

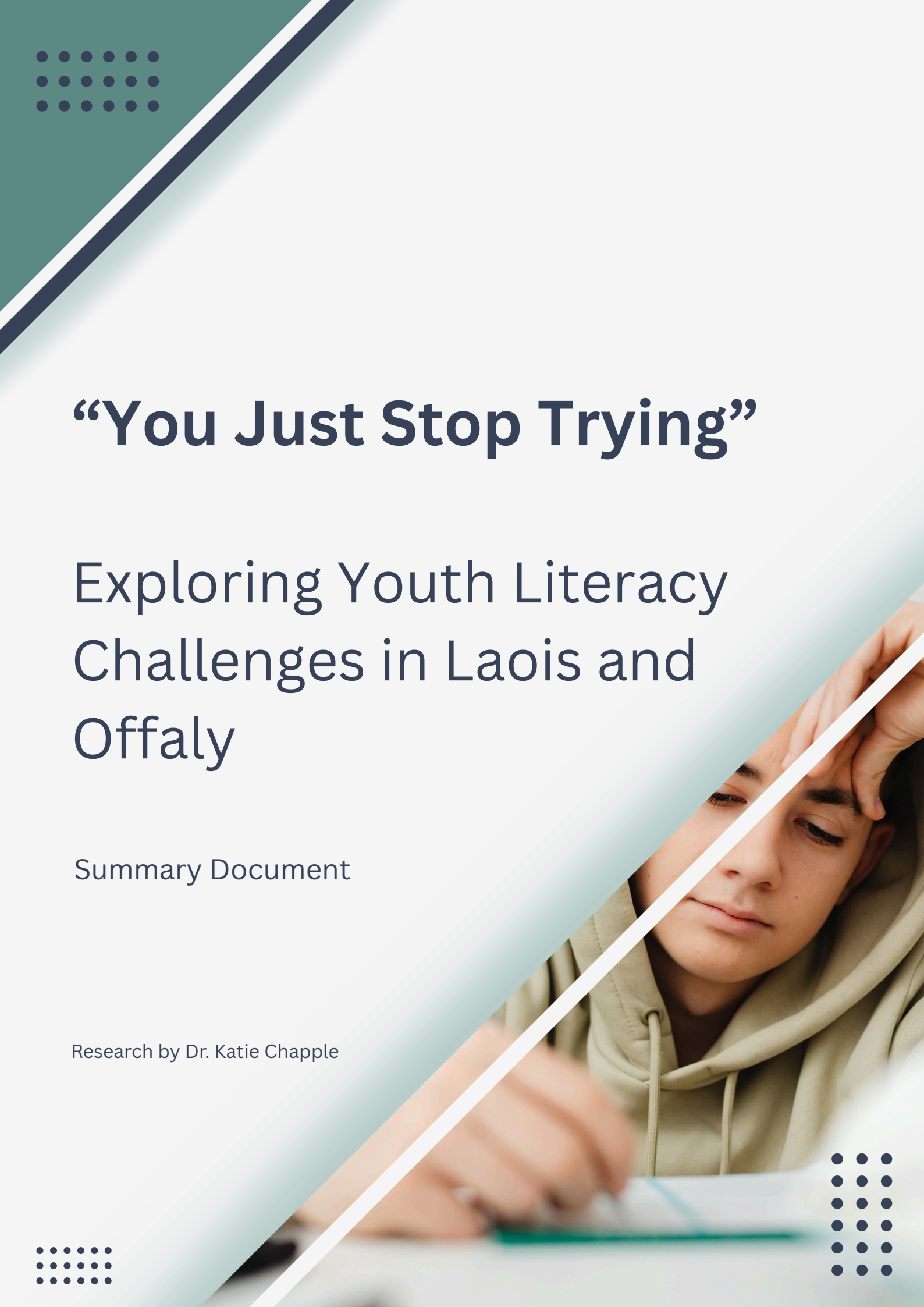


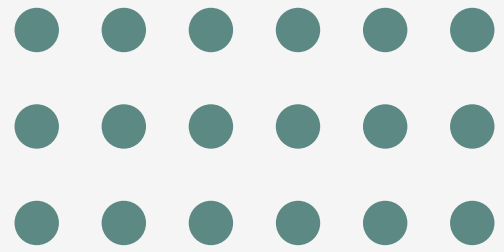
“You Just Stop Trying”

Exploring Youth Literacy Challenges in Laois and Offaly

Summary Document

Research by Dr. Katie Chapple





Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland



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an Aontas Eorpach
Co-Funded by the
European Union

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Adult Literacy is co-funded by the Government of Ireland and the European Union.



The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) is co-funded by the Irish Government through the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, and the European Social Fund Plus under the Employment, Inclusion, Skills and Training (EIST) Programme 2021 - 2027.

Tá an Clár um Chuimsiú Sóisialta agus Gníomhachtú Pobail (SICAP) cómhaoinithe ag Rialtas na hÉireann, tríd an Roinn Forbatha Tuaithe agus Pobail agus Gaeltachta, agus Ciste Sóisialta na hEorpa Plus faoin gClár Fostaíochta, Cuimsiú, Scileanna and Oiliúna (EIST) 2021 - 2027.



Foreword

Literacy is a fundamental life skill that underpins education, employment, social inclusion, and wellbeing. For young people, strong literacy skills support confidence, independence and the ability to navigate everyday life. When literacy needs are not identified or supported early, the impact can have a lifelong effect.

This report provides an important insight into youth literacy in Laois and Offaly. It brings together the voices of young people, parents and practitioners to explore both the challenges and the opportunities that exist within the region. The findings highlight the complex factors influencing literacy development, including socio-economic inequality, access to assessment, educational experiences and emotional wellbeing.

One of the strongest findings of the research is the importance of relationships and trust. Young people described feeling safe, supported and understood as key to their engagement with learning. This underlines the need for collaboration between schools, youth services, families and community supports to strengthen literacy development.

The report also highlights the significant contribution of alternative education and youth work settings in supporting literacy, particularly for young people who struggle in mainstream environments. These approaches demonstrate the value of flexible, person-centred learning that recognises individual strengths and needs.

We hope the findings and recommendations presented here will support the development of coordinated, inclusive and accessible literacy supports across Laois and Offaly, and contribute to improved outcomes for young people in the region.

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Message from Project Partners

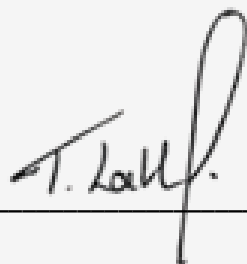
As partners in this project, we are proud to support this important research into youth literacy in Laois and Offaly. We strongly believe that literacy is a fundamental life skill, that shapes not only educational outcomes, but confidence, wellbeing and opportunities for participation in society. Investing in this work reflects our commitment to ensuring that all young people have the support they need to develop these essential skills. We extend sincere thanks to all who gave of their time, knowledge and experience to support this project, including young people, parents and guardians, and professionals. A word of thanks also goes to the Steering Group who offered guidance and ensured clarity throughout the process.

From the outset, it was important to us that this research would centre on the lived experiences of young people, alongside the insights of parents and guardians, and practitioners. While the report offers a valuable and nuanced understanding of the factors influencing literacy development, we are fully aware that this is only the starting point. Not all dimensions of learning have been fully explored yet, with the area of numeracy next to be addressed.

Further research to explore how literacy and numeracy intersect will ensure a more comprehensive understanding of young people's educational needs and experiences. We hope that the insights and recommendations outlined in this report will inform the development of coordinated, inclusive and accessible literacy supports across Laois and Offaly. We remain committed to supporting initiatives that promote equity, strengthen communities and improve outcomes for young people.



Eileen Dunne
FET Manager
Laois and Offaly
Education and Training
Board



Tamara Latham
Adult Literacy Officer
Laois and Offaly
Education and Training
Board



Louise Larkin
Social Inclusion Team Leader
Offaly Local Development
Company

Acknowledgements

We would like to sincerely thank all those who contributed to this research. In particular, we acknowledge the young people who shared their experiences, insights and perspectives so openly. Their voices are central to this report and provide invaluable understanding of how literacy is experienced in everyday life.

We also extend our thanks to the parents and guardians who participated in surveys and discussions, offering honest reflections on both the challenges and successes they have encountered while supporting their children.

We are grateful to the practitioners across education, youth work, community services and support organisations who contributed their professional knowledge and experience. Their commitment to supporting young people's learning and wellbeing is evident throughout this report.

We also wish to thank the organisations and group leaders who facilitated access to participants and supported the research process across Laois and Offaly.

Finally, we acknowledge the funding partners and commissioning organisations whose support made this research possible.





Executive Summary

This report examines youth literacy in Laois and Offaly, drawing on the experiences of young people, parents and practitioners across education, youth work and community settings. It explores literacy needs, barriers to support, and opportunities to strengthen provision across the region. The research involved 199 participants, including young people, parents and guardians, and practitioners working with young people in Laois and Offaly.

Across all stakeholder groups, literacy was recognised as a critical life skill linked to confidence, independence, education and employment. However, participants consistently identified challenges including delayed identification of literacy needs, inconsistent access to supports, and the emotional impact of struggling with literacy.

The findings highlight the importance of early intervention, person-centred and evidence-informed approaches, accessible community supports, and coordinated systems linking schools, youth services, families and communities. Youth work was identified as particularly valuable in engaging young people who may be less likely to participate in formal education settings through relationship-based, youth-led and practical approaches.

Key Findings

Practical, Individualised Support

Literacy support works best when it is tailored to the individual. One-to-one or small-group interventions linked to practical, real-life activities help improve engagement, confidence and outcomes. Participants also highlighted the need for more flexible and alternative supports for young people who struggle within mainstream school environments.

Accessibility and Affordability

Access to literacy support is often limited by cost, location or the need for a formal diagnosis. School-based, after-school, youth, and community programmes should offer flexible and affordable options to ensure wider access.

Family and Community Engagement

Families play a vital role in supporting literacy development, but many lack the information, confidence or resources to do so effectively. Workshops, practical guidance and stronger links between schools, families and services can help strengthen literacy support at home.

Professional Training and Capacity Building

Ongoing training for practitioners is critical. This includes literacy awareness and strategies, trauma-informed practice, cultural awareness and ways to integrate literacy support across educational and community settings.





Reducing Stigma and Building Motivation

Stigma remains a significant barrier to engagement. Approaches that normalise literacy support and connect learning to learners' interests can increase motivation, participation and confidence.

Digital Literacy and Universal Design for Learning

Technology can play a key role in supporting literacy development. Digital literacy, assistive technologies and educational apps can complement traditional approaches and support a Universal Design for Learning Framework.

Inclusivity and Cultural Responsiveness

Literacy programmes must be flexible and responsive to different cultural backgrounds, learning needs and socio-economic circumstances to ensure equitable access for all learners.

Collaboration and Referral Pathways

Strong multi-agency collaboration is essential. Clear referral pathways help identify needs early, coordinate supports and ensure continuity across educational and life transitions.

Systemic and Structural Support

Sustained improvement requires adequate staffing, appropriate learning environments, sufficient funding and targeted provision including English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) supports.

Early Identification

Literacy needs are often identified in primary school, particularly through early screening. However, schools may only be able to respond within existing resources and support hours. The transition from primary to secondary school can be particularly challenging for young people with literacy needs, highlighting the importance of sustained support and continuity across educational transitions.

Key Recommendations

The recommendations presented below are informed by the experiences of young people, parents and practitioners and reflect the evidence gathered throughout the research. They focus on practical actions that can strengthen literacy supports across education, youth and community settings in Laois and Offaly. They emphasise the importance of early identification, accessible and inclusive provision, family engagement and coordinated multi-agency responses to improve literacy outcomes and reduce inequalities for young people.

Expand one-to-one and small group literacy interventions using community-based and low-cost programmes with flexible delivery where possible.

Support parents to engage in literacy development through training, resources and family learning initiatives.

Provide training for practitioners in literacy strategies and inclusive pedagogies, cultural awareness and trauma-informed approaches.

Strengthen referral pathways, coordination and collaboration between schools, youth services and community organisations.

Develop inclusive literacy supports that combine effective use of technology with traditional literacy skills, embed literacy across youth work provision, and support confidence-building, interest-driven learning in a stigma-free environment.





Introduction

This report explores youth literacy in Laois and Offaly, focusing on how literacy is experienced by young people and how supports can be strengthened across education and community settings. Literacy is understood broadly as encompassing reading, writing, communication, digital skills and the ability to understand and use information in everyday life. These skills are closely connected to confidence, wellbeing and participation in society. The research was commissioned to inform future literacy initiatives across the region, particularly within youth and community contexts. The findings indicate that unmet literacy needs remain a significant concern across both counties, particularly for young people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, disrupted educational pathways, additional learning needs or language barriers. Participants consistently reported difficulties in reading, spelling, writing and comprehension, alongside growing concerns about confidence, anxiety and disengagement from education.

While supports exist, access is inconsistent and often dependent on diagnosis, resources, socio-economic status or location. Delays in assessment, limited staffing, and fragmented referral pathways were identified as major barriers to timely intervention. Parents frequently reported difficulties navigating systems and accessing information about supports. The research highlights the importance of early identification, coordinated multi-agency approaches, and accessible community-based literacy provision. Supportive learning environments characterised by strong relationships with educators, small group supports and access to alternative education pathways were consistently described as effective in improving engagement and confidence. Youth work and alternative education settings were identified as particularly valuable for young people who struggle in mainstream education, offering flexible, supportive environments that integrate literacy with practical life skills. Participants highlighted that youth work can support a broader understanding of literacy, including communication, confidence, self-expression, social skills and emotional wellbeing. Youth work methodologies such as experiential learning, creative activities, one-to-one support, small group work and youth-led practice were viewed as particularly effective in engaging young people who may be reluctant to access more formal supports.

Methodology

This research adopted a mixed-methods design combining quantitative survey data with qualitative consultation methods. The approach was chosen to provide both breadth and depth of understanding, allowing patterns and trends to be identified while also capturing the lived experiences of young people, parents and practitioners. The study aimed to explore literacy needs, experiences and service access across Laois and Offaly, with a particular focus on identifying gaps in provision and opportunities for improved coordination of supports. A total of 199 individuals participated across all phases of the research.

Participants included:

- 57 young people
- 26 parents and guardians
- 19 practitioners participating in interviews and discussions
- 97 survey respondents including practitioners, parents, teachers and Special Needs Assistants (SNAs)

The combination of perspectives enabled triangulation of findings across stakeholder groups and strengthened the reliability of the results.

Sampling and Recruitment

A purposive sampling approach was used to ensure representation across geographic areas, service settings and participant groups within Laois and Offaly. A Steering Group of agency representatives assisted in identifying potential groups to participate in consultations to ensure diversity of experiences and coverage across communities. Locations included a range of towns and communities across both counties, including Mountmellick, Portlaoise, Tullamore and Clara.

Participation was voluntary across all stages of the research. Group leaders distributed information sheets and consent forms to potential participants, and individuals chose whether to take part. Young people, parents and practitioners were free to decline participation without consequence. For youth focus groups, practitioners were asked to limit group sizes to approximately five participants where possible. This approach was used to create safe environments, recognising that unmet literacy needs can be sensitive and may cause embarrassment or anxiety for some young people. Adult discussion groups were not subject to the same size limitations as adults were considered better able to regulate participation within larger groups.





Data Collection

Data collection involved multiple methods to capture a broad range of perspectives and experiences. The use of several instruments supported methodological triangulation and strengthened confidence in the findings.

Methods included:

- Practitioner survey
- Parent and guardian survey
- Teacher and Special Needs Assistant (SNA) survey
- Youth focus groups
- Parent discussions
- Practitioner interviews (including one online practitioner session)

Nine sessions were conducted in person and one practitioner session was held online. All sessions took place in familiar environments chosen in collaboration with group leaders to maximise comfort and participation.

Data Collection Instruments

A combination of surveys, focus groups, discussions and interviews was used to capture both quantitative data and in-depth qualitative insights. Using multiple data collection approaches supported a more comprehensive understanding of literacy experiences, needs and service provision across Laois and Offaly.

Surveys

Surveys were developed to gather perspectives from practitioners, parents/guardians and education staff. Surveys included a combination of closed questions and open-ended responses

The surveys explored:

- Perceptions of literacy needs
- Experiences accessing supports
- Barriers to engagement
- Awareness of local services
- Suggestions for improvement

Survey findings were used to identify emerging themes and inform the design of qualitative consultation questions for the focus groups and interviews.

Youth Focus Groups

Focus groups with young people explored experiences of literacy in education, daily life and support settings. A total of 57 young people took part across nine focus groups, including 39 participants aged over 12 years, 9 participants aged under 12 years and 9 participants in mixed-age groups. The range of age groups captured both current experiences of literacy support and education, as well as reflections from older young people on transitions between primary and secondary school and on points where disengagement from education may have begun. Interactive and participatory approaches were used to support engagement and reduce pressure on participants. Young people completed digital activities using their own phones or Chromebooks, including interactive questions using Mentimeter, which enabled participants to contribute anonymously where preferred. A ‘walking debate’ activity was also used, where young people positioned themselves physically in response to statements about literacy experiences. This approach enabled participation without requiring verbal responses and supported rapport building within groups.

Parent Discussions

Parent discussions explored experiences supporting children with literacy needs, challenges accessing services and perspectives on effective supports. Discussions were semi-structured, allowing parents to share experiences while ensuring coverage of key research topics.

Practitioner Interviews

Practitioner interviews examined service provision, referral pathways, perceived gaps and opportunities for collaboration across sectors. These included professionals working in education, youth services, community organisations and therapeutic supports. One practitioner consultation was conducted online to enable participation from individuals unable to attend in person.





Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles guided all stages of the research. Key considerations included:

- Voluntary participation
- Informed consent
- Confidentiality and anonymity
- Sensitivity to literacy-related stigma
- Use of familiar and safe environments

Consent forms were distributed through group leaders, and participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time. No identifying information is included in the report. Particular care was taken when working with young people to ensure activities were supportive, non-judgemental and appropriate to their needs.

Data Analysis

Quantitative survey responses were analysed descriptively to identify patterns and trends. Qualitative data from surveys, focus groups, discussions and interviews were analysed thematically. Themes were identified across participant groups and compared to identify areas of agreement, divergence and emerging priorities.

Limitations

As with all research, some limitations should be noted. Participation was voluntary, and therefore findings may reflect the experiences of individuals more engaged with services. The purposive sampling approach aimed to ensure diversity, but results cannot be generalised to all populations. Despite these limitations, the consistency of themes across participant groups strengthens confidence in the findings.

Context:

Youth Literacy in Laois and Offaly

Youth literacy outcomes in Laois and Offaly are shaped by a combination of demographic change, socio-economic conditions, educational experiences and access to supports throughout childhood, adolescence and into adulthood. Understanding this context is essential for interpreting the findings of this research and identifying appropriate responses. Both counties have experienced significant population growth in recent decades. According to Census data, the population of Laois increased substantially between 2006 and 2022, with Portlaoise identified as one of the fastest-growing towns in Ireland (CSO, 2023). Offaly has experienced more moderate population growth overall but with notable increases in urban centres such as Tullamore. These demographic changes have contributed to greater cultural and linguistic diversity, with increasing numbers of children and young people learning English as an additional language. While diversity brings opportunities, it also creates additional literacy support needs, particularly where families are navigating new education systems or experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.

Socio-economic inequality remains an important contextual factor. The Pobal HP Deprivation Index identifies pockets of relative disadvantage across both counties, particularly within some urban areas and smaller rural communities (Haase and Pratschke, 2022). Deprivation is associated with lower household income, higher unemployment, lower educational attainment and reduced access to services. International and Irish research consistently demonstrates that socio-economic background is strongly associated with literacy outcomes, with gaps emerging early in childhood and often widening over time without targeted intervention (OECD, 2019; Smyth, 2017).

Youthreach and Alternative Education Participation

Youthreach programmes operate across both counties and provide education, training and personal development opportunities for early school leavers aged 16–21. Youthreach Programmes, in Laois and Offaly, and a Community Training Centre in Offaly, support young people who have disengaged from mainstream education, many of whom present with literacy and numeracy needs.





Nationally, Youthreach data indicates that a substantial proportion of participants have literacy levels below those expected for their age group, with many reporting prior negative school experiences (SOLAS, 2022). Literacy and numeracy support are core components of Youthreach provision, often delivered through small group or individualised learning approaches. Stakeholders involved in this research consistently identified Youthreach and Community Training Centres as important protective environments where young people can rebuild confidence and re-engage with learning. Participation in alternative education settings reflects both risk and opportunity. While early school leaving is associated with poorer long-term outcomes, re-engagement through supportive programmes can significantly improve educational and employment trajectories (McGuinness et al., 2014).

Socio-Economic Context: HP Deprivation Index Mapping

The Pobal HP Deprivation Index provides a detailed socio-economic profile of communities across Ireland, combining indicators including demographic growth, employment levels, educational attainment and housing conditions (Haase and Pratschke, 2022). Mapping of the index across Laois and Offaly shows variation in deprivation levels, with areas ranging from marginally above average to disadvantaged. Urban centres such as Portlaoise and Tullamore include neighbourhoods experiencing relative disadvantage alongside more affluent areas, reflecting patterns of socio-economic inequality within towns. Rural areas also display mixed profiles, with some communities experiencing service access challenges linked to transport, employment opportunities and population dispersion. For literacy development, deprivation mapping is particularly relevant because educational attainment and literacy outcomes are strongly correlated with socio-economic conditions. Areas identified as disadvantaged are more likely to experience:

- Lower average educational attainment
- Higher rates of early school leaving
- Reduced access to educational supports
- Greater financial barriers to private assessments
- Increased demand for publicly funded services

Understanding geographic patterns of deprivation supports targeted planning of literacy interventions and services.

Educational Attainment and Literacy Outcomes

Adult literacy data reinforces the importance of sustained education. Findings from the OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) show strong relationships between literacy proficiency, educational attainment, employment and income (OECD, 2013; CSO, 2013). Educational attainment emerges as the strongest predictor of literacy proficiency. Adults whose education ended before completion of upper secondary level are significantly more likely to experience literacy and numeracy difficulties, while those with third-level education demonstrate substantially higher proficiency levels.

These findings highlight the positive impact of continued participation in education and training beyond compulsory schooling and emphasise the importance of preventing early disengagement among young people.

Employment, Skills and Regional Development

Literacy skills are closely connected to employment opportunities and social inclusion. Young people with lower literacy levels are at increased risk of unemployment, underemployment and economic vulnerability (NALA, 2020). Regional labour market conditions influence motivation, aspirations and engagement with education. Supporting literacy development therefore has implications not only for educational outcomes but also for workforce participation and economic development within Laois and Offaly.

Cultural Diversity and Inclusion

Cultural and linguistic diversity is another important contextual factor. Young people from migrant backgrounds or learning English as an additional language may experience specific literacy challenges related to language acquisition, transitions between education systems and access to supports (Devine, 2011). Young Travellers also experience structural barriers, including educational disadvantage and discrimination, which can impact literacy outcomes and school participation (Department of Education and Skills, 2017). Inclusive and culturally responsive literacy approaches are therefore essential components of effective provision.





Youth Wellbeing and Literacy

Youth wellbeing is closely linked to literacy experiences. Difficulties with reading, writing and communication can affect confidence, participation and mental health. Research indicates that repeated experiences of academic struggle may contribute to anxiety, embarrassment and disengagement from education (Morgan et al., 2008). Conversely, supportive relationships and positive learning environments can significantly improve outcomes. Importantly, literacy development does not occur solely within formal education settings. Youth services, community organisations, libraries and family learning environments all play important roles in supporting literacy across the lifespan (NALA, 2018). Supportive, informal learning approaches can be particularly effective for young people who have experienced challenges within mainstream education.

Youth Literacy in Laois and Offaly

The facts

199

participants
across Laois and Offaly



66%

of practitioners engaged with, believe that they work with young people with undiagnosed literacy difficulties.



70%

of parents spoken with, believe that more literacy support is needed for young people.

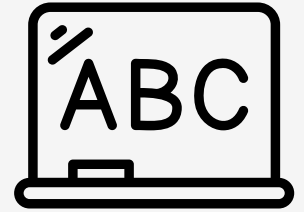
44%

of parents spoken with, do not know what supports are available.



33%

of parents spoken with, are aware of supports that are available.



Most common literacy difficulties:

Spelling (64%)
Reading (41%)
Writing (32%)

80%

of practitioners engaged with, believe that there are gaps in literacy supports.

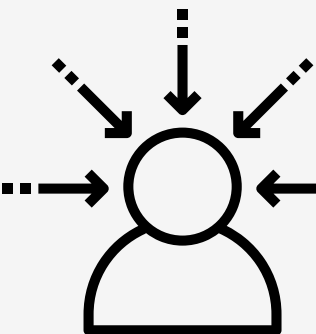
4%

of practitioners engaged with, believe that current supports are sufficient.



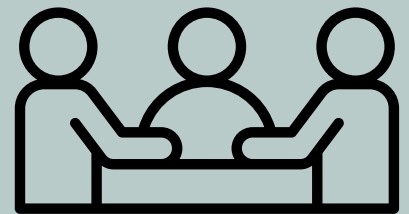
Practitioners reported mixed engagement with literacy supports:

33% of young people engage
33% of young people don't engage
33% of young people somewhat engage.



According to this research, contributors to literacy difficulties include:

Family and parental factors (35%)
School and early identification (29%)
Socio-economic disadvantage (27%)
Technology and social media (23%)



34

out of 41 young people engaged with, agreed that one-to-one or small group support helps them learn better.

16

out of 21 young people engaged with, reported avoiding literacy tasks because they feel it's too difficult or too boring.



Youth Literacy in Laois and Offaly

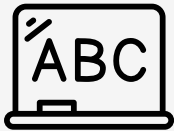
The recommendations

Targeted and individualised support needs to be integrated into practical activities.



Accessible and affordable supports can be provided through collaborative community-based literacy programmes with flexible, low-cost delivery models.

Family and community engagement can further support parents through training, resource provision and family learning initiatives.



Promoting effective use of technology alongside traditional literacy skills will support **digital literacy integration**.

By developing confidence-building, interest based programmes that reduce stigma, **engagement and motivation** can be improved.



Training and professional development for practitioners is needed around literacy strategies, cultural awareness and trauma-informed approaches.



Inclusivity and cultural responsiveness ensures that programmes reflect diverse cultural and learning needs.



Traveller-specific literacy supports need further development and resourcing, through trusted community partnerships and dedicated liaison roles.

Strengthening referral pathways and coordination between services will support strategic **multi-agency collaboration**.



Awareness of alternative education pathways and new funding streams will enhance **systemic and structural support**.

Early identification and assessment is essential to ensure timely intervention.



Literacy Experiences of Young People

‘It’s stuff you need for real life, like jobs and forms and talking to people.’ – Young person

This section explores how young people in Laois and Offaly experience literacy in their everyday lives, drawing together insights from youth focus groups alongside perspectives from parents and practitioners. While earlier sections examined structural influences and service provision, this section focuses on the lived experiences of young people, recognising that literacy is not only a technical skill but also enables social, emotional and relational development, shaped by confidence, identity and learning environments. Young people’s accounts show that literacy is closely connected to how they experience school, relationships with teachers and peers, and their sense of competence and belonging. For some, literacy is associated with achievement, independence and future opportunities, while for others it is linked to anxiety, embarrassment or past negative experiences of education. These differing experiences underline the importance of supportive, inclusive learning environments that recognise both skill development and emotional wellbeing.

Young people described literacy as both a practical skill and a personal experience. Many associated it with reading, writing, communication and education, while others connected it to emotional experiences such as frustration, anxiety and embarrassment. Participants highlighted practical literacy skills they valued, including writing CVs, presentations, punctuation and the use of digital tools to support learning.

‘Literacy is reading and writing, but it’s also being able to understand things and talk properly.’ – Young person

For some participants, literacy was closely linked to educational experiences, both positive and negative. Experiences of support, encouragement and understanding were associated with more positive attitudes towards learning, while negative school experiences contributed to disengagement and avoidance. The findings presented in this section are organised around key themes that emerged across the research, including experiences of unmet literacy needs, emotional impact, the influence of digital media, perceptions of literacy beyond school, and the wider systems that shape access to support. The section also considers how educational settings, youth work and community supports influence literacy engagement, highlighting both barriers and effective practices. By foregrounding young people’s voices, this section provides insight into how unmet literacy needs are experienced in practice and what conditions support positive engagement and progress, informing responsive, youth-centred literacy supports across education, youth and community sectors.





Participants

A total of 199 people contributed to this research across Laois and Offaly through surveys, focus groups, interviews and discussion sessions. Participants represented a broad range of perspectives, including young people, parents and guardians, practitioners, teachers and Special Needs Assistants (SNAs). This multi-stakeholder approach was designed to capture both lived experiences and professional insights into youth literacy needs and supports across the region.

Young People

Fifty-seven young people participated in focus groups held in community, education and youth settings across Laois and Offaly. Participants included young people under 12 years, those aged 12–18 years, and young adults engaged in alternative education or youth programmes. Some participants were attending mainstream school, while others were involved in Youthreach, Community Training Centres or youth services. This diversity enabled the research to reflect a range of literacy experiences, including those of young people who may be disengaged from formal education.

Parents and Guardians

Twenty-six parents and guardians participated in discussion groups and interviews. Participants included parents of children attending primary school, post-primary school, alternative education settings and those receiving additional learning supports. Parents represented both urban and rural communities across the two counties and included families experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, additional needs, and diverse cultural backgrounds.

Practitioners

Nineteen practitioners participated in interviews and consultations. Participants came from a range of professional backgrounds including:

- Education and training services
- Youth work and community organisations
- Family support services
- Libraries and literacy services
- Social and wellbeing services

Practitioners worked directly with young people across formal, non-formal and informal learning environments, providing insight into systemic issues, service provision and engagement challenges.

Survey Respondents

Survey data was collected from 97 respondents, including:

- 61 practitioners
- 27 parents and guardians
- 9 teachers and SNAs

Survey respondents that identified as practitioners represented organisations across Laois and Offaly, including schools, youth services, community organisations, libraries and training providers.

Representation across Laois and Offaly

Participants were recruited across both counties to ensure geographic representation, including urban centres such as Portlaoise and Tullamore as well as smaller towns and rural communities. Groups were identified with the support of key practitioners and organisations to ensure inclusion of diverse populations, including marginalised groups and those experiencing barriers to education and services.





Experience of Literacy Needs

‘Sometimes I just keep quiet because I don’t want people to think I’m stupid.’ – Young person

Across participants, literacy difficulty was frequently associated with low confidence, embarrassment, avoidance behaviours and disengagement from school. Some young people described remaining silent in class when they did not understand something, while others reported avoiding reading or writing tasks altogether.

‘If there’s loads of writing, I just won’t do it.’ – Young person

Practitioners observed that literacy needs often remained hidden, particularly among young people who had developed coping strategies to avoid exposure.

‘A lot of learners have difficulties that they don’t want to disclose. They are so embarrassed.’ – Practitioner

However, positive experiences were also reported where supportive teachers, one-to-one help or small group environments were available.

‘I learn better when someone explains it slowly to me.’ – Young person

Emotional Impact

‘Confidence is the biggest issue around literacy.’ – Practitioner

Parents and practitioners consistently emphasised the emotional dimension of literacy difficulty. Young people with unmet literacy needs were described as experiencing anxiety, shame, fear of judgement and reduced self-esteem. Confidence emerged as a critical factor influencing both engagement and progress.

‘He thinks he’s not smart because he struggles with reading.’ – Parent

For some young people, repeated experiences of difficulty led to frustration and disengagement from education over time.

‘If you keep failing, you just stop trying.’ – Young person

Parents described the emotional impact not only on young people but also on families, particularly when supports were difficult to access.

‘We only want to do the best for our child.’ – Parent

Digital Media

Digital technology was described as having both positive and negative impacts on literacy development. Benefits included assistive tools such as autocorrect, speech-to-text and online learning resources, as well as opportunities for creative expression through digital media.

‘Voice to text helps me a lot because spelling is hard.’ – Young person

Challenges included reduced attention span, increased reliance on technology and concerns about declining reading habits.

‘They rely on their phones for everything now.’ – Practitioner

Overall, technology was viewed as a valuable support when used intentionally, but not a replacement for core literacy skills.

Importance of Literacy Beyond School

‘They’ll need it for work, for bills, for everything really.’ – Parent

Participants widely recognised the importance of literacy for employment, independence and everyday life. Literacy was linked to tasks such as completing forms, understanding contracts, managing finances, driving theory tests and communication.





‘You need literacy so you don’t get caught out or scammed.’ – Young person

However, some young people questioned the relevance of literacy depending on their career aspirations, highlighting the importance of contextualised and practical learning approaches.

Systems Influencing Literacy Outcomes

Literacy development was strongly influenced by broader structural and systemic factors, including access to assessment, educational supports and family circumstances.

Diagnosis and Assessment

‘The diagnosis came too late.’ – Parent

Parents and practitioners reported significant challenges accessing assessments, including long waiting lists, financial barriers and delays in diagnosis. Access to supports was often dependent on formal diagnosis, creating additional pressure for families.

‘By the time the diagnosis comes, the young person has lost confidence.’ – Practitioner

Delays were seen as particularly harmful because they often occurred during critical stages of educational development.

Gaps in Provision

Participants identified multiple gaps in literacy provision, including limited staffing, inconsistent supports across schools, transition challenges between primary and secondary education, limited alternative education places and funding constraints.

Family and Home Environment

Parents were consistently identified as important partners in supporting young people's literacy development. However, many families face barriers that can make this difficult, including their own unmet literacy needs, limited confidence, competing responsibilities and financial pressures. Across the research, parents expressed a strong commitment to supporting their children but often reported needing clearer guidance and accessible supports. As one practitioner noted:

'Many parents wouldn't understand how to help – their hands are tied.' – Practitioner

Family and community contexts were identified as key influences on literacy development. In Laois and Offaly, Family Resource Centres provide afterschool supports, homework clubs, parenting programmes and family learning initiatives, offering accessible literacy-rich environments outside school hours. Evidence shows that supportive home learning environments and parental engagement contribute positively to literacy outcomes, particularly for children experiencing socio-economic disadvantage (Desforges and Abouchar, 2003; Sénéchal and LeFevre, 2002; Sylva et al., 2004; OECD, 2019; Smyth, 2016; DES, 2017). These findings highlight the importance of strengthening family learning opportunities and ensuring parents have access to clear, practical and inclusive supports alongside school provision.

Cultural and Community Factors

Participants highlighted additional barriers experienced by some groups, particularly young Travellers, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) learners and migrant families. Language barriers, cultural differences and experiences of exclusion were identified as influencing literacy engagement. Culturally responsive and inclusive approaches were seen as essential to improving participation and outcomes.



Experiences of young Travellers

The research highlighted specific literacy experiences and barriers affecting some young people from the Traveller community, shaped by a combination of structural inequality, educational experiences and cultural context. Practitioners reported that some Traveller learners may enter post-primary education with lower literacy levels than their peers, which can contribute to difficulties with transition, confidence and sustained engagement. Parents and practitioners also described challenges relating to school attendance, access to school places and inconsistent support provision.

Experiences of discrimination and low expectations within educational settings were identified as particularly harmful to motivation and participation, with some participants reporting that Traveller children felt marginalised or overlooked in classrooms. At the same time, examples of effective practice were identified where culturally responsive approaches were used, including the involvement of Traveller support workers, trusted community relationships and learning activities connected to young people's interests and identities. Dedicated community organisations in Laois and Offaly, including Traveller support groups and youth services, were recognised as playing an important role in bridging relationships between families and education providers through homework support, advocacy and informal learning opportunities.

Participants emphasised that trust, cultural understanding and positive relationships with educators were central to successful engagement. Structural factors such as family responsibilities, bereavement practices and living conditions were also described as influencing school attendance and opportunities for homework or study, highlighting the need for flexible and context-aware responses from services. Concerns were raised regarding reduced timetables and inconsistent expectations for Traveller students in some settings, reinforcing the importance of equity and accountability within education systems. Both parents and practitioners stressed that early encouragement, positive reinforcement and high expectations can significantly influence educational trajectories. As one practitioner reflected, positive school experiences have the potential to change long-term outcomes, whereas negative experiences may contribute to early disengagement. Overall, the findings indicate that improving literacy outcomes for young Travellers requires coordinated, culturally responsive approaches across schools, youth services and community organisations, alongside targeted supports that recognise both structural barriers and community strengths.

Education and Youth Work Responses

This section examines how different educational and youth work environments influence young people's literacy experiences and engagement with learning. Drawing on the perspectives of young people, parents and practitioners, it explores both mainstream and alternative settings, highlighting the factors that support or hinder literacy development. The findings show that learning environments, relationships with educators, and the flexibility of supports play a significant role in shaping outcomes. While mainstream education provides essential foundations, alternative education and youth work settings often offer more personalised, supportive approaches that can be particularly effective for young people who have struggled in traditional school environments. The section also identifies teaching approaches that participants considered most helpful in supporting confidence, engagement and literacy progress.

Mainstream Education

Experiences of mainstream education varied significantly. Challenges included large class sizes, limited individual attention, anxiety and pressure, and the loss of supports during educational transitions.

'There are too many people in the class.' – Young person

Positive experiences were linked to supportive teachers, clear explanations and smaller learning groups.

'When teachers take time, it makes a big difference.' – Parent

Alternative Education and Youth Work

'This place has changed his life.' – Parent

Alternative education settings such as Youthreach and Community Training Centres were consistently described as highly effective in supporting literacy development. Key strengths included small class sizes, strong relationships, flexible learning approaches, personalised support and safe learning environments.





Youth work settings also provided valuable informal learning opportunities, often embedding literacy into practical activities and everyday experiences. Participants emphasised that youth work approaches can support literacy in a broader sense than reading and writing alone. Youth workers often help young people to build confidence, communication skills, emotional literacy and self-expression through informal and relationship-based practice. Experiential learning, creative activities, youth-led programmes, outreach, one-to-one support and small group work were all identified as valuable approaches, particularly for young people who find mainstream education environments overwhelming or inaccessible. Participants also highlighted the role of youth workers as trusted adults who can build consistent relationships over time, support engagement with families and act as a bridge between young people and other services. Several respondents noted that increased staffing would allow youth services to expand outreach, provide more individual support and embed literacy more consistently within everyday youth work activities.

Effective Teaching Approaches

Participants highlighted several approaches that supported literacy development:

- Small group and one-to-one support
- Practical and interest-based learning
- Clear instructions and structured steps
- Visual and audio supports
- Supportive engagement

Relationship and trust were consistently identified as central to effective learning.

Access to Supports in Laois and Offaly

Further Education and Training Programmes provided by or funded by LOETB include Youthreach, Community Training Centre Tullamore, National Learning Network and other part time and full-time programmes. Many services are also provided through youth services, community organisations and a variety of other agencies. However, awareness and access were inconsistent across communities.

Barriers to Engagement

‘Families don’t always know what’s available.’ – Practitioner

Participants identified several barriers to accessing literacy supports, including lack of information, cost, transport difficulties, stigma, limited service capacity and eligibility criteria.

Linking Young People with Services

‘Young people are more likely to attend if their friends are involved.’ – Practitioner

Participants suggested that engagement improves when supports are visible in communities, delivered in familiar environments and introduced by trusted individuals. Involving families and peers was also seen as important.

What Works?

Across all data sources, several core principles emerged. Effective literacy support is:

- Early
- Individualised
- Supportive
- Practical and relevant
- Accessible and affordable
- Inclusive and culturally responsive
- Coordinated across services

These findings highlight the importance of a whole-system approach to literacy development that integrates education, youth work, families and community supports.





Recommendations

This research demonstrates that youth literacy in Laois and Offaly is shaped by complex interactions between individual learning needs, educational experiences, family environments, and wider structural systems. While challenges persist, the region also benefits from significant strengths, particularly in alternative education and youth work provision. Addressing literacy outcomes effectively requires coordinated, cross-sectoral action spanning education, community, and policy contexts.

The following recommendations outline a set of priority actions for policy and practice, focused on improving coordination and strengthening system-wide responses to support youth literacy development.

Targeted and Individualised Support

This recommendation focuses specifically on the design and delivery of tailored literacy interventions, ensuring that support is responsive to individual learning needs across all settings.

There is a clear need to expand access to targeted literacy support that responds directly to individual needs. This includes increasing the availability of one-to-one and small-group interventions that are tailored, flexible and responsive. Supports should be embedded within practical, interest-led activities that connect to young people's everyday experiences, making learning more meaningful and less intimidating. Particular attention should be given to learners who face additional barriers, including those experiencing language difficulties and Traveller young people, ensuring that supports are culturally responsive and adapted to meet both literacy and language development needs. These supports should be consistently available across schools, alternative education settings and youth services, ensuring that young people can access appropriate help at any stage of their learning journey without delay or stigma.

Accessible and Affordable Supports

This recommendation addresses the practical conditions of access, focusing on cost, availability and delivery models so that literacy support is attainable for all young people regardless of circumstance.

Improving access to literacy support requires a strong focus on affordability and local availability. Community-based programmes that are low-cost or free should be expanded and sustained, particularly in areas where access to services may be limited. Flexible delivery models, including after-school supports, outreach programmes and blended learning options, can help ensure that support reaches those who may not engage in traditional settings. Access should not depend on private assessment, diagnosis or family income, highlighting the need for stronger systemic and structural supports to reduce inequality in access. Additional consideration should be given to learners and families who may experience language barriers or social exclusion when accessing information or services.

Family and Community Engagement

This recommendation centres on the role of families and carers as partners in literacy development, and on strengthening home–school–community connections that support learning beyond formal settings.

Strengthening the involvement of families and communities is essential in supporting literacy development. Parents and carers often want to help but may lack the information or confidence to do so effectively, particularly where language barriers exist. Providing clear, accessible communication, translated materials where necessary and practical guidance can empower families to support literacy at home. Family Literacy initiatives, engagement approaches should also recognise and respect the experiences of Traveller families and other marginalised groups. In addition, stronger collaboration between schools, youth services, community organisations and families can create a more consistent and supportive learning environment that reflects the needs of diverse communities.





Digital Literacy Integration

This recommendation is concerned with the appropriate use of digital tools and assistive technologies to enhance access, flexibility and inclusion within literacy support provision.

Digital tools and assistive technologies can play an important role in enhancing literacy support when used appropriately. These tools can increase accessibility, support different learning styles and allow young people to engage with learning at their own pace. For learners experiencing language barriers, digital supports such as translation tools, audio supports and visual learning resources can provide additional ways to access content and build understanding. However, it is important that digital supports are used to complement, rather than replace, the development of core reading and writing skills, and that access to technology is supported through broader systemic provision.

Engagement and Motivation

This recommendation focuses on the relational and emotional dimensions of literacy learning, recognising that confidence, trust and relevance are central to sustained engagement and progress.

Sustaining engagement requires literacy support to be relevant, respectful and responsive to young people's interests and experiences. Programmes should prioritise relationship-building, trust and a sense of safety within learning environments. When young people feel valued and understood, they are more likely to participate and persist. For those experiencing language barriers, inclusive approaches that recognise linguistic diversity and support communication can further enhance engagement. Culturally inclusive approaches that reflect Traveller identity and experience can also support stronger engagement. Reducing stigma and fear of failure remains critical, as confidence plays a central role in ongoing engagement and progress.

Training and Professional Development

This recommendation addresses the capacity and preparedness of practitioners, ensuring that those supporting young people have the skills, knowledge and confidence to deliver effective and inclusive literacy support.

Those working with young people require ongoing support and training to deliver effective literacy interventions. Continuous professional development should include evidence-informed literacy strategies, inclusive teaching approaches, trauma-informed practice and cultural awareness. It should also include strategies for supporting learners with English as an additional language and for working effectively with Traveller young people and other marginalised groups. Strengthening practitioner capacity in these areas supports more equitable and responsive practice. Building practitioner confidence and capacity ensures that support is delivered consistently and effectively across different settings.

Inclusivity and Cultural Responsiveness

This recommendation sets out system-wide principles and expectations to ensure that literacy provision is equitable, culturally responsive and respectful of diverse identities and experiences.

Literacy supports must reflect the diverse needs and experiences of all young people. This includes developing culturally responsive approaches that recognise and respect different backgrounds, languages and lived experiences. Targeted supports should be available for groups who may face additional barriers, including Traveller young people and those affected by language differences, ensuring that provision is equitable and inclusive. Programmes should promote high expectations for all learners while actively challenging discrimination, exclusion and low educational expectations at both practice and systemic levels.





Traveller-Specific Supports

This recommendation recognises the need for additional, tailored responses to address persistent structural disadvantage and improve literacy outcomes for Traveller young people.

Dedicated and culturally appropriate supports for Traveller young people are necessary to address persistent disparities in literacy outcomes. These supports should take account of the impact of discrimination, disrupted educational experiences and cultural marginalisation. Effective provision should be developed in partnership with Traveller communities to ensure relevance, trust and sustainability. Building culturally safe learning environments, alongside strengthening representation and engagement, can contribute to improved participation and outcomes. Traveller-specific supports should be integrated across education and youth services to ensure continuity and accessibility.

Multi-Agency Collaboration

This recommendation focuses on how services work together in practice, emphasising coordination, communication and continuity across education, youth and community sectors.

At the same time, stronger multi-agency collaboration between schools, youth services, community organisations and statutory supports is needed to ensure that young people experience continuity of care. Clear referral pathways, shared communication systems and collaborative planning approaches can reduce fragmentation and ensure that support is joined-up. Strengthening these systemic and structural supports is particularly important during key transition stages and for young people experiencing multiple forms of disadvantage, ensuring no learner falls through gaps in provision.

Systemic and Structural Support

This recommendation addresses the policy, funding and governance conditions required to sustain consistent, equitable literacy support across the region.

Addressing literacy challenges requires sustained attention to systemic and structural factors that influence access and outcomes. This includes strengthening funding models, improving service coordination and ensuring equitable distribution of resources. Barriers such as over-reliance on formal diagnosis, inconsistent provision and unequal access to supports must be addressed. Policies and systems should prioritise early intervention, inclusivity and continuity of care. Embedding literacy support within a coherent and well-resourced system ensures that access is not dependent on individual circumstances but is consistently available to all learners.

Early Identification and Assessment

This recommendation focuses on the timing and consistency of identification and assessment processes, ensuring that literacy needs are recognised early and responded to appropriately.

Early identification and assessment of literacy needs are essential in preventing long-term difficulties. Screening and assessment processes should be introduced earlier and carried out consistently across settings, allowing for timely and appropriate intervention. For learners experiencing language barriers, identification processes should clearly distinguish between language acquisition needs and literacy difficulties to ensure appropriate support is provided.





Conclusion

Literacy affects how young people understand the world around them, how they express themselves and how they participate in education, society and community life. When literacy needs are not recognised or supported early, the effects can be long-lasting and can extend well beyond the classroom.

Many young people experiencing literacy difficulties gradually disengage from learning over time. This is often not because they lack ability or motivation, but because repeated difficulties can impact their confidence and sense of belonging. Feelings of embarrassment, frustration or being judged can lead young people to withdraw, participate less in class and eventually disconnect from education altogether, in their own words ‘just stop trying’. This can reduce their aspirations and limit their access to further education, training and employment opportunities. These outcomes highlight the importance of early and appropriate support rather than reflecting any individual failing.

The findings show that gaps in how support is organised and delivered, alongside broader systemic and structural challenges, play a significant role in these experiences. Delays in identifying literacy needs, inconsistent access to supports and a reliance on formal diagnosis can create barriers for young people seeking help. In addition, unclear or fragmented pathways between schools, services and supports can make it difficult for young people and their families to navigate the system. These challenges are often more pronounced for those already facing disadvantage, including young people affected by poverty, disrupted education, cultural marginalisation or language barriers. Traveller young people, in particular, may experience additional barriers linked to discrimination, interrupted educational pathways and reduced access to culturally appropriate supports. For learners whose first language is not English, literacy challenges can be compounded by difficulties in understanding instruction, accessing appropriate supports and fully participating in learning environments. As a result, literacy difficulties can contribute to widening existing inequalities if not addressed effectively.

At the same time, the research demonstrates that positive change is both possible and achievable. Where literacy support is delivered in a flexible, supportive and relevant way, young people are more likely to re-engage with learning. Approaches that focus on building relationships, creating safe learning environments and connecting literacy to real-life experiences can help restore confidence and motivation. Recognising individual strengths and providing opportunities for success can support young people in developing both their skills and their self-belief.

Overall, the findings point to the need for a more coordinated, inclusive and responsive approach to literacy support. Literacy should be understood as a shared responsibility across education, youth services, families, communities and wider systems. Strengthened multi-agency collaboration and clearer systemic supports can help ensure that young people receive the right support at the right time. With improved coordination, sustained investment and a clear focus on young people's lived experiences, meaningful and lasting improvements in literacy outcomes can be achieved.





For more copies of this report, contact Louise Larkin at llarkin@offalyldc.ie or Tamara Latham at tlatham@loetb.ie

