



**Guðmundur B. Kristmundsson,**

Associate professor, University of Iceland

# What is the role of parents when children are learning to read?

*Now and then I'm trying to recall memories from my childhood when learning to read. It was a bit of a struggle, took a long time and the texts were boring and without any touch of interest. I remember when I was trying to make sense of sentences as "Sisi saw the sun". It is dangerous for the eyes to watch the sun without sunglasses! Meaningless texts did not increase interest in learning to read. My mother helped me at home, and we read other short and interesting texts, and discussed the meaning of words and sentences. Gradually I became a reader, reading all sorts of children's books and even magazines. My grandmother gave me the first poetry book, which she loved and talked about. At the age of 10 I read the poems again and again. Later she gave me more books and sometimes we listened novels read on radio together. – Literacy became my lifelong work, teaching, doing research and lecturing. Often, I have been thinking about the role of the home in the literacy development of children.*

In 2012, the EU high level expert group on literacy concluded that parents and their attitude to learning to read and literacy have significant influence on their children's literacy development, from preschool to secondary level. The same view could be found in many European national curricula. Educational laws and curricula often stress the responsibility parents have for their children's education, or the common responsibility of school and parents. When skimming through the literature, the importance of home is frequently mentioned in literacy education and learning in general. It seems, however, to be more often aimed at parents of young children rather than students from the age of 10 and upwards. The older age groups are however getting a bit more space in the discussion than before. Maybe the lively discussion of PISA results is to be thanked. Another rather new view in the discussion is the importance of supporting parents in helping their children's literacy acquisition and even guide them with family lit-

eracy (The European declaration of literacy as a basic right).

It is important for scholars to know what parents know about the work at school, including teachers' views, their work, and what they expect from the children and their parents. What information do the parents get, do they really know what their role is, and do they have enough knowledge of the work in school? It is interesting to see the outcome of the Icelandic survey, which could give some answers to these questions.

Years ago, Rosa Eggertsdóttir, teacher and researcher at the University of Akureyri in North Iceland, developed a method or approach to reading instruction, the so-called Beginner Literacy. There, a new tone could be found in the teaching of young children in Iceland, 6–9 years of age. The teaching was based on so-called quality books that students read and used for their literacy works. Beginner Literacy is a holistic method of teaching literacy, reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Phonics is also included



in the general method. Many schools in Iceland began to apply this method and it was introduced by professionals who held courses for teachers, and provided regular instructions and advice. In each school, there was one teacher who had a good knowledge of Beginner Literacy and had acquired the training to lead the work within the school.

### **Study about the Beginner Literacy approach**

In 2014, a decision was made to study the implementation of the method: how it was implemented and run in various schools. This work was a comprehensive study in all areas of literacy education, reading, writing, speaking, and listening. One aspect of the study involved examining the relationship between parents and schools. The main objective of this part of the study was to explore home and school collaboration on literacy education and the role, responsibility and parental involvement in that collaboration. The information given here is mainly based on the research report by Sigthorsson and Marinossion (2017). Particularly the focus is on chapter 13 by Audunsdottir, Marinossion and Ólafsson (2017) on cooperation between the home and school on children learning to read. Also, the author of this article is using his experience when collecting data in schools and former research work: investigation of national curriculum in various countries of Europe, and research on adult literacy, 17–70 years of age.

In the study, various tools were used to gather information about school and home relationships, such as interviews with all those who had or could have some influence on home and school relationship: headmaster, deputy head, head of primary sector, the literacy promotor (adviser), parents and children. During the study two researchers spent a whole week in each class-

room, one following the work of the teacher and the other following three children: one well on the way to literacy, one middle of the road, and one struggling. Last but not least, a questionnaire about the home/school connection was sent to parents. Total of 2,800 parents answered to the questionnaire. Parents were asked to answer questions such as: In what way does school and home collaboration work on, or deal with, literacy? What is the role, involvement and responsibility of parents in the partnership? What does student homework involve, how is it valued by parents, students and teachers, and how is it carried out? How much knowledge do the parents think they have on teaching and learning to read? What is the parents' attitude to literacy and teaching?

### **Results from the questionnaire data: focus on home and school collaboration**

The results summarized below are based on answers to questionnaires, interviews with teachers, children and parents, as well as other data.

Schools do various things to introduce parents to reading instruction and to learning to read. In addition to other things, parents and children are using a “home reading logbook”. Parents meet teachers as they accompany their children to school. Parents gets “This week's e-mail” with information on the schoolwork in the coming week. Parents of the youngest children receive information at the school and are invited to participate in various activities, such as parents' meetings for the parents and their children, and educational meetings at the school. These meetings are organized 2–3 times over the school year, where learning to read and the role of the home is discussed, amongst other things.

The answers to the questionnaire are in many ways interesting: Parents' attitude to their role of taking part in their children learning to read is



mostly positive, some mention limited time, maybe a feeling of lack of knowledge, to deal with reading. Some mentioned the lack of computer skills to make use of the school's digital media.

85% of the parents answered that a teacher made them aware of their importance in supporting their children's learning to read. At the same time, 39% responded that the teacher contacts them to discuss the literacy learning of their child. In interviews, most parents said they were hardly ever asked about their view. Almost all parents considered themselves to be very responsible for their children's literacy education, and the same was true of teacher responsibility.

The role of homework, in the opinion of 87–97% of parents, was to enhance the students' sense of responsibility; support methods aiming at independence in reading; increase interest in reading and writing; give parents information on the status of their children's ability to read; increase reading speed; increase vocabulary and comprehension. Many teachers agreed with this. In interviews with the children, it was stated that most of them found it enjoyable to read at home, and some of them said it was the most fun thing they did. What caught attention was that many children felt that the actual learning was taking place at home.

Only 53% of parents believed that the teacher guided them in helping their children with their homework, while about 93% of teachers thought they did. 39% of parents thought they needed more guidance. There were few examples of teachers supporting parents of children with a language other than Icelandic. However, it did happen.

In the questionnaire, parents were asked 12 questions about knowledge of various things related to their children's literacy education. Below some results of these questions:

87% said they know very much or rather a lot about the child's status in reading.

72% said they know very much or much about the child's well-being during reading.

39% thought they knew very little about the reading method used in school.

27% thought they knew a lot or rather a lot about assessment methods.

30% thought they knew the teacher's teaching plans well or fairly well.

29% thought they knew about teacher collaboration. They also seemed to know little about the teachers' assistant's role in the class.

Finding how few parents had good knowledge of what the teacher prepares and does at school is a matter of contemplation. The knowledge seemed to be tied to what the child brought home from school. Parent interviews, emails, and parent meetings seemed to be the main means of communication.

These figures are completely different from what the headmasters say. There, the figures range mostly from 60% to 91%.

## **Researcher observations and interview results**

The author of this article helped with collecting data in the classrooms, and interviewed teachers, the school reading promoters, the headmasters, parents, and children. It was interesting to see how teachers dealt with individual children and how they managed to take notice of and deal with children with difficulties as well as gifted children. It was also interesting to compare the ways of working in different classes. All of them



were using Beginner Literacy but did it in different ways. This is something which could easily be seen also when the teaching is based on other theories, such as phonics. Teachers in the same school, teaching the same age group could work rather differently, although they are basing their work on the same approach.

In each class observed in the study, parents of the three children were interviewed individually. It was a group of parents with different backgrounds. Majority were mothers, but there were some fathers in this group too. Some of the interviews took place in the schools, but some were conducted in the homes.

All the parents interviewed by the writer of the article and his colleague had a positive attitude to the school and the teachers' work, but had not very much to say about their work at home, except that the child read to them. They did not mention for instance comprehension of words, sentences and chapter, nor discussion about the text or other things which could support comprehension.

It was interesting to interview 6–7-year-old children. They were happy with their teachers and school, and told us about their reading and writing. Of course, some mentioned how clever they were. Some of the children also mentioned their home reading, and who were listening them read.

The majority of parents are happy with the school. 65% to 87% of them are happy or very happy with the teachers and their teaching, but not so happy with the assessment strategies, the school curriculum, and how the children interact with each other in the school. The percentages vary from 49% to 60%.

National curriculum focuses on parental involvement in children's education. Mutual demands for increased cooperation or change, however, were not high. Anyway, both the schools

and homes were quite happy with the situation as it is. In fact, teachers mentioned a lack of time for parents. Parents felt they lacked guidance in how to support their children. Headteachers and teachers believe parents know more about teaching and organization of their work than the parents say they do.

Some parents think they do not get enough information and schools sometimes use media that some parents do not know how to use. Parents are usually positive in their attitude to the school, and most of them feel responsible when it comes to their children learning to read.

Schools have tried to provide information for parents. There are meetings for parents, sometimes with a guest speaker, and online materials, which they can use for improving the literacy work at home. Some teachers send home ideas, which could be used for home reading. It is difficult to see if and how this affects the work at home. The source of these ideas is the school. It would be interesting to look for ideas from the parents themselves.

Parents have probably the strongest influence in strengthening children's literacy. It is a mutual task for parents and teachers to lead children on the road to literacy. Maybe the solution could be found in closer cooperation.

"The one who never reads is in similar crisis as the one who is illiterate"

(Mark Twain)

## References

- Auðunsdóttir, I., Marinósson, G. & Ólafsson, K. 2017. Samstarf heimila og grunnskóla um læsinnám yngstu nemenda. In R. Sigþórsson & G. Marinósson (eds) *Byrjendalæsi, rannsókn á innleiðingu og aðferð*. Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, pp. 361–369.
- Sigþórsson, Rúnar & Marinósson, Gretar. 2017. *Byrjendalæsi, rannsókn á innleiðingu og aðferð*. Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan
- The European declaration of literacy as a basic right (n.d.). Retrieved from: <https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/en/pub/view-points/experts/the-european-declaration-of-li.htm> (January 30th 2020).