

OPINION: FAMILY MATTERS

Family focussed book provision and support could make a vital contribution to children's literacy and school preparedness argue Julia Eccleshare and Joseph O'Reilly.

The Education for All goals focus on the need to provide learning opportunities at every stage in life, from infancy to adulthood. Despite universal recognition of the fact that learning begins well before a child walks through the classroom door early childhood care and education (ECCE) interventions don't exist in much of the world.

The 2008 Education for All Global Monitoring Report stated that only 53% of the world's countries have ECCE programmes for children under three. Confined mostly to North America and Western Europe, Central Asia and Latin America, ECCE programmes are particularly lacking in sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab States.

Major government support for childcare services is unlikely to grow significantly in developing countries where perceived demand is low or has not yet reached a critical level. One viable ECCE strategy would be to support parents to provide better education to children in their care.

Family literacy – an approach which works through parents to improve the reading and writing of their children, as well as the improvement of the parent's literacy – has seen significant expansion in the industrialized world and could be adapted to help meet the needs of pre-school children and their parents in the developing world. Family literacy is a proven intergenerational approach that improves the literacy, language and life skills of both parents and children. The results of research into the impact of family literacy programs in industrialized countries include:

_ Children participating in family literacy programs are rated higher by their teachers than a randomly selected comparison group in terms of overall academic performance, motivation to learn, attendance, and likelihood of future success.

_ Adults who participate in family literacy often pursue educational and job related goals, such as earning a high school diploma or GED, learning English, and gaining computer skills.

Uniquely, adult participants in family literacy interventions also have opportunities to learn how to create a learning environment at home, regardless of their current literacy level and children receive age-appropriate instruction that prepares them for school and starts them on a path of lifelong learning.

One increasingly common family literacy intervention is the provision of age appropriate books to parents along with professional and peer support aimed at encouraging parents to share books with their babies and toddlers.

These programmes recognize that access to books is essential to reading development. Research into the impact of book provision projects indicate that:

_ The number of books in a child's home correlates significantly with reading scores.

_ The more types of reading materials there are in the home, the higher students score in reading proficiency.

_ Students who do more reading at home are better readers and have higher math scores.

The provision of age appropriate, context specific, local language books to parents as part of a broader effort to encourage sharing books with children could have the same benefits in developing countries. This would necessitate support for the local production of books for pre-schoolers, the supply of those books to families with young children and the implementation of strategies aimed at helping parents develop the confidence to play an active part in their children's learning and their own.

The multiple benefits of family focused book provision and reading promotion programmes pose huge opportunities for developing countries: more successful transitions to primary school, better early learning outcomes and improved completion rates will help to secure the investment in universal primary education.

Better skilled and confident parents who understand the role they can play in their children's learning and who have a better sense of how to advance their own will help reduce poverty and increase equality.

The case for expanding and improving ECCE in the developing world is unambiguous, providing families with books, along with support to use them effectively, offers a simple and scalable way of doing so.

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