Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young People refers to the role of the public library in addressing the issues that relate to improving Literacy and numeracy skills of children and young people. Under the “Actions to Support parents and communities” it specifically states “inform parents of opportunities to participate in home literacy programs as organised in local libraries or provided by VECs or community groups”.

The support and development of literacy and reading form the core of what the public library service offers. The informal/self directed and non-threatening nature of the public library is what makes it attractive to those who may wish to access resources outside the formal systems.

The reading role of the public library should be developed further because of its impact on the population’s literacy levels, educational progress, employability and sense of community.

OECD research shows that enjoyment of reading can be the biggest factor in helping children overcome a disadvantaged background and go on to succeed educationally. Public Libraries play a crucial role in helping people practice and enjoy reading.

To illustrate this I provide an overview of 3 projects in which Kilkenny Library Service has been involved with.

**Case Study 1**

**The Six Book Challenge Project**

The Six Book Challenge Project is an initiative introduced by the Reading Agency in the UK as a way of involving reluctant adult readers with their local library. Kilkenny Library Service is the first Library Authority in Ireland to get involved in this.

The project runs from January to June. The challenge is to read 6 books over a period of 6 months. A wide range of local agencies/groups were contacted and got involved – groups dealing with literacy, unemployed, disability, parent groups, men’s groups, active retirement groups, family resource centres and there was a very high uptake rate with 106 people registering and 68 completing the challenge. This year we are extending the challenge to encourage lapsed and reluctant readers.
The whole focus of this project is on the reader and their well-being.

The outcomes of this project are very real as it has allowed participants to gain confidence around reading and has helped many participants to become acquainted and indeed reacquainted with their local library and staff. The project has allowed the library service to develop significant partnerships with key stakeholders. It shows that the public library does not operate independently and that collaboration with a broad range of groups can yield very positive results. It also shows that public libraries can often more easily engage with groups that other service providers find hard to reach.

**Case Study 2**  
**Summer Reading Challenge**

We recognise that schools and libraries are about extending knowledge and understanding and that they complement each other. The Finnish Education system is recognised as the best in the world according to a recent OECD survey. Most parents and children in Finland are members of the public library system and this feeds into the strong literary tradition in Finland.

Kilkenny Library Service runs a Summer Reading programme for children every year. The aim is to create/develop a love of reading and to prevent a loss of reading skills over the summer months. It has been recognised internationally that public libraries play a significant role in helping to close the achievement gap in school performance.

The Reading Challenge is a very cost effective and simple means of encouraging children to read and develop skills over this period. It also involves parents and engages families to promote early childhood literacy.

There are many possibilities around this simple scheme to promote and encourage reading amongst children in conjunction with schools.
Case Study 3
One Book One Kilkenny

Public Libraries recognise also the importance of family/community literacy programmes and how they can play a significant role in promoting economic and social equality.

This project is a family literacy project between Kilkenny Library Service, the RAPID Co-coordinator and the home school liaison officers from 3 DEIS schools in the City.

The idea behind the One Book- One Kilkenny project is to encourage children to read both in school and at home in an effort to encourage parental involvement in this initiative. We believe that developing literacy skills with children may contribute to improving the literacy ability of parents and all family members.

400 pupils were involved in this project supported by their teachers, siblings and parents.

The simple concept of all pupils reading the same book both at school and at home and developing a series of events (author visits, art workshops, and screening of the film version) around that book proved to be very successful.

This initiative is an example of how a partnership approach between various stakeholders can attempt to support and improve access to reading resources with a view to developing literacy standards in disadvantaged schools.

We would envisage that this pilot project can be replicated by schools and literacy groups across Kilkenny.
Summary
Public libraries are about active engagement with the community, making links to other public services and responding to the policy imperatives of the day. The above 3 case studies reflect how public libraries have a real role in supporting and developing the reading and literacy skills of all children and adults. Unfortunately there is no formal mechanism for measuring the usage and the benefits of these schemes and many go unnoticed and undocumented.

The key to these projects is the effective partnerships among the different agencies which allows for skills sharing and better integration.

The 352 public libraries spread across the country have much potential to develop and support this national plan to improve literacy and numeracy in a real and constructive way.

Josephine Coyne
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