

Educational Policies that Address Social Inequality

Malta case study report 2 The Hilti After-school Literacy Clubs

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Contents

1. The Hilti (“My Ability”) Programme	3
2. Hilti Programme Development and Implementation Process.....	3
3. Hilti Club Session Structure.....	4
4. Other Hilti Projects	5
5. Hilti Clubs Outcomes and Long Term Impact.....	6
6. Evaluation	7
References.....	8

1. The Hilti (“My Ability”) Programme

The Hilti Programme is a primary prevention after-school family literacy programme that addresses pupils in their early primary years. Provision is specifically aimed at communities considered to be more vulnerable to future literacy problems. It was founded in 2001 by the Foundation for Educational Services (FES), and is carried out by the FES along with the selected centres that implement the programme in their school community. Hilti was the FES’ pioneer programme, materialising the Foundation’s aim to participate in the development and the implementation of strategies and programmes that effectively tackle illiteracy, absenteeism and school failure while ensuring the interest, motivation and involvement of students, parents, teachers and others involved. Hilti was also the first project to promote the importance of parents’ involvement.

According to the FES emerging research studies show that children’s motivation to succeed in school is influenced by the educational achievement of their parents. The importance of the family and the pupil’s social environment on cognitive development and literacy acquisition of children is manifest and is the foundation of the programme. Parental involvement will influence student achievement, school attendance, motivation, self-concept and esteem and behaviour. (FES 2004).

Hilti Clubs

The Hilti programme includes a range of activities, all characterised by processes through which teachers, children, their parents and volunteers engage in collaborative learning efforts through participation in artistic activities. The main activity is the Hilti Clubs, which provide after school sessions for all families who apply. A Club Hilti is held in a state primary school and caters for families of children aged 6 to 8 and whose children attend the host centre. Each centre has a ratio of 8 to 12 families per tutor.

Hilti Clubs encompass mixed ability groups and use a range of differentiated teaching and learning approaches to reach children who most require literacy support. A team of teachers trained in family literacy approaches and volunteer assistants run each Hilti Club. Teachers who co-ordinate these clubs must have attended a 112 hour training programme in the project’s specific methodologies.

Club sessions are carried out twice a week for 1¾ hours - from 2:30 to 4:15 in the afternoon -, during at least 15 weeks. Each meeting is organised in three blocks and consists of separate and parallel child and parent sessions that lead to joint sessions and processing of learning afterwards. Club activities are specifically designed with an in-built literacy and/or numeracy component that the children immerse themselves in as an integral part of the fun activity. Parents also obtain copies of resource tools being used by the Hilti Centre personnel on that particular day so that they can adapt them for home use afterwards.

Hilti Clubs currently operate in 26 community-based primary schools and reach around 600 children and their parents per scholastic year.

2. Hilti Programme Development and Implementation Process

In September 2001, right after the FES had been created and prior to embarking on its first operational phase, the strategy for the fulfilment of its corporate objectives was formulated and sent for discussion. A consultative seminar was held with educators, educational administrators and academics, and the feedback from the survey and the seminar was integrated into a revised strategy and plan (FES 2004).

As a consequence of the strategic design and consultation, a pre-pilot phase of the Hilti (My Ability) after-school family literacy programme was set a month later, in October 2001. The first

team of Hilti Centre coordinators and animators were recruited and provided with intensive training in family literacy work, including theoretical and practical elements. This team launched and ran the first Hilti Club at the Gzira State primary school for students from years two and three and their parents. The pre-pilot phase lasted from October 2001 to January 2002.

Pilot phase

By this time, another five centres had been created and all the trained coordinators were able to run their own school based Hilti programme. A total of 174 students and 126 parents participated. The pilot phase culminated with a Hilti Family Festival where parents from each of the six Hilti Centres planned, led and participated in theme-based workshops and other educational games and activities aimed at children, adults and whole families.

Expansion Phase

Following the success of the pilot phase between February and June 2002, the Education Division advised the FES in the identification of other schools that could be invited to host a Hilti Club. School selection was determined using a range of criteria such as the literacy result scores indicated by the National Literacy Surveys and the percentage of pupils who access in-school complementary education. Agreements were set with fourteen state primary schools, followed by construction of adequate work space and staff recruitment. Hosting a Hilti Centre includes furnishing two rooms allocated by each school and equipping them with the necessary educational resources this is undertaken with capital funding from the Foundation for Tomorrow's Schools from the Education Division.

These fourteen new Hilti Centres became operational in November 2002, adding to the first six. According to the project's activities report, parents from the first six Hilti Centres were invaluable in promoting family literacy initiatives in the fourteen new sites. Parents who joined FES personnel during parent meetings in these new sites were instrumental in stimulating parents to decide to become part of the programme. Parents from the old sites also joined FES personnel in the training of teachers who would later run the fourteen new centres. In 2003, the programme employed 10 full-time and 82 part-time personnel (mostly state school teachers specially trained for the task) and kept growing (FES 2004).

Hilti Clubs currently operate in 26 community-based state primary schools and reach around 600 children (of whom 350 are male and 250 female) and their families/parents (500, of whom 40 are male and 450 female) per year (National Action Plan On Poverty And Social Exclusion 2006-2008). Also, each state primary school that hosts a Hilti Centre has been offered additional literacy support for a limited number of older pupils.

3. Hilti Club Session Structure

Hilti Club sessions last for 1¾ hour, take place two times per week and run for a minimum of 15 weeks, although participants can re-register every semester. The tutor-pupils ratio average is of 1-10. Sessions have a common basic structure that is adaptable to provide a number of parallel and consecutive programmes for different age-groups and needs. Therefore, the programme content varies in topic and focus (FES 2008).

The basic structure of an after-school session is composed of three blocks:

a) Big Group Activity (50 minutes). Only children take part in this first activity which may include drama, creative thinking skills, group reading, cooking, special activity, etc.

b) Simultaneously, parents meet separately in their own room to prepare their participation in the Early Intervention Strategy. The session starts with a 10-minute circle time where they engage in a discussion on how and to what extent each family has implemented at home the knowledge and skills learnt during last week's parent session. Parents then go on to rehearse their interaction with their own children in the joint activity that is carried out in the final part of every Club session (part C, see below). This leads to concrete learning about how to support their children's educational development, and also an increased consciousness of the learning process itself and of their own role as learners and, eventually, as parent leaders in their school community. During this session, parents obtain copies of resource tools being used by the Hilti Centre staff on that particular day so that they can adapt them for home use.

c) Small Group Activity (35 minutes). Parents join their children to implement the previously rehearsed activity, and this way put into practice the knowledge and skills learnt in the previous meeting. Those children whose parents cannot participate in the session are assisted by tutors or volunteers (FES 2008).

From the children's perspective, the session's different blocks are a whole, with one part leading into the other, however, the first Big Group Activity provides the social, communicative and thematic context for the second, joint Small Group Activity. While the first one is more group-based, the second one focuses on one-on-one and small group work, with academic skills oriented tasks, reaching wider educational objectives such as knowledge of the world around us, social and communication skills, manual dexterity, and others.

4. Other Hilti Projects

Hilti through Sports

Similar to the family literacy clubs' aims, Hilti in Sports targets children ages 7 to 8 with literacy difficulties who would benefit from after-school support but are too involved in their local sports nursery to be reached and supported through their local Hilti Centre.

This initiative is considered as an extension of the local Hilti Centre but instead of being allocated in a primary school, it is set in the football club nursery. The literacy session takes place just before children's football training, two times per week for 45 minutes, and activities focus on a football-related aspect while integrating speaking, reading and writing elements. Sessions include discussions with football players whom the children look up to, the production of a newsletter or an article based on such encounters, and the production of booklets or wall-charts of football rules. The project was piloted in one community in partnership with the Valletta Football Club and the Valletta Local Council, and twenty children attended with a participation rate of 88 percent, after what is has been extended to other local sport clubs (FES 2008).

The Hilti Tezor ("My Ability is my Treasure") Project

This bilingual reading promotion initiative was created because of the general lack of Maltese literature for early years of education. It aims to promote the habit of reading among low-achieving students and their parents, including those children from monolingual families for whom the access to written materials in English has not led to cultivating reading. The initiative is funded by the HSBC Cares for Children Fund and the Maltese editorial house "Klabb Kotba Maltin".

Two packs of bilingual reading were created and published for children aged 6 to 7 (23 books) and 7 to 8 (18 books). Each set resembles a small treasure chest, and includes a bilingual guidebook with activities and projects that parents can carry out around the contents of each book. Also, a

contest was made for literature in Maltese, and three new children's books were published, one in large book format - being the first of its kind in Maltese - for use at kindergarten and year one of primary education. Besides being the first big book in Maltese, it is also the first to tackle multicultural and particular social issues for young children.

The project also included training HSBC workers as Volunteer Assistants to attend Hilti Clubs in three-month cycles, developing and implementing a reading promotion scheme, as well as creating and publishing new children's literature in Maltese.

PEFaL

This parent empowerment for family literacy project was partly funded by the European Commission through the Grundtvig action of the Socrates Programme, and aims to adapt the Maltese experiences from Club Hilti and Id f'Id programmes (also reviewed in the projects charts section. See the EPASI database projects [MT246](#) and [MT228](#)) to different European settings, forming a network of mutual learning family communities. Partners include England, Belgium, Lithuania, Rumania and Italy, and the initiative was launched in 2003 through a National Conference on family literacy for PEFaL partner organisations and practitioners from Malta (attended by 250 delegates), and closed in 2004 with an International Conference on Lifelong Learning through parental involvement in Education.

Finally, the FES also provides another family literacy programme named *Ongi Ongi Ongella* (a Maltese nursery rhyme) as part of day school provision for primary education children, complementary to the Hilti after-school services.

5. Hilti Clubs Outcomes and Long Term Impact

Some of the main outcomes of the work carried out at these centres include:

Infrastructure for school and after-school activities

Twenty-five Hilti Centres have become operational in host-State primary schools, each made up of two rooms specially refurbished and resourced to host Club Hilti and Id f'Id parent learning support activities on after-school hours. During school hours, the Club Hilti resources are used by Activity Teachers employed by the Education Division to develop a school-based integrated expressive arts programme, as well as for staff development and adult-centred learning activities. The funds and refurbishment work were provided by the government's Foundation for Tomorrow's Schools.

Professional development / Teacher training

Hilti Centres comprise a wide range of personnel (most on a part-time basis due to their links to the day-school services), including Centre Co-ordinators, Animators, Activity Teachers employed by the Education Division and Volunteer Assistants. The FES has provided the staff with training and mentoring sessions (102 hours in the case of Centre Co-ordinators) to provide literacy support services at Hilti Clubs after school hours, which has had an impact on day-school practices as well.

Impact assessment, Individual Educational Plans and Case Studies

Personnel from the FES have also developed Individual Educational Plans (IEP) for those children attending the Hilti Programme, as well as specific formative assessment tools - such as portfolios and profiles - in order to be able to gauge the impact of the family literacy approach adopted at the

Hilti Centres. Also, in depth case studies of individual children attending different Hilti Clubs have been completed and published in a monograph.

Hilti Family Festival

These are end-of-course celebrations where persons who had participated in the programme spend the day together celebrating their collective achievements. Parents get the chance to discuss educational issues of common concern through parent-organised and led workshops, and review children's progress through static and live exhibitions.

Print material, including among others

“Manual on How to Run a Hilti Club”: A Procedures Manual produced for use by Hilti Centre Co-ordinators and team members. “Hilti Tezor Reading Pack” for 6 and 7 year olds, and another for 7 and 8 year olds (bilingual texts); as well as a parents' guide to using the packs.

Development of home-school links and innovative school communities

According to the programme webpage, “parents learn concretely how to foster their children's educational development. This leads to increased consciousness of the learning process itself and of their own role as learners and, eventually, as parent leaders in their school community” (FES 2008).

The FES states that the Hilti Programme enables parents to come to know teachers and what they do more closely, developing a teacher-parent tie that breaks the barrier separating parents who shy away from school and teachers, and making parents feel reassured and accepted as main actors in their children learning processes.

Other children in the family may also benefit from using the activities made in the parents-pupils joint sessions and from having a parent who is more in tune with their learning. In the adult sessions, parents can come to terms with their own experiences of school and learning and are encouraged to reflect on how their attitudes to these experiences help or hinder their children.

The change processes involved by the programme at the personal, family and school levels are also enabling school communities to become more open to experiment with a range of effective and practical differentiated teaching methodologies that have the potential of stemming literacy difficulties at the roots. Moreover, such processes are stimulating teachers to explore new ways of facilitating learning activities in partnership with parents.

6. Evaluation

The creation of school-based Hilti Centres includes regular monitoring of the project's teams and undertaking performance assessments, as well as holding weekly planning, review and training sessions for Hilti Centre teams at head-office level and modelling sessions whenever required. Results of internal evaluations indicate that the approach stimulates and enhances children's self-esteem, social skills and literacy attainment. Parents gain competencies that strengthen the curriculum of the home. School teachers have the opportunity to develop home-school links and to extend their repertoire of literacy tools and strategies that enrich their classroom practices (FES 2004).

Most agents involved in the Hilti programme have been asked for evaluation and recommendations during each phase of the project. Their concerns and proposals have been taken on board in the preparation of the next phases of the programme. Systematic interviewing to heads of schools from those centres hosting a Hilti Centre shows that their perception of the programme changed from that

of a remedial to a family literacy programme; they regarded Club Hilti as a valuable addition to the school programme and were impressed by the parents attracted to programme and their level of participation.

Day school teachers' of all the schools hosting a Hilti Centre were also interviewed for their feedback regarding the programme. Their judgement on attainment of participating children and their parents showed that 74 percent considered an improvement in pupils' social skills; 81 percent perceived improvement in their academic skills as well; and 73 percent evaluated an improvement in parent participation (FES 2004). Their feedback also indicated that the programme was well received and perceived as learning through fun by the teaching community. Teachers have also expressed concerns about the programme's ability to reach those families that were most in need of such a service and to provide greater programme-school links.

Parents' concerns were gathered from parent-to-parent meetings, the Family Festival, operational files, in-house and external research exercises. Parents noted the following changes in their children; better speech and pronunciation skills; increased awareness of environmental print and an increased willingness to read it; eagerness to read more; a willingness to write more challenging sentences and writing them better; improved concentration and schoolwork; happier and more confident in school. Parents also noted the following changes: Enhanced parent-child communication; specific parenting strategies learnt; specific literacy strategies learnt; they appreciated the parents' sessions during Club Hilti as an opportunity for self expression, and to work with their children and the teachers; they appreciated small-group format and the upgraded welcoming physical environment. They also made proposals for improvements that have been taken on board in next phases of the programme (FES 2004).

Children's feedback has been gathered in the closures of Hilti Clubs. Their comments showed that they saw Club Hilti as a learning-conducive environment; appreciated the nurturing interaction between themselves and the Hilti staff; appreciated the supportive parental presence during sessions; developed bonds and communication skills between peers; were learning through fun – with speaking and literacy skill development being highlighted. Pupils also indicated their most enjoyable activities, and made many proposals for improvements (FES 2004). From all these evaluations, the Club Hilti personnel designed a chart indicating which attainment targets were reached, partly reached or not yet reached, as a project's assessment based on an evaluation of all the qualitative and quantitative data available.

Hilti Programme was also recommended (by request from the EPASI Spanish team) by Nora Macelli, Chief Executive of the Foundation for Educational Services (FES). According to Macelli, the programme has "proven to be a statistically significant early intervention literacy and parental participation strategy, leading to greater reading and social skills in children, and enhanced and more articulate parental involvement in their children's learning and in home-school links" (personal correspondence).

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