



This Issue

Alliance
Report Card
2009

Expert
Opinions:
Phil Beadle
and Ted
Lempert

Literacy:
The Alliance
Recommends

Member
Focus:
Barnardos

NESF Report



Should
school
books be
free?

YES — 92%
NO — 8%

Alliance
Poll



This is a special edition of the Children's Rights Alliance Newsletter, focusing on child literacy. Child literacy was a policy priority for the Alliance in 2009. This newsletter provides an update on our work in this area; it includes facts about literacy, Alliance recommendations, expert opinions from our Symposium in April 2009 and much more.

The Alliance sits on the management team of the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) and influenced the selection of Child Literacy as a project focus for 2009. The Alliance participated on the NESF project team, along with representatives of each Pillar of Social Partnership, members of the Oireachtas and education experts. The NESF Report

Child Literacy and Social Inclusion: implementation issues, was published in November 2009.

In January, the Alliance published *Report Card 2009*, and in the area of child literacy and language support, the Government received a meagre 'C' grade. In April, we held a symposium where Phil Beadle, award-winning teacher and presenter of Channel 4's 'Can't Read, Can't Write', spoke about literacy and education. When the Alliance took on this issue, there was no organisation championing it for children. Since then, both the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) and Barnardos have done significant work in pushing the issue up the political agenda.

The Facts: Literacy in Ireland

- Ireland ranks fifth out of 29 OECD countries for reading literacy (for 15-year-olds)
- One in ten children leaves primary school with severe literacy difficulties. This figure rises to one in three in disadvantaged communities.
- Literacy achievement is linked to socio-economic status: children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are over-represented among those with reading difficulties.
- Ireland has no national level literacy strategy. Government literacy targets have not yet been met.
- DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) Action Plan, 2005-2010, has a focus on literacy, but it only applies in designated disadvantaged schools.

Why is it important to improve literacy?

Children that leave school with literacy difficulties are more likely to experience educational failure, leave the education system without qualifications, be low attendees at school, and display problem behaviour.

Ireland, along with the rest of Europe, is moving towards a knowledge-based economy that will depend more on the availability of an educated and literate young population. The failure to invest in improving literacy is likely to be costing the State millions. A UK report found that pupils leaving school with low literacy cost the Exchequer over £2 billion annually and it showed that a specific reading intervention at the age of six would lift 79% of children out of literacy failure, and that the return on investment on every pound from this measure would be between £14.81 and £17.56.

What is the problem?

1. High level of literacy failure: Still, one child in ten leaves primary school with literacy difficulties. This rises to one in three in disadvantaged communities.

2. Meaningless Government targets: Current targets are not based on agreed indicators, progress is not regularly monitored, and national targets are not aligned with targets set at individual school level. It is not clear where responsibility for meeting national targets lies.

3. No National Literacy Policy: There is no national policy to outline a plan of action to improve literacy for *all* children in Ireland. Without a clear plan, it is impossible to make consistent, measurable progress in literacy at a national level. The Alliance is hosting a Roundtable on Literacy in early 2010, details of which will be posted on www.childrensrights.ie

Report Card 2009

Child Literacy and Language Support: GRADE 'C'



Chief Executive, Jillian van Turnhout; Justice Catherine McGuinness, and the then Chair, Nóirín Hayes at the launch of Report Card 2009 in 2009.

On 19 January 2009, the Children's Rights Alliance launched its new annual Report Card series in Dublin's European Union House. An annual audit of the Government's own commitments to children in the areas of Education, Material Wellbeing, Health, and Safeguarding Childhood, the Report Card series tracks progress in relation to commitments in documents, such as *Towards 2016* and the *Programme for Government*. Within 'Education', the Alliance felt that, in 2009, child literacy and language support was an issue requiring specific attention. The Alliance awarded Government a **grade 'C'** for its efforts in literacy, signalling a satisfactory attempt to affect change, but with children still left wanting. **Report Card 2010 will be launched and published on 25 January 2010**, where we will be grading Government on its work during 2009 in relation to child literacy.

Government received its best grade in "Child literacy and language support" within education, and this despite unclear progress on the literacy target. In comparison to other countries, it cannot be denied that Ireland performs well on literacy, ranking **fifth out of the 29 OECD countries in 2006** – a standard that has remained relatively stable since 2000. Notwithstanding these impressive results, national data shows that Ireland is still failing to equip many of its children, and particularly its most disadvantaged, with basic reading and writing skills. One child in ten in Ireland leaves school with literacy problems. This rises to one child in three in disadvantaged communities. These children are more likely to experience educational failure, and to leave the education system without qualifications. This, in turn, affects the life chances of such children – it makes them more likely to be long-term unemployed, to experience poverty, and to enter the criminal justice system.

The Alliance tracked two Government commitments:

1. *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016 and National Development Plan 2007-2013*: to reduce the number of children leaving school with literacy problems in disadvantaged communities from 30% (present rate) to 15%.
2. *Towards 2016*: to put in place a number of additional supports under DEIS to tackle literacy and numeracy problems in primary schools in disadvantaged areas and additional literacy supports, under DEIS, will also be targeted at junior cycle students.

Reducing the number of children leaving school with literacy difficulties: Whether progress is being made on this commitment is unclear, as the DEIS schools develop individual three-year action plans (with private targets), making it impossible to determine if local progress is aligned with national targets.

Providing additional supports through DEIS: In 2007/2008, €18.7 million was spent on the implementation of DEIS. Running since 2005, its evaluation is not due for publication until 2010. Two programmes were set up within DEIS to support children with reading and writing skills. Reading Recovery was in operation in 197 of the 673 DEIS primary schools, and First Steps was operational in 260 schools. *Report Card 2010* will provide updated figures on the roll out of these programmes.

In focusing specifically on improving literacy levels in disadvantaged communities, the commitment fails to recognise that improving literacy is a key issue for *all* children. Literacy as a life skill should be acknowledged and valued; extra support for reading and writing skills should not be solely limited to children experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.

The Alliance recommended two immediate actions:

- The Department of Education and Science should establish a process to monitor progress on reaching the national level literacy targets. Ideally, this would provide an annual mechanism through which problem literacy 'hot-spots' can be identified and responded to quickly.
- Introduce a new literacy target for *all* children: the Department of Education and Science should set, and commit to, a new target that focuses on improving literacy among *all* children.

To find out what grade the Government will be awarded in *Report Card 2010*, go to www.childrensrights.ie on 25 January 2010.



Alliance Symposium

Phil Beadle and Ted Lempert on Literacy

On 2 April, the Children's Rights Alliance held its first high-level biennial symposium in Dublin Castle, entitled 'Children's Rights in Ireland: Are We There Yet? Are We There Yet? Are We There Yet?' in order to explore international best practice and help realise and protect children's rights in Ireland. The Alliance was especially keen to take some time at the symposium to probe the issue of child literacy. Consequently, two leading practitioners in education and children's rights, Phil Beadle (Teacher and Presenter of Channel 4's 'Can't Read, Can't Write'), and Ted Lempert (President of 'Children Now' in California), joined us on the day to discuss their position on improving child literacy, among other things. Both appeared in the Children's Rights Podcast Series, which can be downloaded from the Alliance web site: www.childrensrights.ie



Phil Beadle (left) and Ted Lempert (right) at the Alliance Symposium

Ted Lempert spoke of his experiences in California. Lempert believes that in order to improve literacy, investment and reform in education is needed across the board, particularly in early education. He told us that, although 85% of brain development occurs before the age of four years, California only invests 9% of its education budget in this age group. Lempert believes one of the key strategies to encourage investment in literacy and education is to work in co-operation with other groups, including government, civil rights groups, trade unions and business organisations. In order to encourage these groups to invest time and money in literacy, Lempert firmly believes in outlining the positive, economic outcomes for society. In his lobbying work in California, he frequently cites the example that for every 120,000 children who drop out of school, an economic loss of \$40 billion can be expected. In repeating this message, Government has been made aware of the economic impact of low literacy levels and the long-term financial value of investing in literacy, and 'Children Now' has been successful in moving child literacy to the top of the policy agenda in California.

Phil Beadle also shared his experiences of working with children. In his series, 'Can't Read, Can't Write' the devastating effects of illiteracy, of 'writing off children' is clear to see, with adults struggling to deal with basic daily tasks, such as shopping, and coping with low self-esteem. Beadle believes the key to improving child literacy levels and to help each child realise their full potential is to make education supportive of each child's unique gifts. Beadle is of the firm opinion that each child is born a genius. Beadle believes that what children need to reach their full potential is just one person to care and take a stand on their behalf. According to him, children come to the education system with this unique genius and enormous creativity, but the education system teaches them not to harness this creativity and to conform and adjust to societal expectations. This teaching of conformity allows many children to fall through the cracks. Beadle affirms that in order for each child to reach their learning potential, education and learning should be exciting, enlivening and sometimes anarchic. It should ignite a child's passions that will carry them through to adulthood, and make children aware that each and every one of them is in possession of their own unique gifts, talents and competencies.

Alliance Recommendations to Government on Literacy

In order to make a significant impact on improving child literacy in Ireland, the Alliance urges Government to implement the following three recommendations:

1. Develop a National Literacy Policy with the child at the centre

A National Literacy Policy outlining Government policy on literacy for all children is needed. As its starting point, the policy should emphasise that literacy is *the* basic building block in every child's education. The National Literacy Policy should address literacy from the early years, through to second level. It must include a revised target for child literacy levels; this target must be measurable, and should be supplemented by short-term school-level targets. Lines of accountability for delivering the policy and reaching targets must be clear.

2. Increase time spent teaching literacy in disadvantaged areas to 90 minutes per day

Without basic reading and writing skills children are not equipped to get the most from their education. Current curriculum guidelines on time allocation for literacy are not appropriate for disadvantaged schools. Such schools should allocate at least 90 minutes a day to classroom teaching of reading and writing. This should be supported by a school-wide focus on language and literacy.

3. Guarantee further professional development for teachers, with a specific focus on child literacy

Teacher pre-service training should have a greater focus on reading development, with a particular emphasis on teaching educationally disadvantaged pupils. Support for teaching literacy should be given priority by the Teaching Council when planning professional support for primary teachers.

The Alliance urges Government to implement these three crucial steps without delay to show their recognition of literacy as a valuable life skill, and to demonstrate their commitment to improving literacy for all children in Ireland.

