

Family literacy, language and numeracy
– a celebration of progress to 2006

Those people present from schools will be familiar with the government's national literacy strategy and national numeracy strategy (... which merged into the national primary strategy); the Key Stage 3 strategy; the work done around the Foundation Stage, Sure Start and Children's Centres etc.

What may not be remembered is that a lot of the early groundwork on all of this was done in Birmingham (ten years ago) ... before the current government, literacy hours, Every Child Matters ... etc).

Within that early testing out of things in Birmingham there were some very clear ideas:

- people needed time to focus (intensively) on Literacy, Language and Numeracy
- developments needed to be all part of well-led/well-managed organisational development planning, within well-led/well-managed Local Education Authority overall plans
- success would rely on high quality, well-supported teachers
- with learners practising specific skills
- and schools engaging larger numbers of parents (with literacy, language and numeracy activities spilling over into everyday, community life ...)

Those were 'early days' (even though only 10 years ago). At that time Birmingham had expanded its Family Literacy, Language and Numeracy activity and had 50 families involved (just to give a sense of scale – there are now more than 2,500). This programme has more than doubled, every year, year on year over last 10 years.

In the middle of that period (in 2001) the government introduced its Skills for Life strategy (for adult basic skills). The family learning work now sat in the context of strong national ambitions – to halve the number of adults with low levels of adult basic skills by 2010!

- We already knew that there were strong correlations:
Adults who needed to polish up literacy and numeracy were more likely to be:
- living in areas of disadvantage
 - with no qualifications
 - in low wage/low skill job (or dipping in/out of unemployment)
 - be less knowledgeable/skills to support children (who thus achieve less well at school, remembering that benefits of parental involvement are related to what they do as parents – not what they are)

We could state this in reverse:

If you start with schools in particular areas

- ... and focus on a year group that seems to need it most
- ... concentrating on literacy, language, numeracy ... (whichever needs more of a boost for those pupils at that time)
- ... offering something additional to the 10 or so pupils needing most 'catch up' acceleration
- ... in the context of everything else the school is doing ... and working with their parents:

then taking this approach means that we are highly likely to have contacted/ 'screened-in' parents who themselves need basic skills needs and so be operating in that 'intergenerational' territory that can, if done well, bring about double benefits.

The children gain from these family programmes, we know that – but we also want adults to gain by similar amounts. For the adults, we are talking about 'Adult Basic Skills' – but let's be clear of what that means. The national adult skills curricula are based on 3 levels:

Entry Level; Level 1; Level 2 (GCSE A*-C equivalent). At this higher level it's what we expect of our brightest school leavers, so basic here means basic not as 'low level' – but basic as 'fundamental right' 'essential for moving on'.

So, starting with the right schools, the target classes and subjects, and the right pupils means we reach the right parents and this could mean that the adult teacher may have mix of adult levels that are wider than the school teacher's range of pupils' levels, – but if we use what the pupils are doing that term as the platform for working on the adult skills profile, and if the adult teachers are good at differentiation ..., then (in a substantial Family Literacy, Language and Numeracy course) there is enough time for all those adults to make substantial progress both:

- (a) ... in engaging with child's learning ... shown as crucial to the child's extra achievement – as in the research by Charles DesForges. If we get this right it will spill over into what happens at home, and have a long lasting influence on the whole family.
- (b) ... in adults brushing up their own skills ... often to a level where these can be nationally certificated

As part of the Skills for Life strategy the Government expect that in groups of 10-12, there are likely to be 3 or 4 adults who able to get such national certification; and are entitled to expect this, because Family Literacy, Language and Numeracy is a well funded part of the social drive to shift huge volumes of Skills for Life needs.

From my perspective (as regional director Skills for Life in West Midlands) I need to go back and remind you of government's commitment to halve the adult basic skills issue ... with family programmes being part of this. The government has recently gone beyond that to say that in 15 years time (by 2020) there will have been a virtual eradication of the adult basic skills problem.

❑ So – what have we seen in 2006?:

- a further expansion of the Family Literacy, Language and Numeracy programme (both in volume of activity and in the variety of range of activity)
 - a focus on what works (and in Birmingham it works!)
 - the Birmingham Family Literacy, Language and Numeracy activity being 'leading edge' – across Europe (and currently being written up as national case study by National Research and Development Centre on behalf of Department for Education and Skills)
- In 2007-2010 we will see a continuation of the Skills for Life strategy:
- with a focus on those in work
 - those in/out of employment
 - those in disadvantaged areas with low skills levels: and Family Literacy, Language and Numeracy will continue to have a role in this group (because of the double gains).
- ** So where next for Birmingham? We need to:
- maintain Birmingham's model and approach – making it as robust as possible.
 - celebrate successes – but modernise those bits of the process that still need it
- Finally I want to take this opportunity to announce that, in Birmingham, adult skills gaps been very significantly closed (and we will continue pushing for further achievement). On that journey to 'halving by 2010 ...': we have sailed past the expected 2004 milestone. Already by early 2006 we were up to the 2007 milestone; so we are well on track to reduce the adult basic skills needs by half by 2010
- and we are already sketching out what all this means for the virtual elimination of the issue by 2020

In that context (and it seems strange to be saying this now) ... having no more Family Literacy, Language and Numeracy would be something to celebrate!

- meanwhile, it's really needed and really valuable, so let's continue to focus on the progress being made and still to be made.

Thank you