

Prepare for Life!

Raising Awareness for Early Literacy Education

Leipzig Recommendations on Early Literacy Education

The international conference “Prepare for Life! Raising Awareness for Early Literacy Education” of experts held from March 12th to 14th 2013 in Leipzig recognized the UNESCO definition on literacy as “the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society.”

130 participants from over 35 different countries developed a whole set of recommendations on how to improve Early Literacy Education (ELE). Based on the assumption that ELE is a prerequisite for any kind of skill acquisition, it is important to recognize that early literacy is much more than learning the alphabet.

Having considered all aspects of ELE, the Conference “Prepare for Life! Raising Awareness for Early Literacy Education” calls for the full involvement of all relevant partners:

Politicians and Policy Makers:

- Poor literacy skills lead to impoverished lives and have an economic impact on countries. There is a need to break the vicious circle that passes illiteracy from generation to generation. A central task for politicians and policy makers is to embed ELE programs into their education and social systems.
- Politicians must ensure appropriate and long lasting financial resources for all necessary partners, including, of course, libraries.
- ELE needs a cross-departmental approach, becoming part of the remit of several ministries such as those responsible for health, education and social issues.
- Those involved in ELE policy-making must be aware that many policies will need up to 20 years to embed and develop; thus ELE must be planned independently of legislation periods.

Donors and Fund Raisers:

- We must make the case to decision makers and funders that ELE is crucial for education and society and that investment will yield long-term returns.
- ELE work must be broadened by strengthening networks and gaining access to target groups through all, even non-educational institutions.
- The economic relevance of early childhood makes it a core interest of companies, corporations, employers' organizations and others in the private sector who may sponsor and support ELE and so invest in children and their education.

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Professionals:

- There is a need for cooperation and interaction between all involved in ELE whatever the gaps between social and educational levels.
- Early childhood teachers, librarians and other professionals have a huge responsibility; we expect from them the highest standards and in return they must be paid appropriately. Only then can we create, keep and cultivate motivation and quality.
- Libraries play a crucial role in ELE and should be welcoming places giving space and resources to families, including the very youngest children. The training of librarians must reflect their growing role in ELE.
- Training of professionals should adapt new technologies to the needs in early childhood education. This means including research and development of media literacy and digital literacy into training programs.

Volunteers:

- Early literacy education is a task for the entire society. The responsibility cannot be passed on fully to families and educational institutions. This means strengthening the role of volunteers.
- The integration of volunteers should not be perceived as an economic substitute for professionals. Their work is complementary and supplementary to formal education.
- The value of volunteers lies in their ability to talk to target groups too often out of the reach of official channels. Honoraries should be trained and supported in their dealings with these hard-to-reach families.
- Volunteers bring personal commitment, and motivation to ELE. Training will strengthen their role and give impact to their work.

Families:

- Parents and carers are a child's first teachers, thus their integration into ELE programs is central to their success. Outside institutions alone will not do the job.
- ELE has to begin as early as the birth of the child within the families. The popular understanding of "early" is not early enough. ELE within families should permanently focus on children's perspectives and development and take into account the needs, interests, and developmental level of the child.
- Empowering parents and carers must be a central task in improving literacy. This means raising awareness of themselves as role models in using language, communication and media, and encouraging them to be active in helping their children learn more about language and literacy by talking with their children and reading aloud to them every day.
- Parents should be empowered to provide a home rich in words and stories, and to inspire children to speak, to sing, to play, to move and to communicate. According to the cultural and social parameters in different countries, this should include all media used in the families and their surroundings.

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Society:

- Reading promotion needs awareness in all parts of society: politics, economy including campaigning at a large scale. Campaigning needs a wide range of partners and a defined benefit for all.
- Networks among health care institutions, social organizations, marginalized groups, churches etc. can provide multidimensional accesses to education, especially for disadvantaged environments.
- Multilingualism is an asset that should be encouraged and celebrated.
- There is a need to widen public knowledge and willingness to take the issues of ELE by using celebrities of stage, screen music and sport as role models.

Researchers:

- ELE is an interdisciplinary issue, for which various scientific perspectives need to be cooperating to achieve a common goal: Economics, Neurosciences, Psychology, Linguistics, Educational and Social Sciences, Media Sciences including research on digital literacy.
- Stronger bonds and meaningful connections between research and programs are needed. Research must be applied to overcome the Knowing-Doing-Gap. With regards to intervention, this means that studies of effects have to be directly aimed at the optimization of programs. More evaluations need to be published and to be publicly discussed.
- Investigations of effects on literacy interventions have to be equipped with enough resources and must be implemented over a longer period of time, which then allows the measurement of long term effects. It is only then possible to also prove and to estimate the national economic return of the literacy promotion in this way.
- Research on ELE needs standards within and among countries. This is why studies should deal with comparable indicators. This needs an exchange as much as possible between researchers and practitioners involved in ELE programs.

In conclusion, ELE is everyone's responsibility. It has to start **at the beginning of a child's life**, to reach out to **all children** and to lead on to more advanced forms of literacy development. ELE is about our **countries' futures**.

- Everyone means families, professionals, governmental institutions as well as others without an obvious connection to ELE – such as celebrities, media, volunteers, and non-governmental organizations so as to align efforts of all groups in society. This is in accordance with the recommendations of the **EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy** (2012).
- Successful ELE will eventually lead to economic prosperity, to an increase of GDP and more importantly will enrich individual lives. Political commitment is needed in terms of an inclusion in the rhetoric of societal debate, leading to sustainable financial and ideological support (public, private and academic).
- Awareness of ELE needs to be widely disseminated; in accordance with the theory and practice debated at the conference "Prepare for Life! Raising Awareness for Early Literacy Education".