

Appendix A – Literacy skills

Introduction

Literacy is the ability to read, write, communicate and use numeracy skills in everyday life. It is essential for personal, social and economic development, as well as for civic participation and democracy. Literacy is also a key factor for health, well-being and employability.

Literacy levels in Scotland

The most recent and comprehensive assessment of literacy levels in Scotland was conducted by the Scottish Government Social Research in 2009. Scottish Survey of Adult Literacies (SSAL) 2009 involved a random sample of 1927, 16–65-year-olds in Scottish households.

The key findings of SSAL 2009 are that:

- 73.3% of the Scottish working age population have a level of literacies that is recognised internationally as appropriate for a contemporary society;
- around one quarter of the Scottish population (26.7%) may face occasional challenges and constrained opportunities due to their literacies difficulties, but will generally cope with their day-to-day lives; and
- within this quarter of the population, 3.6% (one person in 28) face serious challenges in their literacies practices.
- Literacy levels varied significantly by age, gender, education, occupation, income and region. For example, younger adults (16-24) had higher literacy scores than older adults (55-65), women had higher literacy scores than men, and those with higher qualifications had higher literacy scores than those with lower qualifications.

According to the SSAL 2009 survey report, poverty is identified as a key factor associated with lower literacy skills, as adults residing in the top 15% most deprived areas in Scotland are more prone to having lower literacy skills.

There is considerable evidence to suggest that the events of the last few years have influenced literacy in various and complex ways, affecting reading habits, writing skill, and digital literacy among children and adults. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated the inequalities and gaps in literacy which is further impacting on outcomes for those with both protected characteristics and those impacted by poverty.

Challenges and opportunities for improving literacy

Scotland faces several challenges in improving literacy outcomes among its adult population. Some of the key issues are:

- Addressing the gap between the low-skilled and the high-skilled, and ensuring that all adults have the literacy skills they need to participate fully in society and the economy.
- Supporting the literacy development of older adults, who are more likely to have low literacy levels and face barriers to learning and accessing services.

- Enhancing the literacy skills of non-native English speakers, who may face linguistic and cultural challenges in accessing education, employment and public services.
- Improving the quality and availability of literacy provision for adults, and ensuring that it is relevant, flexible and responsive to the needs and aspirations of learners.
- Strengthening the links between literacy and other key policy areas, such as health, well-being, employability, social inclusion and digital inclusion.
- Encouraging a culture of lifelong learning and a positive attitude towards literacy among individuals, families, communities and employers.

There is a need to consider the role of the library services in helping to improve outcomes in literacy, wellbeing and employability.

Factors influencing literacy development in Aberdeen

Literacy development is a complex and lifelong process that is influenced by a range of factors, such as individual, family, community, and societal factors. This section highlights some of the key factors that affect literacy development in Aberdeen, and how they relate to the existing data and evidence on literacy levels in the city.

- **Individual factors:** These include the cognitive, affective, and motivational aspects of learning, such as intelligence, memory, attention, self-efficacy, interest, and goals. These factors can vary from person to person, and can change over time. Individual factors can affect literacy development by shaping the acquisition, retention, and application of literacy skills. For example, a person who has a high level of self-efficacy and interest in literacy may be more likely to engage in literacy activities, seek feedback, and use strategies to improve their skills, than a person who has a low level of self-efficacy and interest in literacy. There is evidence that the challenges experienced over the last few years have impacted on levels of efficacy in citizens.
- **Family factors:** These include the home environment, parental education, parental involvement, and family literacy practices, such as reading, writing, and talking together. These factors can affect literacy development by providing the foundation, resources, and support for learning, as well as by modelling and reinforcing literacy behaviours and values. For example, a child who grows up in a home that has a rich and stimulating literacy environment, where parents have high levels of education and involvement, and where literacy activities are frequent and enjoyable, may be more likely to develop strong and positive literacy skills, than a child who grows up in a home that has a poorer literacy environment, where parents have low levels of education and involvement, and where literacy activities are rare. The need for a strong foundation in children from pre-birth should be taken into account.
- **Community factors:** These include the school environment, teacher quality, curriculum, assessment, and intervention, as well as the wider social and cultural context, such as peers, media, and norms. These factors can affect literacy development by providing the opportunities, expectations, and feedback for learning, as well as by shaping and reflecting literacy identities

and practices. For example, a pupil who attends a school that has a supportive and challenging literacy environment, where teachers are highly effective, and where curriculum, assessment, and intervention are aligned and responsive, may be more likely to develop high and consistent literacy skills, than a student who attends a school that has a lax literacy environment, and where curriculum, assessment, and intervention are mismatched and inadequate. There is a need to strongly consider how our communities differ to ensure that our localised literacy offer best reflects the needs of the community.

- **Societal factors:** These include the economic, political, and historical factors that affect the availability, accessibility, and quality of literacy resources, services, and policies, as well as the recognition, reward, and demand for literacy skills, in the society. These factors can affect literacy development by creating the conditions, incentives, and pressures for learning, as well as by defining and measuring literacy standards and outcomes. For example, a citizen who lives in a society that has a high level of investment, innovation, and integration of literacy resources, services, and policies, and where literacy skills are valued, rewarded, and required, may be more likely to develop advanced and diverse literacy skills, than a citizen who lives in a society that has a low level of investment, innovation, and integration of literacy resources, services, and policies, and where literacy skills are devalued, ignored, and optional. There is a need to clearly articulate the Community Planning Partnership's vision for literacy to help create the conditions required.

Impact of literacy on various outcomes in Aberdeen

Literacy is not only an outcome of learning, but also a means of learning. Literacy skills enable people to access, process, and produce information, knowledge, and ideas, in various domains and contexts. Literacy skills also enable people to communicate, collaborate, and participate, in various social and civic activities. Literacy skills, therefore, have a significant impact on various outcomes, such as personal, social, and economic outcomes.

- **Personal outcomes:** These include the outcomes that affect the individual's well-being, such as health, happiness, and self-esteem. Literacy skills can affect personal outcomes by enhancing the individual's ability to access, understand, and use health information and services, to cope with stress and challenges, and to express and fulfil their potential and aspirations. For example, an adult who has high levels of literacy skills may be more likely to have good or very good health, to be satisfied or very satisfied with their life, and to have high or very high self-esteem, than an adult who has low levels of literacy skills. There is a need to consider how we can offer a bespoke service to support improvement in personal outcomes.
- **Social outcomes:** These include the outcomes that affect the individual's relationships, such as family, friends, and community. Literacy skills can affect social outcomes by enhancing the individual's ability to communicate, cooperate, and contribute, in various social and civic contexts, such as family, work, and leisure. For example, an adult who has high levels of literacy skills may be more likely to have a partner or spouse, to have close or very close

friends, and to participate in various social and civic activities, such as volunteering, voting, or joining a group, than an adult who has low levels of literacy skills. There is a need to carefully consider social outcomes given the considerable variation from community to community across the city with some communities facing greater levels of social isolation.

- **Economic outcomes:** These include the outcomes that affect the individual's income, employment, and education, such as earnings, occupation, and qualification. Literacy skills can affect economic outcomes by enhancing the individual's ability to acquire, apply, and adapt, in various educational and occupational contexts, such as school, college, or work. For example, an adult who has high levels of literacy skills may be more likely to have a higher income, to have a higher-skilled occupation, and to have a higher level of qualification, than an adult who has low levels of literacy skills. There is a need to strengthen the alignment of library services to employability services.

Conclusion

Literacy is a key skill and asset, for individuals, families, communities, and societies. Literacy enables people to access, process, and produce information, knowledge, and ideas, in various domains and contexts. Literacy also enables people to communicate, collaborate, and participate, in various social and civic activities. Literacy has a significant impact on various outcomes, such as personal, social, and economic outcomes and our current system is not effectively addressing the gap between more vulnerable groups and their peers.

Aberdeen also faces challenges and inequalities, such as poverty, unemployment, social exclusion, and health issues, that affect the literacy levels and outcomes, of some groups and areas, in the city. There is an opportunity to address some of these challenges by thinking about the provision of library services in a more holistic and collaborative approach and as an integral part of our model of Family Support. There is a need to fully take account of, and utilise, the high proportion of residents who are bilingual.

Such an approach would require the involvement and contribution of various stakeholders and actors, such as learners, teachers, parents, schools, colleges, libraries, organisations, businesses and library services. This may be best progressed through the development of a multi-agency Literacy Plan for the city to clearly articulate an overarching aim and set of measurable priorities to encourage higher levels of innovation and experimentation.

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