trusted intermediaries or mentors helps break down learning barriers, but these people need awareness training to help them identify a young person’s literacy needs and offer support.

Building the skills of at-risk adults means responding to what interests and motivates people, providing enjoyable learning experiences in local venues where they feel comfortable, and encouraging further participation in learning. ‘Literacy support’ is needed that is wider than skills learning; adults may need help initially with difficult issues they face such as homelessness or debt. This means providing opportunities to help them develop appropriate language and communication skills, as well as support for reading and writing. This may require one-to-one help.

The model for building parental skills illustrates the potential benefits of a community-focused approach that takes a wide view of engagement in literacy learning, including partnerships with other organisations. In this case, positive outcomes for both parent and child are shown, but the model could be applied equally to children, young people and adults who are not parents. The wider impacts for schools, communities and employment are indicated too.
Every which way we can

- Build relationships
- Identify parental concerns
- Address parental concerns
- Start dialogue around reading and literacy
- Agree future learning

Formal programmes

Parents

- LEAs
- Schools
- Colleges

- Children’s centres
- VCS
- Libraries

- Business
- Justice system
- Health and housing services

Partners

- Health links
- Money matters
- Employability

Engaging parents

- Engagement events
- Taster courses
- One-to-one contact

Partners’ interests

- Children’s learning/behaviour
- Community participation/representation
- Housing issues

- Build relationships
- Identify parental concerns
- Address parental concerns
- Start dialogue around reading and literacy
- Agree future learning

Informal/taster courses delivered over time

Parental outcomes

- Parental empowerment
- Increased parental confidence around literacy
- Improved parenting skills
- More literacy activity in the home/community
- Further interest in learning

Child outcomes

- Improved child behaviour
- More motivated and confident children
- More leisure reading and writing
- More literacy experiences

Further training to become a volunteer

Increased community participation
eg classroom helper, school governor, community activist, learning champion

Specific skills training

Improved educational outcomes

Increased skills and qualifications

Training

Employment

Increased confidence and skills

Employment

Conclusions

Acquiring good literacy skills is not just a schools or even just an education issue. We need to look for ‘every which way we can’ to motivate and guide at-risk children, young people and adults, helping them to see literacy skills as an important and attainable goal.

We urgently need to find ways to build an individual’s capabilities from an early age, and support families to develop early language skills in their young children and engage them in literacy-related activities. For at-risk children, young people and adults outside a family structure, we need to find other ways to influence and help them develop competent literacy skills. The ‘Influences on literacy learners’ chart suggests some of the partners we could involve in this process.

There are major policy challenges: considerable gaps in provision; funding barriers, including insufficient...
money for the process of engagement in learning; the challenge of partnerships; and a shortage of good teachers with the necessary personal qualities to motivate and help those with multiple challenges. This makes it extremely difficult for individual schools and adult learning providers, outside of a locally developed strategic framework, to make a sustained difference with those most at risk.

Some policymakers and service providers still need to be persuaded to see literacy as an inter-generational issue that cuts across, and brings benefits to, a wide range of policy areas; to see literacy as lifelong learning, wider than basic skills, and more than just an early years issue.

The Government accepts the need to do more to support families most in need, and much good work has been pioneered in Sure Start. Childcare is becoming increasingly important, and rightly so, but there are issues around providing quality learning environments that pay sufficient regard to children’s early communication skills. In addition, there is some concern that providing childcare may, in the future, be at the expense of extending family learning provision. For parents, this would shut down important pathways into literacy and wider skills learning.

The paper provides some specific policy proposals:

1. A cross-cutting family and community-focused literacy strategy would help to open up opportunities for partnership working and support mainstream service delivery. A few local authorities have had the vision to take this route, such as Derbyshire and Birmingham. Government needs to create the policy climate for more authorities to do likewise. For example, the Skills for Life Strategy Unit, Learning and Skills Councils, Local Strategic Partnerships and the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit should work with local authorities to promote coherence in policy, and a clear funding route, for a community-focused literacy strategy. This will support schools and adult learning providers in their work with at-risk groups, including parents. Resulting policies would recognise that many at-risk learners are not ready or able to take national qualifications, for many different reasons, and need to learn in different ways, and at their own pace. However, their engagement in learning will, in the long term, lead to personal, social and economic benefits.

A new infrastructure of community-focused basic skills tutors, with appropriate funding and local vision, would provide on-the-ground support for cross-cutting priorities around community participation and cohesion by giving at-risk adults not only skills, but also ‘a voice’, and therefore a stake in their communities.

2. The implementation of Every Child Matters should include a specific reference to consider the language and literacy skills of children at risk, and how best to support families with their children’s literacy development.

3. Every extended school should develop a home and community literacy strand that includes family learning, with public libraries as central partners.

4. Targets can be effective tools but can result in unintended consequences. We need to look at how targets might be refined, or developed further, to ensure that they work productively and realistically for those most at risk. In this way, their needs will be brought into the mainstream, and activity to support them will be funded at a realistic level and not be dependent on short-term project funding.