

The Home Learning Environment in Scottish policy

Introduction

John Swinney, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills states that '*Improving the education and life chances of our children and young people is the defining mission of this government*'.¹

Scottish Education and Early Years policy recognises the central importance of the home learning environment (HLE) to children's attainment. There is a movement from understanding parental engagement in school as an end in itself to seeing parental engagement with school as a means to improve the home learning environment. The *Children and Young People's Act* (2014) made a change in terminology from 'Pre-school Education' to 'Early Learning and Childcare'. This was to remove the 'artificial divide' between educational settings and care settings. *Building the Ambition* (2014) states that *Early Learning and Childcare* are 'indivisible and should be seamless' (p.9). This promotes an understanding of the home as a 'learning environment'.

The centrality of the home learning environment for children's attainment

Educational Governance (2017)² acknowledges evidence from key academics such as Dr Janet Goodall that parental engagement in children's learning has the greatest impact on outcomes for children. It also recognises that the purpose of parent's engagement with school is for the good of the child's education and to improve *learning at home*.

Action: Based on this understanding, Scottish Government has made a commitment to increase availability of home-school link workers and of family learning.

The National Improvement Framework (2016)³ recognises that 'parental and family engagement is a key factor in helping all children achieve the highest standards whilst reducing inequity and closing the attainment gap.' Parental engagement is one of the key drivers in promoting educational excellence and equity.

Action: Scottish government commits to the development of Family Learning Programmes in primary schools in all Challenge areas⁴ by end 2017 and all areas by 2018.

The Early Learning and Childcare document, *A Blueprint for 2020* (2017), recognises research which 'shows that when parents and carers support their children's learning, and when children live in a stimulating home learning environment, it improves children's attainment and achievement.' It commends Family Learning as an approach which 'encourages family members to learn together, fostering positive attitudes to lifelong learning'.⁵

Action: Help support parents to enrich the home learning environment by integrating Early Learning and Childcare with the range of family support.

The Early Learning and Childcare practice guidance document, *Building the Ambition* (2014) recognises home as the 'first and most important place for a child to grow and develop' (p.25).

Action: Increase parenting/family capacity and skills in a non-stigmatising environment.

The *Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act* (2006) states that 'parents, carers and families are by far the most important influences on children's lives' (p.5). The *National Parenting Strategy* (2012) makes clear that

¹ . *Educational Governance: Next Steps, Empowering our teachers, parents and communities to deliver excellence and equity for our children* (2017), p.1

² *Educational Governance: Next Steps* (2017), p.4

³ *National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan for Scottish Education* (2016), pp 9-10

⁴ Currently Glasgow, Dundee, Inverclyde, West Dunbartonshire, North Ayrshire, Clackmannanshire, North Lanarkshire, East Ayrshire and Renfrewshire

⁵ *A Blueprint for 2020: the expansion of early learning and childcare in Scotland, 2017-18 Action Plan*, (2017) P.6

‘the nurturant qualities of the environments where children grow up, live and learn parents, caregivers, family and community – will have the most significant impact on their development’ (p.11).

Action: Included a £1 million per year commitment from 2011-15 to the *PlayTalkRead* campaign which promotes and supports the home learning environment.

Family Learning

The ELC practice guidance document, *Building the Ambition* (2014) states that Family learning ‘helps some families challenge educational disadvantage, promote socio-economic resilience and foster positive attitudes towards lifelong learning’ (p.25).

The *Educational Governance* and *National Improvement Framework* documents link increased Family Learning provision with improved children’s attainment and social mobility. Education Scotland’s *Review of Family Learning: Supporting Excellence and Equity* (2016) highlights two interrelated benefits of Family Learning:

1. to support, equip and build capacity amongst Scotland’s parents to capitalise on children’s opportunities for learning: to raise attainment and close the poverty-related attainment gap, and;
2. to act as a catalyst to help adults take up adult learning and training opportunities, gain employment or attain new skills, which in turn impacts upon children’s attainment, aspirations and learning. (p.3)

This reflects the inter-related benefits of improving the home learning environment for children’s attainment, parental confidence, parental aspirations and parental employment. It in turn suggests that such an approach can break intergenerational cycles of poverty and low aspirations. This chimes with the *Adult Learning Statement of Ambition* (2014) which recognises that ‘adult learning within the family provides modelling for children and young people’ (1.13). It is reinforced by the *Adult Literacies in Scotland 2020: Strategic Guidance (2011)* which affirms that ‘working with the family together rather than with the child or the adult separately makes a greater impact on the literacies development of both child and parent or carer’ (p.10).

What is Parental Engagement for?

There remain some inconsistencies in current Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) and Education policy regarding the question of ‘what is parental engagement for?’ The current *Pre-Birth to Three Guidance (2010)* states that ways of ‘involving parents in children’s learning’ include ‘providing a home lending library’ and ‘keeping them informed’ of activities undertaken at the setting. (p.62)’. This seems to omit the fact that parents are already involved in their child’s learning, as ‘first educators’ providing the home learning environment.

Barriers to supporting the home learning environment cited in Scottish policy

- Parents’ own poor experience of school, parents’ level of English and a variety of family challenges⁶;
- The stigma for parents associated with accessing support⁷;
- Building professional partnerships to increase the skills and capacity to support families. Partnership is a key tenet of the Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) Scottish approach⁸. The *CLD Regulations (P.7)*, *National Parenting Strategy (.p.18)* and *Building the Ambition* (p.27) are amongst those policy documents to advocate for professional partnerships in order to maximise the attainment and social mobility benefits of interventions.

⁶ Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act (2006), pp 10-11

⁷ National Parenting Strategy (2012), p.27

⁸ Please see *Building the Ambition* (2014), p.13 for further information on GIRFEC and professional partnerships