



CYPRUS PRESIDENCY
OF THE COUNCIL
OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Cyprus Presidency Conference "Literacy for All"

Nicosia, 5-6 September 2012

Description of Workshop 1

Workshop 1 – Literacy: why is it a big deal?

Literacy is the most important basic skill in today's society. Children, teenagers and adults of all ages all need good reading and writing skills for their active participation in education and training, in the labour market, in social and civic life. The fast-paced changes and the increasing use of digital technologies have also put reading and writing at the centre of most of our daily tasks, and are changing the very nature of literacy.

However, a high number of individuals in the EU lack adequate reading and writing skills. In 2009 one in five EU 15-year-olds had poor reading skills and it is estimated that one in five adults are low skilled, including in literacy. Illiteracy is still a taboo and a stigma for individuals who experience it, but also for society as a whole. Children hide it from their teachers, adults hide it from their family, friends and employers. In addition, and contrary to common belief, illiteracy is a problem that concerns all society: it does not only affect migrants, those living in the margins of society, or children with reading difficulties.

This poses important challenges for the economic development of the EU and for social inclusion. Improving literacy levels is therefore crucial if citizens and the EU are to meet their full potential. For individuals themselves, improvement of literacy skills is a stepping stone to further education and to lifelong learning, but also to social and civic participation and inclusion. For the EU, it is estimated that if all countries boosted their average PISA scores by 25 points over the next two decades, Europe could experience an aggregate GDP gain of €32 trillion over the lifetime of the generation born in 2010.

It is therefore crucial that all the society is engaged and committed to tackle this problem. Literacy is not only a problem for schools and teachers. The development of adequate literacy skills requires the active involvement of families, schools, employers, policy makers, NGOs and all the community. This will require the joint effort of all relevant stakeholders to develop comprehensive policies and structures to support struggling readers and to promote literacy.

Questions

- a) How can we break the taboo of poor literacy skills in society? How can we raise awareness of this problem and encourage struggling readers to seek support? What actions can we take at the European and at the national levels to tackle this issue?
- b) What are the main challenges/obstacles to the development of comprehensive literacy policies at the EU level and at the national levels? How can they be overcome?
- c) What do you see as the main challenges and opportunities for literacy resulting from new technologies?
- d) Do you know about good practice examples/projects developed in your country? What factors contributed to the success of those projects?